

The Myth of Narcissus: Themes of Life & Death in Pablo Picasso & Salvador Dalí

By Enrique Mallen

ABSTRACT

Salvador Dalí's *Metamorphosis of Narcissus* (1937) reflects the artist's view of his role as a creator of new realities and his acknowledgement of the developing nature of his own self: out of the confrontation with his image emerges a new creation, a manifestation of his persona. In this respect, the story of Narcissus may be linked to another myth of physical transformation, that of Orpheus. Both myths are also present in Pablo Picasso's painting *La vie* (1903), a painting equally emblematic of the artist's transformative powers. In the end, what both artists seek is the possibility to overturn the threat of death by constantly reinventing themselves in their canvases. While clearly Picasso and Dalí failed in the end to escape their fate, through their work, both painters managed to transform their life circumstances into new venues of artistic creation.

The *Metamorphosis of Narcissus*[\[1\]](#) is probably one of Salvador Dalí's most celebrated works. Executed in 1937, this oil on canvas is particularly significant for its relationship to the artist's view of his role as a creator of new realities and his acknowledgement of the developing nature of his own persona. Based on Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, the painting is accompanied by a poem on the same theme. Painted under the "critical paranoia" method, it combines explicit images with concealed ones, often in conflicting relations. The dynamic process of interpretation that this type of work requires from viewers is ideal as a representation of the sequential transformations involved in metamorphosis.

According to Ovid's story, Narcissus was the son of the nymph Leiriope and the river god Cephissus. Upon his birth, the diviner Thiresius made a prediction to his mother that her son would have a long life "as long as he did not get to know himself." In his youth, Narcissus's beauty made him an object of desire for people of both sexes, but he rejected them all. One of them, the nymph Echo, withdrew in desperation to a solitary location where eventually nothing remained of her but her voice. Nemesis, taking up the plea of one of his victims, managed, one hot day, to get Narcissus to bend down to drink from a fountain, where he fell in love with his own reflection. Unable to attain the object of his desire, Narcissus lets himself die. At the place of his death a flower sprang bearing his name: the narcissus.

Throughout the ages, the myth of Narcissus has been associated with the role of the creative artist: out of the confrontation with one's image emerges a new creation, a manifestation of his own self. Narcissus' unrequited love, linked to Echo's desire for him, also correlates with the story of the primordial artist, Pygmalion. Before Venus intervened and gave life to Pygmalion's beloved statue, Galatea, the sculptor, kissing and caressing his unresponsive statue, was like Narcissus in his attempt to embrace and kiss a fleeting figure. The story of Pygmalion was thus initially like the story of Narcissus, the tale of an artist in love with his own unreciprocating creation. Pygmalion, in this respect, may be interpreted as Narcissus' double. According to Barolsky, a clue to the fact that Ovid's thinking about Pygmalion is related to his conception of Narcissus is the fact that Narcissus was so charmed by his

own image that he remains still as a “marble statue.” If he resembles a statue, then so does his creation, which, like Pygmalion’s, is also a sculpture. What Ovid says of Pygmalion, “his art conceals art,” is thus true of Ovid himself, who is like his own fictive persona.”[\[2\]](#)

In this respect, the story of Narcissus may be linked to another tragic myth of physical transformation, that of Orpheus, which also had great influence on the surrealists. Orpheus occupied much of book ten of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. According to the story, Orpheus’s lyrics had enchanting powers over humans, animals and even gods. His poetry allowed him to enter the Underworld in an attempt to bring Eurydice, his deceased young wife, back to life. Sadly, Orpheus lost her once and for all when he contravened the condition of his grant by looking at Eurydice before leaving the world of the dead. Thereafter, the poet sang in solitude of the loves of the gods for young men.

The philosopher Herbert Marcuse brought together the myths of Orpheus and Narcissus in his reflection on the function of same-sex desire as a performative-contemplative principle capable of recalling the “experience of a world that is not to be mastered and controlled but rather liberated—a freedom that will release the powers of Eros now bound in the repressed and petrified forms of man and nature.”[\[3\]](#) The striking paradox that narcissism, usually understood as egoistic withdrawal from reality, is connected with “oneness with the universe,” revealing a new depth of the conception. “Autoerotism, or narcissism, denotes a fundamental relatedness to reality which may generate a comprehensive existential order. In other words, narcissism may contain the gem of a different reality principle: the libidinal cathexis of the ego (one’s own body) may become the source and reservoir for a similar process applied to the objective world – transforming this world into a new mode of being.”[\[4\]](#)

In the sensual vision celebrated by the Symbolists and theorized by the Surrealists, the myth of Narcissus may be related to Orpheus and the possibility it entails of a return to a primary state in which the self can take possession of its surrounding world. This integration of aesthetic dream with vital instincts finds a mirror in what Breton called “the surreality that resolves the dualism of perception and representation.”[\[5\]](#) By identifying with his own creation, the artist both captures and engenders reality, thus simultaneously discovering and defining his own self in his surroundings.

This notion forms the core of much of Dalí’s production. As his biographer Meryle Secrest notes: “[Salvador Dalí] desperately needed to explain himself to himself, and his explanation ... was entwined with the idealized self he was deliberately constructing to replace the intolerable sensation of not knowing who he was.”[\[6\]](#) The creative and transformative capability of both Narcissus and Orpheus, the generative power in confrontation with one’s own self or its equivalent other, is what fascinated Dalí. This coincides with the fact that the painter saw himself as having been born in the shadow of his brother’s death from meningitis at the age of seven. Named Salvador after him, Dalí had to live with his brother’s lingering spirit, and felt as if he were his double. The effect that this had on the young Dalí confirms the general “superstitious disfavor” with which such practices are often seen. As Secrest points out, “In that part of Spain it is not customary to name a son after his father and even less customary to name a baby after a dead child.

In fact, it is looked on with superstitious disfavor. In the conviction that the name will transmit to the second the fate of the first.”[7] The first chapter of Dalí’s *Unspeakable Confessions* was called “How to Live with Death” and opens with the depiction of the artist’s own demise. The various shadows, the hidden face, and the reflection in the water in the *Metamorphosis of Narcissus* are but echoes of the dead brother haunting him wherever he goes, trying to capture and pull him down to the kingdom of Hades.

Dalí describes his association to his dead brother’s shadow as madness: “only through paranoia, that is the prideful exaltation of self, did I succeed in saving myself from annihilation of systematic self-doubt.” Furthermore, Dalí says: “I first conquered death with pride and narcissism.”[8] Thus, narcissism, that quality for which the hero is punished in Ovid, becomes in Dalí’s work a redeeming feature, and it is this redemption from his brother’s death that he explores in the painting. Secrest writes: “At an early age, he became aware that he was not being loved for himself. When he looked into his mother’s eyes what he saw was not his own reflection, but a ghost.”[9] Under Pierre Brunel’s interpretation, metamorphosis is nothing but the means to overcome death. It is a hypothesis about time before birth and after death uniting matter and mind.[10] It combines two elements which seem to be contrasting—change and permanence—, the question being what is my persona, or what remains constant beyond all changes.

In Dalí’s painting, Narcissus’ figure takes two different appearances. On the left, one sees the vague outlines of his figure reflected in the water, his head resting on his knee, probably bending down to take his last breath. On the right, the figure’s double depicts the transformation of Narcissus into a hand holding an egg from which a narcissus flower emerges. These two images reconcile opposites: the one on the left appears surrounded by fire, encompassed by warm primary substances connoting blood, mud and feces; the one on the right is cold and stone-like, with ants crawling on its cracked surface, suggesting death. Yet, the flower breaking through the egg’s shell signifies a new beginning. A whole new cycle of the metamorphosis of matter is symbolized.

The egg the hand carries clearly derives from the world of alchemy where it denotes the “philosopher’s stone.” As an ideal, well-balanced form, the egg represents a microcosm, where all is contained: the initial seed of the biological cycle as well as the final empty shell. From its inner substance all is created, thus making it the foundation of all symbiotic processes. By reconciling contrasting properties, the egg symbolizes the principle of continuity, which is the nucleus of all transformations. Its smooth, white exterior represents purity and is associated with the ‘immaculate conception,’ itself an internal contradiction. Its lack of individual character also serves Dalí to express views concerning the analogies between the personal and the cosmic. As already stated, we may relate this to Dalí’s self-image as an individual living with a perpetual dichotomy: his counterpart figure (brother) haunts him and draws him toward a primordial non-existence. “Every day I kill the image of my poor brother, with my hands, with kicks, and with dandyism,” he was quoted as saying.[11] According to Secrest, “he had identified so closely with his dead brother that his inner image of his own body was that of ‘a soft ... worm-ridden corpse.’ ”[12]

Alchemy and metamorphosis are also essential to understand another Spanish genius, Pablo Picasso. In his painting entitled *Life*,^[13] a canvas emblematic of the artist's fierce contention with death as a malignant force, Picasso makes use of the exorcistic powers he believed were bestowed upon him as an artist/shaman; and in his presumed capacity as generator of new life, revisits the theme of Pygmalion and Galatea.

In the fall of 1901, depressed over the suicide of a close friend, Picasso had launched into the austere paintings of his Blue Period. His growing obsession with themes of human misery and social alienation climaxed in *Life*. The painting is set in an artist's studio, with vague suggestions of a cloistered architecture. A young couple stands at the left, facing a heavily draped woman holding a sleeping baby in the folds of her cape at the right edge of the canvas. The nude female clings to the male figure, dressed only in a white loincloth, who is pointing toward the dressed woman. Between these groups are two canvases on the back wall of the room, stacked on top of one another, both at the beginning stages of development, showing only outlines. In the upper one, two embracing nudes look out in gloomy dejection; in the other, a nude female figure crouches lethargically on the ground, her head on her knees.

As was true with Dalí, here there are unmistakable autobiographical references. Preliminary sketches show beyond a doubt that the male figure was a self-portrait of the artist. Yet in the end, the painter decided to transcend his personal fate, creating a work of much more universal significance. Picasso made four preparatory studies for this painting, changing the figures in the composition at least twice. The sketches indicate that his original intention was to depict himself standing between a naked woman (his model or mistress) and a canvas resting on an easel. In some, the naked woman beside the artist appears pregnant. In others, another artist enters the studio at the far right. Picasso later replaced that man with the robed woman holding a baby, one creator for another.

Life may be interpreted as an allegorical summation of the artist's disheartened view of life at the time. From radiographs taken in 1976 and through subsequent research, some of the mysteries of the canvas have been explained. In addition to the changes Picasso made while at work on *Life*, a second painting was discovered beneath its surface that appears to be the lost work, *The Last moments*, which Picasso had exhibited on his first visit to Paris for the *Universal Exposition* of 1900. Elements identified in the radiographs—a nude female reclining on a bed, a bedside table with a lamp, a priest, and a winged creature—resemble the description of that lost canvas. This makes *Life* particularly significant to the artist, being painted on a canvas that presumably had portrayed the last moments of his life. Even more revealing as to the true meaning of the mysterious final composition is that, at the last minute, Picasso replaced his self-portrait with the “death mask” of Carles Casagemas, the close friend who had committed suicide after being cruelly rejected by his mistress, Germaine, whose features resemble those of the female figure. “It was thinking about Casagemas that I started painting in blue.” In these words, spoken to Pierre Daix, Picasso discloses how a sudden and profound change in his art had been triggered by this dramatic event in his life. The suicide of his friend impelled Picasso to further explore the dependency between his own persona and the other, between art and life, establishing a pattern that was to remain the same throughout his career.

In 1900, Casagemas and Picasso had shared a studio at 17, *Riera de San Juan* in Barcelona. There, Picasso started preparing for his upcoming exhibition at *Els Quatre Gats*, where another important painting was exhibited: *Les derniers moments*. It is this painting which later Picasso submitted to the Paris *Exposition Universelle*. By late-September, eager to see his painting hung at the Paris exhibition, Picasso would start making travel plans with Casagemas, and in late-October, both left for the French capital. In October another Catalan, Manuel Pallarés, joined the two friends in Montmartre. Three women also moved in to accompany them: Odette (Louise Lenoir), who took up with Picasso; Antoinette (later Fornerod), who was paired up with Pallarés; and Germaine (a.k.a Laure Florentin), who became involved with Casagemas.

The *Exposition Universelle* closed on November 12th and Casagemas was as depressed by his Paris experience as Picasso was invigorated by his. Picasso decided to cheer up Casagemas by taking him home to Barcelona for Christmas, then going south to Málaga. On December 23rd they left for Spain, however Casagemas' excesses would soon force Picasso to separate from him, by asking his Uncle Salvador to pay for his friend's passage back to Paris. By the beginning of February Picasso had already moved on with his life, settling in Madrid. Meanwhile back in Paris, Casagemas, who was sinking into a deep depression and drinking to excess, shot himself on February 17th in front of a group of friends at *Café de l'Hippodrome*.

Six months would pass before Picasso could find the strength to commemorate his dead friend, doing so in three very different paintings, all of which depict the head of the dead Casagemas with a visible bullet hole. Richardson observes that this depiction of Casagemas brings to mind the lines about death in García Lorca's *duende*: "In Spain, the dead are more alive than the dead of any other country ... Their profile wounds like the edge of a barber's razor." Picasso took leave of Casagemas in the traditional manner of a mourner paying respect to the body, and we see the deceased as his friends would have done, lying in an open coffin. But in his intensely moving portrait, Picasso recreates the circular ritual of life and death. The separation of the two domains inhabited by Casagemas remains vague at best. Even after Picasso had commemorated the suicide of his friend in the three canvases of 1901, he was still unable to lay his ghost to rest.

As is the case for all masks, the one Picasso places over his own face in *Life* is intended to be an agent of metamorphosis, revealing as much as it conceals. In Picasso's works, masks are objects that intentionally destabilize the identity of the subject: wearing one, literally or symbolically, is to cease being oneself; removing it potentially reveals a deeper truth. For the Symbolists, masks were part of their quest for enigmatic mysteries, swaying between apparition and dematerialization. They also embodied internal torments, being connected with the theme of neuroses and "the agony of the Ego." Richardson has suggested that "by substituting the image of the suicide for a self-portrait, Picasso memorializes himself in the guise of his dead friend." Taking the place of his dead friend may also be interpreted as a form of exorcism, a desperate attempt by Picasso to bring his friend back to life using his own body as a medium. The possibility of rebirth had been in Picasso's mind since childhood, through stories he had been told by relatives. Apparently, he had such a difficult birth that he was at first thought to be

stillborn. Picasso delighted in recounting the story: “Doctors at that time,” he told Antonina Vallentin, “used to smoke big cigars, and my uncle was no exception. When he saw me lying there he blew smoke into my face. To this I immediately reacted with a grimace and a bellow of fury.”^[14] Another close encounter with death, this time with tragic results, took place in 1895. As his younger sister Conchita was dying of diphtheria, he made a vow to God that if she were cured, he would never paint or draw again. The relief at not having to keep his promise left him with lifelong guilt. Did Picasso feel, at the demise of his “brother” Casagemas, that he had again failed in his role as mediator in matters of life or death? Had he again let down one who was close to him by favoring his role as a creator over death?

In its conflictive nature, the myth of Narcissus, as seen in both Dalí and Picasso, may also be related metaphorically to the formation of an artist’s ego as understood by Freud. After all, as Secrest points out, “for Dalí, there was no goal larger than the exploration of his own psyche, the furtherance of his own ambitions, the discovery of his own meaning.”^[15] In short, Narcissus’ metamorphosis and Picasso’s *Life* may be conceived as representative of the interrelation between the pull of nature (the death drive) and man’s fight for survival (the libido or life drive) in Freudian terms. In July 1938, Dalí travelled to London to meet Freud, and in the course of their conversation showed the psychologist his *Metamorphosis of Narcissus*. Freud later remarked: “Until today I had tended to think that the Surrealists, who would appear to have chosen me as their patron saint, were completely mad. But this wild-eyed young Spaniard, with his undoubted technical mastery, prompted me to a different opinion ...”

Following Freud, we see in Dalí’s narcissism two opposing representations of idealized desire and reality. In the foreground to the left, Narcissus standing for ephemeral androgynous beauty; to the right, the hand indicating harsh reality. In the background to the left we have a crowd of animated naked individuals who represent reality, while on the right side, the image of perfection resting on a pedestal, again androgynous and signifying idealized unity. The same duality is observed in the giant stone hand, as already mentioned. The egg it holds is symbolic of the life instinct; yet, the ants that inexorably crawl on its surface signify death. The flower sprouting from the cracked egg also represents a new life, yet one that has emerged from death as the flower grows upon the place where Narcissus dies. The duality and complementary nature of Eros and Thanatos, life and death, as explained by Freud in “Beyond the Pleasure Principle” is put on display in both Dalí’s and Picasso’s paintings.

Jacques Lacan, a friend of both Dalí and Picasso, formulated his own tripartite schema of the psyche, with three Orders: The Real, the Imaginary and the Symbolic. He used the symbol of the Borromean Knot to theorize the interrelation of his Imaginary, Symbolic and Real Orders. The distinction between them was key to his re-thinking of psychoanalysis. Where the Imaginary is the site of the Ego, the Symbolic Order correlates with the paternal Superego and the Real with the unconscious Id. Lacan’s Imaginary order is the gaze, as explored by Lacan in his Mirror Stage theory of psychosexual development. It is imagination, fantasy and play, the ideal ego and the ego ideal image that permanently captivate.

In Freudian and Post Freudian thinking, it is the undifferentiated narcissistic omnipotent state of fusion between the early ego and the mother, which remains latent in adult life and according to Lacan, manifests when we ‘falsely’ identify with others. The Symbolic Order involves the formation of signifiers and language and is the world of Language, Law and Structure. He claims the Symbolic order function is the way in which a ‘subject’ is organized and to a certain extent, how the psyche itself becomes accessible.

In his oil painting, Salvador Dalí linked the classical tradition of Greek mythology with the latest investigations of psychoanalysis, doing so by casting a new light on the myth of Narcissus. One important theme of Dalí’s painting is the idealization of unattainable desires. The hand represents the harsh and unchangeable reality of life and death—as represented by the sex and death drives – in duality and opposition to the ephemeral and idealized figure of Narcissus. Narcissus, in turn, represents desire, as the reflected image symbolizes what Lacan describes as the moment of initial recognition, when the mirror image represents a more perfect idealized image of the self. But it also essentially represents miss-recognition, for the image is perceived as “other” that is necessary to complete us, but that we may never be united with. This is what the myth of Narcissus illustrates so concisely, the longing to be reunited with the “other half” that is experienced from that first Lacanian moment—the first moment in which one realizes that he/she is not complete. It is the eternal search to return to that perfect state of unity with the mother which in itself is always an impossibility. According to Freud we will always desire to be reunited with our mother and return to that ideal dyadic relationship that precedes the intrusion of a third party (represented by the father or anyone else that effectively comes between the child and mother.) Narcissus’ desire is the inner desire to regress to that stage. This could also be linked to Freud’s initial description of the death drive.

Freud hypothesizes that “all instincts tend towards the restoration of an earlier state of things ... and inanimate things existed before living ones.”^[16] Therefore we could interpret this image of Narcissus not only as longing to be united with his image, but perhaps also longing for death, which would lead to this inorganic state of being. Towards the background we see the already mentioned naked figure on a pedestal. This could represent love sublimation, the act of putting someone on a pedestal and raising that person to the status of “Thing.” Yet it is not the person per se that we are raising to that level, but the idea of completeness to which one aspires. The figure on the pedestal, like Narcissus, is androgynous, neither obviously male nor female, representing the unity of the two halves that is impossible and that we all idealize. This duality is also symbolized by the fact that the pedestal stands on a checkered floor, and it is placed precisely with half of it standing on a black square and half on white, uniting male and female in the perfect unison idealized in the Oedipus complex.

According to Lacan, the human subject is always split between a conscious side, the part of the psyche that is accessible, and an unconscious psyche that is a ‘continuous series’ of instinctual drives and forces which remain inaccessible. The cost of human consciousness and knowledge is that instinctual drives remain unknown, i.e. that what is most basic to being human, is what is most alien. We are what we are, on the basis of something that we experience to be missing from us, our unconscious desires that can

never be satisfied. We experience this ‘something missing’ as a lack or hole that we desire to close, to fill in or replace with something. For Lacan, this lack is desire. Desire is what cannot be satisfied even when our demands are met, as our needs themselves are converted into desires that can never be satisfactorily fulfilled. Unconscious instinct manifests itself, by the way it insists on filling a ‘gap’ in the psyche, that has been left by the very thing the subject feels is lacking in him/her, that is the unconscious i.e. the unconscious attempts to fill in the gap of the unconscious. Therefore, the Lacanian subject is de-centered and marked by an essential split, essentially lacking and alienated. Possessed of a hole, an empty centre Lacan called *beance*.

In this respect, it is interesting to note the relationship between the first encounter of the two artists, and the appearance of the split facial features in their work. Their meeting apparently took place in November 1925, when Picasso was temporarily in Barcelona. While there, he visited some of his friends and met Dalí, seeing also the young man’s first solo exhibition at the *Dalmau Gallery*, which ran from November 14th to the 27th. A second meeting took place in Spring of the next year, when, on a brief excursion to Paris with his father, Dalí paid a visit to his idol, Picasso. “I have come to see you before visiting the Louvre,” Dalí is reported to have said. “You did the right thing,” Picasso had replied. The following October, Picasso visited Barcelona again, where he once again saw the work of Dalí at the Autumn Salon or at the *Sala Parés*.^[17] He spoke favorably of the young artist to his dealer Paul Rosenberg as well as his publisher Skira on his return to Paris. While Dalí did not travel back to the French capital until March 1928 to sign his first contract with the dealer Camille Goemans, Picasso’s influence is clearly seen in the works he produced in 1926: *Harlequin*,^[18] *Two Figures*,^[19] *Self-Portrait Splitting into Three / Harlequin*,^[20] *Head*^[21] and *Self-Portrait Splitting into Three*.^[22] As some of the titles indicate, these paintings clearly deal with self-representation and the figure of the harlequin.

Picasso himself had already placed his alter-ego, the harlequin, beside his friend Casagemas’s mistress, Germaine, in *At the ‘Lapin Agile’*^[23] from 1904. Theodore Reff writes, “... Picasso has always delighted in transforming reality itself into a theatrical event, in which he plays a definite role and often wears a mask or costume improvised for the occasion.”^[24] The figure will reappear in 1915 in *Harlequin*,^[25] his identity recognizable from his trademark outfit, although his body is reduced to bare panels set against a black background. As Aaron Wasserman points out, harlequin’s diamonds are intentionally misshapen, resembling irregular polygons, with a warped cross-hatching woven through them, distorting the trademark outfit. Another salient feature of the harlequin are his crescent-like menacing teeth, which are also prominent in African ceremonial masks where they represent “hostile” spirits. Therefore, we could deduce that the harlequin here is intended to project a demonic energy. Interestingly the figure of the harlequin in Picasso had up to now never worn the black mask of *Commedia dell’Arte*. Here, however, it does. The harlequin’s mysterious mask, with his disquieting “lunar” teeth, undoubtedly embodies the libido’s deflection of the death drive’s activity onto the Other.

In many cultures, masks are associated with shamanic practices; and an important area of the shaman’s mindset is structured around death and dying. It is in this sense that the role of the conjurer, with whom Picasso and Dalí have often been identified,^[26] relate

to the figure of the masked harlequin, an intermediary agent of death.^[27] Etymologically, harlequin comes from Old French *herlequin*, *hellequin*, etc., leader of a troop of demons who rode the night air on horses, hence messengers from the netherworld. André Salmon acknowledged the intermediary role of Picasso's harlequins, describing them as "acrobats that were also metaphysicians," "sorcerers" or "figures like Apollinaire's *Arlequin Trismegiste*,"^[28] the syncretic combination of the Greek god Hermes and the Roman god Janus, considered Psychopomps, capable of guiding souls to the afterlife. These mythic figures are clearly behind Dalí's own works from 1926.

Picasso was made aware of the magical role masks may play in the artist's struggle with death while working on *Les Femmes d'Alger*.^[29] The result of months of preparation and revision, this pivotal painting revolutionized the art world from the first time it was seen in Picasso's studio. He drew on sources as diverse as Iberian sculpture, African tribal masks, and El Greco to make the startling composition, which shows five naked prostitutes in a brothel; two of them push aside curtains around the space where the other women strike seductive and erotic poses. Their figures are composed of flat, splintered planes, their eyes are lopsided or asymmetrical, and the two women at the right have threatening masks covering their identity. The faces of the figures on the left are Iberian, but the ones at the right are unmistakably influenced by African masks, which Picasso assumed had functioned as magical protectors against dangerous spirits: this work, he said later, was his "first exorcism painting."

One commonality in surviving shamanic rituals is that they often involve assistance from the realm of spirits. The embattled shaman calls upon their protectors from the spiritual realms to cure an illness or bring back the deceased. Often it is a major step for the shaman to learn which allies from the spirit world will facilitate his task. A shaman cannot do his work without his team of allies; and it is here where masks play an important role. Masks bring into existence entities which may participate in the transformative ritual involving the transit between life and death.

Indeed, as Picasso began working on the painting, he was visiting his mistress, Eva Gouel (Marcelle Humbert), in the hospital daily. She had been hospitalized for cancer, and would die soon after he had completed the canvas. The close overlapping of the painting's birth and Eva's death brings us back to the role of the harlequin-shaman in Picasso's life events. Richardson has revealed that the initial preparations for *Harlequin* were two pencil drawings, both titled *Dancers*, most likely depicting Picasso and his mistress. In the final work, she is erased, signifying Eva's exodus from Picasso's life. Wasserman proposes that this pictorial removal of his mistress is related to Picasso's decision to distort his former alter-ego; as Eva is no longer part of his identity, Picasso also wants to leave an older, equally touched by death, part of his identity behind. Another indication of Picasso's desire to abandon a facet of his identity is the white square located on the mid-right portion of the canvas. The beige blob of paint may be read as a self-portrait in profile, as deduced from the ridge of the forehead and slanting nose. The self-portrait represented in the harlequin's palette serves an exorcistic function in an interesting reversal of what we saw in *Life*. There, Picasso had brought Casagemas back from the dead by incorporating his physiognomy on his own body. Here, death personified in the harlequin is capable of manifesting new life. By placing his own face on the

harlequin's palette, the artist attempts to reverse the outcome of death through exorcism.

It is not only Eva's tragic death that Picasso memorializes here, but also, once again, his enduring remorse over the suicide of his friend Casagemas. Around 1906, Ramon Pichot had married Germaine, Casagemas' ex-mistress. Four years later, Picasso and his then companion, Fernande Olivier, met up with the Pichots during their summer vacation at Cadaqués. Whatever friendship existed with them, however, came to a halt in 1912 as the result of a quarrel over Fernande, whom Picasso had abandoned for Eva. It is not far-fetched to assume that the death of Eva would have inevitably brought to mind the reaction to her on the part of the Pichots, which in turn would evoke the painful demise of his friend Casagemas.

The connection between Eva and the Pichots allows us to relate the 1915 *Harlequin* to Picasso's exorcism of Casagemas' suicide in a later painting, namely *The dance*^[30] of 1925, which happens to be the year of Pichot's death. Importantly, the date also coincides with the first encounter between Dalí and Picasso, as mentioned earlier. We must remember too that Pichot had been an early mentor to the young [Dalí](#), having met

Pichot in [Cadaqués](#) when he was only ten years old. One wonders if the masks that Dalí introduces in his works this same year are not to be interpreted as death masks for his close friend, and hence a form of wished reincarnation through exorcism.

Executed at a crucial moment in his development, Picasso's *La danse* follows the most serene and classical phase of his art, which lasted from about 1917 to 1925—a period when he was working concurrently in two quite different styles, a decorative form of late synthetic Cubism and a neo-classical figure style. The painting owes something to both of these, but its special significance is that it marks a break with the classical phase and the beginning of a new period of expressionist distortion. As Alfred Barr has written: “The metamorphic ‘Three Dancers’ is in fact a turning point in Picasso's art, almost as radical as was the proto-cubist *Demoiselles d'Avignon*.” Each of the dancers is treated in quite a different manner: the central figure is the least distorted, but still her body is simply a flat silhouette, like a metal cut-out; the extreme thinness and elongation of the body, together with the pallor of the coloring, helps to convey an impression of extreme frailty and vulnerability. To judge by the breasts, this dancer must be female, but the gender is not in the least emphasized, which has led some authors to title the work as “the three male dancers.” By contrast, the style in which the right-hand figure is executed is rather different, being closer to Synthetic Cubism. This is particularly apparent in the manner the body is divided into clear-cut sections of white, brown and black planes which interlock. The brown section is topped by a tiny, almost featureless head which is entirely surrounded and engulfed by another, much larger black head of a completely different character.

A clue to the identity of the shadowy figure was provided by Picasso in a conversation with Penrose in January 1965, just before the picture was dispatched to London: “While I was painting this picture an old friend of mine, Ramón Pichot, died and I have always felt that it should be called ‘The Death of Pichot’ rather than ‘The Three Dancers.’ The

tall black figure behind the dancer on the right is the presence of Pichot.”^[31] Pichot died in Paris on March 1, 1925; Picasso’s remarks seem to make it quite clear that the picture had been started by that date and that it underwent some radical changes afterwards. Ronald Alley gives us an illuminating description of the black profile of Pichot: filling the space between the upraised arms of two of the dancers; the relationship between these heads is so ambiguous that one cannot be certain whether they are intended to be in the same plane or whether the black head is situated behind the other one as a separate character; an ambiguity which applies equally to the black area extending down the back, to the right, and to the black patch along the upraised leg. This figure is very angular in treatment and dances with a masculine, lively motion; yet the double head gives it a mysterious character.^[32] Here, as in Dalí’s *Metamorphosis*, we see an encounter of the artist with the Other, of the living with the dead.

Out of this confrontation emerges the resurrected figure in crucified form. If Picasso began *La danse* in Paris, before going to Monte Carlo—as seems very likely—it is highly improbable that he would have taken such a large canvas with him to the South of France to work on, though there is no reason why he should not have done some further revision on it in Paris when he got back. All he could tell Roland Penrose was that this picture had nothing to do with his visit to Monte Carlo and that he was not certain but he thought that it was painted in Paris after his return. X-ray photographs show that the picture was begun in a much more conventional way as a fairly straightforward representation of three dancers rehearsing. All three figures seem to have had very similar rounded heads and more realistic legs and feet. Then at some point, presumably after Pichot’s death, it underwent a number of radical changes and took on various deeper meanings. A number of pentimenti and cracks in the paint allow one to see that the blue of the sky originally continued under part of what is now the black profile on the right and that the brown head was somewhat larger; the black head, representing the presence of Pichot, was painted on top and reduced the brown head to its current size. In contrast to the poised right figure, the left dancer seems possessed by an uncontrolled, Dionysian frenzy. Gasman identifies her as a Maenad. The rendering of her head is brutal, being partially based on the wooden masks of the Ekoi tribe in Southern Nigeria, whose most distinctive feature is their half-open mouths and double rows of fierce teeth.^[33] Alley has argued that the paroxistic Maenad is actually Germaine. If one compares her portrait in paintings such as *Au ‘Lapin Agile’* with the mysterious profile on the left of *La danse*, one observes various similarities, such as the small, gently curving nose and the pouting lips, though the treatment in the later picture is of course more stylized. This slight physical resemblance seems to confirm what we already suspect from Picasso’s dual representation of her in *Portrait de Germaine*.^[34] Knowing this, it is likely that the left-hand figure in *La danse*, with her aggressive sexuality and her double head—one aspect gentle and the other demonic—, would be intended to depict Casagemas’ mistress, her presence acting as a counterbalance to her late husband on the right.

Accepting this hypothesis, we may also be led to assume that the figure in the centre is meant to symbolize the victimized Casagemas/Picasso. In fact, despite its caricature-like stylization, the bust seems to indicate a certain resemblance to the deceased friend in its suggestion of dark rings around the eyes and a slightly receding chin. The figure’s pallor

and frailty may also hint at the vulnerability of a sacrificial victim. Indeed, in his detailed analysis of the painting, Gowing has compared the painting to a crucifixion. The death of Pichot reminded Picasso of the tragedy which had occurred many years earlier, leading him to turn the canvas into a paradigm of the relationship between man and woman, a sort of masquerade dance of life and death, with the heart-broken Casagemas as the crucified victim.

Here, once more, we are in the presence of an exorcistic painting. Casagemas again exchanges places with Picasso, being “crucified” by Germaine and Pichot. In this manner, the suffering he was experiencing during this excruciating period of his life is deflected to his dead friend. Picasso’s exorcism is aimed at the left dancer, the possessed Maenad with minute but compelling teeth, a “portrait” of Germaine. As in the 1915 *Arlequin*, teeth serve here as a *memento mori*, a reminder of death, and here acquire portentous meaning. Their tangible presence is intensified by their true-to-life asymmetry and by their murderous expression. Death is also embodied in the Maenad’s black nails, which resemble the black iron nails associated with sorcery. However, the Maenad’s teeth and nails may also be read as magic symbols of Picasso’s own shamanic power of transformation. They are the means of his exorcism of the surrounding anguish, part of his enraged protest.

Finally, as Gasman has noted, the head of the paroxistic Maenad/Germane on the left incorporates the profile of a mask-like head. Similar to a crescent moon, it stands erect on a vertical axis instead of lying passively in a prone position, displaying moreover little direct connection with the rest of the anatomy. In spite of the active role it seems to take, the lunar mask is gentle and dreamy, expressing a more hopeful mood than the savage frontal view of the dancer on which it stands. Interestingly, this new “crescent moon of rebirth” appears to be formed out of the blackness into which the Maenad’s teeth bite. The nails of the crucified figure (Picasso/Casagemas) are planted on both the left Maenad, representing Germaine, and the right shadow standing for Pichot. The crescent, like a small bud of life, is presented as the total opposite of death as embodied by the two side lovers. The crescent’s rays spread on the vertical borders in the form of *fleurs-de-lys*, symbols of illumination, suggestive of the conjunction of opposites, of the mythical cycle of life and death. The symbolism appears to indicate Picasso’s anticipation of a positive outcome in his exorcism of death. Picasso devises a fitting background for the final mystical and magical dance of the Maenad (Germaine), for the crucified victim (Picasso/Casagemas) and for the shadowy puppet on the right (Pichot): a half-opened window. The meaning of the window cannot be fully grasped without awareness of the long tradition of mystical windows as thresholds that simultaneously separate and connect the profane and the sacred worlds. The window is not only a passage to/from the “other” dimension for the “crucified” masked dancer: it is itself death, assuming the identity of a sacred delimiting space against which the masquerade of Life must be evaluated. In the end, this window of death may symbolize Picasso’s coming to terms with his friend’s fatal demise; but more importantly, it also embodies the artist’s manifested belief that the human condition is above all defined by man’s struggle with his own mortality.

An exorcistic function is clearly at the core of another painting by Salvador Dalí: *The Angelus of Gala* [\[35\]](#) (1935). Dali had first seen a print of Millet’s *Angelus* on the corridor walls of his school. The original painting focuses on two peasants who have stopped

for an afternoon prayer, heads bowed in reverence. Upon first seeing the print, Dalí sensed the anguish hidden in the figures' faces. Later, radiographs of the original work revealed the casket of a small child lying at the feet of its parents. By including a copy of Millet's painting in the background of *The Angelus of Gala*, Dalí gives full expression to his view of the transgressable demarcation between life and art, artist and model, as emphasised by the harlequin costumes that they both wear.

In Dalí's *The Angelus of Gala* and in Picasso's *The dance*, we see an encounter of the artist with the Other, of the living with the dead. Out of this confrontation emerges the resurrected figure in crucified form. Radiographs of *The dance* show that Picasso's picture was begun in a much more conventional way, as a fairly straightforward representation of three dancers rehearsing. Then, at some point, presumably after Pichot's death, it underwent some radical changes and took on a deeper meaning. Alterations and cracks in the paint allow one to see that the blue of the sky originally continued under part of what is now the black profile on the right, representing the presence of Pichot. Here again, out of the confrontation with the dead Other emerges a new life, a manifestation of one's own living self.

The influence of death and the desire to overturn it, in the works of Dalí and Picasso is overwhelming. Both artists have unresolved phobias that influence their insights into their personas, and even their desire to escape negative life events (the death of Salvador, Conchita, Casagemas, Pichot, etc). In their paintings, they employ undeclared magical powers to transgress the porous separation between life and death. Their frequent use of masks that both hide and reveal, is symbolic of the creative ability of the artist to retell and reinvent reality. In all the paintings discussed, the image of the artist dissipates so that his reflection may take its full embodiment. Through these major works, Picasso and Dalí managed to transform their circumstances into new venues of creation.

[1] Salvador Dalí. *Metamorphosis of Narcissus*. 1937. Oil on canvas. 51,1 x 78,1 cm. Tate Modern, London. Inv To2343). Purchased 1979

[2] Barolsky 1998, 472.

[3] Marcuse 1998, 164.

[4] Marcuse 1998, 169.

[5] Breton 1973, 278.

[6] Secrest 1986, 77.

[7] Secrest 1986, 21.

[8] Secrest 1986, 28.

[9] Secrest 1986, 25.

[10] Brunel 1992, 32.

[11] Secrest 1986, 77.

[12] Secrest 1986, 129.

[13] Pablo Picasso. *Couple nu et femme avec enfant (La vie)*. Barcelona. [Spring~] May [~Summer]/1903. Oil on canvas. 196,5 x 129,2 cm. The Cleveland Museum of Art. (Inv 1945.24). Gift of Hanna Fund, 1945. OPP.03:001.

[14] Vallentin 1957, 7; Palau 1980, 27; Penrose 1981, 10.

[15] Secrest 1986, 136.

[16] Macmillan 1997, 385.

- [17] Palau 1999, 478.
- [18] Salvador Dalí. *Harlequin*. 1926. Oil on canvas. 196,5 x 150 cm. Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid. (Inv AS07488).
- [19] Salvador Dalí. *Two Figures*. 1926. Oil on canvas. 149 x 198 cm. Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid. (Inv AS11135). Salvador Dalí Bequest, 1990.
- [20] Salvador Dalí. *Self-Portrait Splitting into Three / Harlequin*. 1926. Oil on canvas. 40,6 x 30 cm. Private collection.
- [21] Salvador Dalí. *Head*. 1926. Oil on canvas. 100 x 100 cm. Fundació Gala-Salvador Dalí, Figueres.
- [22] Salvador Dalí. *Self-Portrait Splitting into Three*. 1926~1927. Oil on canvas. 71,5 x 51,5 cm. Fundació Gala-Salvador Dalí, Figueres.
- [23] Pablo Picasso. *Au Lapin Agile (Arlequin au verre)*. Paris. Winter/1904~1905 [Early/1905]. Oil on canvas. 99,1 x 100,3 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, NYC. (Inv 1992.391). The Walter H. & Leonore Annenberg Collection. Partial Gift of Walter H. & Leonore Annenberg, 1992. OPP.04:031.
- [24] Reff 1980, 5-33.
- [25] Pablo Picasso. *Arlequin*. Paris. [Late] Fall [~Winter]/1915. Oil on canvas. 183,5 x 105,1 cm. The Museum of Modern Art, NYC. (Inv 76.1950). Acquired through the Lillie P. Bliss Bequest. OPP.15:001.
- [26] Gasman 1981, 449-538.
- [27] Carl Jung described the transit between life and death experienced by the shaman as the Archetypal Hero's journey. It is also mirrored in the Tarot deck, with the journey of the Fool—another association with the Harlequin—that follows the seeker through outer exploration of the world, death, and rebirth into a spiritual and fulfilling life.
- [28] McCully 1996, 55.
- [29] Pablo Picasso. *Les demoiselles d'Avignon*. Paris. [Spring~Summer~Fall] [May~] June~July/1907. Oil on canvas. 243,9 x 233,7 cm. The Museum of Modern Art, NYC. (Inv 333.1939). Acquired through the Lillie P. Bliss Bequest. OPP.07:001
- [30] Pablo Picasso. *Les trois danseuses (La danse) [Les trois danseurs]*. Paris [Monte-Carlo]. [Spring] [June] February~8-June/1925. Oil on canvas. 215,3 x 142,2 cm. Tate Modern, London. (Inv T00729). Purchased with a special Grant-in-Aid and the Florence Fox Bequest with assistance from the Friends of the Tate Gallery and the Contemporary Art Society, 1965. OPP.25:001.
- [31] Picasso refers to the shadow in the canvas as “the presence of Pichot”. Although the shadow does not physically resemble the profile of Pichot, it symbolically may represent his “presence”, as he was associated with artistic shadow theatre (*sombras artísticas*). Pichot had in fact designed, along with Utrillo, the sets for the first performance of *sombras artísticas* at *Els Quatre Gats* in 1897 (cf. Kaplan 1992, 44).
- [32] Alley 1981, 598-605.
- [33] Gasman 1981, 661-756.
- [34] Pablo Picasso. *Portrait of Germaine [La femme au châte]*. Barcelona [Paris]. [Late-October ~ December]/1902. Oil on canvas. 50,2 x 41,6 cm. Christie's. #29, 1655, 05/02/06. OPP.02:076.
- [35] Salvador Dalí. *The Angelus of Gala*. 1935. Oil on wood. 32 x 26 cm. Museum of Modern Art, NYC.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Alley, Ronald. 1981. Catalogue of the Tate Gallery's Collection of Modern Art other than Works by British Artists. London: Tate Gallery and Sotheby Parke-Bernet. pp. 598-605.
- Atkinson-Bonasio, Alice. 2008. "Salvador Dali: Metamorphosis of Narcissus." Ms. University of the West of England.
- Barolsky, Paul. 1995. "A Very Brief History of Art from Narcissus to Picasso." *The Classical Journal*, Vol. 90, No. 3 (Feb. - Mar.), pp. 255-259.
- Barolsky, Paul. 1998. "As in Ovid, so in Renaissance Art." *Renaissance Quarterly*. (Jun 22.) pp. 451-474.
- Barr, Alfred H, Jr. 1946. *Picasso: Fifty Years of His Art*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Bowie, Malcolm. 1991. *Lacan*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Breton, André. 1953. "Océanic." (1948), reprinted in Breton, *La Cité des champs*, Paris: Sagittaire.
- Brunel, Pierre, ed. 1992. *Companion to Literary Myths, Heroes and Archetypes*. New York: Routledge.
- Daix, Pierre. 1993. *Picasso: Life & Art*. New York: Icon Editions & New York: Harper-Collins.
- Daix, Pierre & Georges Boudaille. 1966. *Picasso-The Blue & Rose Periods. A Catalogue of the Paintings 1900-1906*. Neuchâtel: Ides et Calendes; Greenwich, conn.: New York Graphic Society.
- Evans, Dylan. 1996. *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*. New York: Routledge.
- Fink, Bruce. 1995. *The Lacanian Subject: Between Language and Jouissance*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Galvagno, Rosalba. 2011. "The Metamorphosis as a Figure of the Boundary Between Life and Death." *Between*, vol. I, n. 1 (May.) Pp. 1-19.
- Gasman, Lydia. 1981. *Mystery, Magic & Love in Picasso, 1925-1938: Picasso & the Surrealist Poets*. Ann Arbor, Michigan: University Microfilms International.
- Gowing, Lawrence. 1964-1965. *Tate Gallery Report*. London: Tate Gallery.
- Marcuse, Herbert. 1955. *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud*. Beacon Press.
- Heyd, Milly. 1984. "Dali's 'Metamorphosis of Narcissus' Reconsidered." *Artibus et Historiae*, Vol. 5, No. 10, pp. 121-131.
- Land, Norman E. 1997. "Narcissus Pictor." *Notes in the History of Art*, Vol. 16, No. 2 (Winter), pp. 10-15.
- Lomas, David. 2011. *Narcissus Reflected: The Myth of Narcissus in Surrealist and Contemporary Art*. London: Reaktion Books.
- Loreti, Silvia. 2011. "Modern Narcissus: The Lingering Reflections of Ancient Myth in Modern Art" *Papers of Surrealism*, Issue 9, Summer, pp. 1-28.
- Macmillan, Malcolm. 1997. *Freud Evaluated: The Completed Arc*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Mallen, Enrique, ed. 2014. *Online Picasso Project*. Sam Houston State University. 2007-2015.
- Marcuse, Herbert. 1998. *Eros and Civilization*. New York: Routledge.
- McCully, Marilyn, ed. 1981. *A Picasso Anthology: Documents, Criticism, Reminiscences*. London: Arts Council of Great Britain in association with Thames and Hudson.
- O'Brian, Patrick. 1994. *Pablo Picasso. A Biography*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company.

- Palau i Fabre, Josep. 1980. *Picasso, The Early Years: 1881 - 1907*. New York: Rizzoli and München.
- Penrose, Roland. 1967. *The Eye of Picasso*. New York: New American Library.
- Reff, Theodore. 1971. "Harlequins, Saltimbanques, Clowns and Fools." *Artforum* 10, no. 1. pp. 30-43.
- Reff, Theodore. 1980. "Themes of Love and Death in Picasso's Early Work." *Picasso in Retrospect*. Roland Penrose and John Golding, eds., pp. 5-33. New York: Harper & Row, Icon Editions.
- Richardson, John. 1991. *A Life of Picasso, vol 1: 1881-1906*. New York: Random House.
- Richardson, John. 1996. *A Life of Picasso, vol 2: 1907-1917*. New York: Random House.
- Ross, Stephen. 2002. "A Very Brief Introduction to Lacan." Ms. University of Victoria.
- Secrest, Meryle. 1986. *Salvador Dalí: A Biography*. New York: Dutton.
- Seligmann, Kurt. 1974. *Magic, Supernaturalism and Religion*. Pantheon Books
- Vallentin, Antonina. 1957. *Pablo Picasso*. Paris: Albin Michel.
- Varnedoe, Kirk. 1996. "Picasso's Self Portraits." In *Picasso and Portraiture: Representation and Transformation*. Rubin, William S., Anne Baldassari, Pierre Daix (eds..) pp. 110-179. New York: Museum of Modern Art.
- Wasserman, Aaron. 2005. "Self-Identity and Picasso's Harlequin." Ms. Swarthmore College.
- Zizek, Slavoj. 1991. *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan Through Popular Culture*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.