“Himself in the Glass”: The Mythology of *Vertigo*

One ought not be surprised that it is easy to misread *Vertigo*. Time and again, Boileau and Narcejac's novel takes up the problem of correctly discerning the relationship between a signifier and its signified: the central concern of any detective, as he or she pieces together clues in order to solve the mystery at hand. In this way, the role of detective is a specialized case of the general situation of a reader, who must interpret a complex series of signs in order to discern the meaning of a text. This operation can be most clearly discerned in the novel as Roger Flavières attempts to solve the riddle of the relationship between three women – Pauline Lagerlac, Madeleine Gévigne, and Renée Sourange – an enigma which consumes the vast majority of Boileau and Narcejac's text. It is a less immediately evident case of confused identity, however, that motivates the specific way *Vertigo*'s narrative unfolds: a parallel drama concerned not with the correctness of Flavières' identification of Madeleine, but with the reader's correct understanding of the character of Flavières. This narrative is played out in the tension between two ancient myths: Flavières' explicit invocations of the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, and the text's own references to the story of Echo and Narcissus. The latter exerts a stronger force on the text than its companion, despite its never receiving an overt reference from either a character in, or the authors of, the work. Ultimately, Flavières' obsessive attempts to solve the riddle of Madeleine's relationship to Pauline and Renèe are secondary to, and governed by is the novel's working out of Flavières' complex relationship to the figures of Orpheus and Narcissus.

While Flavières' allusions to the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice are overt, the presence of

the myth of Narcissus in the novel is more subtle. It comes closest to the surface of the text late in the novel, in an instant that passes so quickly that it is likely to escape the inattentive reader's notice. After Flavières finishes styling Renée's hair in an attempt to "remodel the shape of her head...painting a portrait of the Madeleine he remembered," he pauses to admire his work, asking himself: "Was that really the reflection of a woman that he was staring at in the glass? Or was it some subjective vision like the things seen in a crystal? … No, he hadn't deceived himself. It was Madeleine as he had known her" (145-46). The myth of Narcissus, of course, centers on that figure's mistaking a "subjective vision" – his own reflection – for the image of "a woman" with whom he becomes enamored. The comparison appears to collapse, however, when one considers that Flavières is, in fact, looking at the reflection of Renée, an actual woman. However, Flavières quiets his doubts not with this obvious truth, but by affirming to himself that he is in the presence of "Madeleine as he had known her." This distinction is crucial to understanding the operation of the Narcissus myth within the novel, for a close examination of the relationship between Flavières and Madeleine reveals that "he had known her" not as an actual woman with a being independent from his own, but rather only as a thinly-veiled projection of his own private hopes, anxieties, and obsession – in short, as his reflection.

Before even laying eyes on her, Flavières is depicted as already superimposing his own personal narrative onto the figure of Madeleine. Gévigne has not even finished describing his "wife" before Flavières begins to think that "[p]erhaps Gévigne's wife too was burdened by some gnawing secret, but it couldn't be half as hideous a one as his. Were her dreams torn by a scream like that? Had she allowed someone to die in her place?" (15). He makes this projection explicit

when he declines Gévigne's offer to pay him for his services, explaining that "[i]t's the case I'm interested in … I already have the feeling your wife and I have something in common" (16).

Flavières continues to project his inner life onto Madeleine in his first encounter with her, during which he furtively observes her at the theater without any exchange of words. Indeed, Flavières explicitly identifies one of his projections as a foundation of his sense of intimacy with her: "Flavières already called her by her Christian name in his own mind, as though there was already some bond between them, as though they were united in a common hostility to Gévigne" (20). This "bond between them" has no more reality outside Flavières' mind than does Madeleine's "hostility toward Gévigne"; neither actually exists, and both are merely instances of Flavières externalizing his own feelings onto Madeleine, despite there being nothing in his interaction with her that would substantiate the belief that she shares them. Moments later, Flavières imagines Madeleine as a portrait, bearing his signature; a moment of irony which serves to underline that Flavières is, in fact, constructing an image of Madeleine out of his own imagination without reference to her actual being.

This irony further reveals the narcissistic nature of Flavières' "love" for Madeleine, as Flavières, with an utter lack of self-awareness, perverts the common comparison of one's lover to a work of art – usually an expression of admiration and love – into an assertion of his authorship, and therefore ownership, of the object of his desire. The perverseness of Flavières' love is further underlined by his thoughts after he "rescues" Madeleine from drowning in the Seine. He is initially "overflowing with joy, energy, and decisiveness … If death had come to her she simply wouldn't have noticed it! He swore a mental oath never to let her out of his sight.

From now on he would protect her against herself. She needed protection. She wasn't quite normal, he felt sure of that now" (42-3). However, reality soon intrudes – as Madeleine appears, in dry clothes, Flavières "...got another shock. In a cheap print dress, her bare feet in sandals, she was another Madeleine altogether, and one that was not in the least intimidating" (43). Although he is not aware of it, this is Flavières' first vision of Renée, and he is not pleased by the sight. Instead, he reacts with rage, negating the oaths he had sworn to himself moments before on the basis of his relationship to a Madeleine who existed solely in his imagination: "He had expected her to thank him. It was to have been a rather touching scene. And here she was being jocular about it! Furious, he muttered to himself...His joy had completely evaporated … he was angrier than ever. Against Gévigne. He'd pay for this! And he could have his wife watched by someone else in the future" (44). Madeleine's failure to follow the script Flavières had written for her sends him into paroxysms of fury; rather than admitting, and loving, her individuality, he is infuriated by the discrepancies between her and his projection of her, the only actual object of his obsession.

Given the conspiracy between Gévigne and Renée, Flavières is never allowed to meet the real Madeleine; it is due only to his own narcissism, however, that he refuses to relate to the real "Madeleine." As the novel progresses, Flavières reveals the depths of this narcissism in two extraordinary passages.

After an initial refusal of several opportunities to clear Gévigne's name following Madeleine's death, Flavières learns that "the police seemed to have ruled out the possibility of suicide" (90). Given the logistical problems posed by the Second World War's recent penetration

into France, Flavières resolves

> to straighten out the muddle at the first opportunity. That decision enabled him to regain some of his self-esteem, and allowed him to share a little more in the emotions of his fellow-men. He went to a mass at the Cathedral in honour of Joan of Arc, and prayed for France and Madeleine at the same time. He made little distinction now between the national disaster and his own. France was Madeleine lying crushed and bleeding at the foot of the church tower.

The incredible egocentrism of these thoughts is astonishing, although one is perhaps able to empathize with Flavières, who has just "witnessed" the "suicide" of "Madeleine," the only "woman" he ever "loved." Flavières later proves this empathy to be misguided, and reveals himself to be essentially incapable of empathizing, as he tells Renée:

> 'I've always been afraid of dying … The death of other people upset me terribly because it foretold my own. And my own... no, I have never been able to resign myself to the idea. I came close to believing in the Christian God because of the promise of the resurrection … That body wrapped in a linen cloth, the great stone rolled to the door of the sepulchre, the soldiers watching … and then, the third day … When I was a boy, how I used to ponder over that third day …' (143).

These comments evince a profound inability on the part of Flavières to transcend, even conceptually, the narrow confines of his own being. In addition to his earlier absurd conflation of the invasion of France with the death of his lover, he declares that he is upset by the deaths of others, not because another person has died, but because these deaths serve as inescapable intimations of his own, and that he only approach of religion came about, not because of faith in something greater than himself, but by virtue of the strength of his desire to escape mortality. Taken together, Flavières' comments reveal a close relationship between himself and Narcissus: While Narcissus mistakes his own reflection for another human subject, Flavières cannot relate to other subjects as anything but reflections of himself.

Flavières' second comment, however, is incompletely reproduced above. Read through the lens of his narcissism, its latter half provides the key to understanding Flavières' motivations

throughout the novel, from the development of his initial “love” for Madeleine, to his obsessive insistence that Renée is Madeleine, to his murder of Renée when she attempts to explain that “Madeleine as … [Flavières] knew her” was a fiction. Flavières concludes: “"I went secretly up to an empty cave and shouted into it. The sound echoed under the ground, but no one rose from the dead … It was too early then … Now … now I believe my shout was answered … I want so desperately to believe it. If it were true … if you could only tell me … you … Ah! What a relief it would be … '" (143). It has already been established that Flavières is in love, not with Madeleine, but with a narcissistic projection of his own subjectivity onto her. In light of this utterance, the mechanics – and consequences – of this projection can finally be understood.

Flavières himself admits that his initial attraction to Madeleine is due to resonances between her and two items of tremendous significance in his private syllabary: the caves near his grandparents' house which he explored as a child, which he views as the interstice between the world of the living and that of the dead, and a mysterious picture of a girl on the cover of a book he read as a small boy, which he seems to also somehow relate to the spectral world:

> [The caves were] imbued with that scent -- the scent of Madeleine. And there on the sunny boulevard under the budding trees, Flavières experienced once again the fearful attraction of the shades, and he understood why, at first glance, Madeleine had touched him. Another image surged into his brain...The young girl, dressed in black, resembled Madeleine -- he was sure of it now -- and had made no less of an impression on him. He had thought about her as he went to sleep and heard her footsteps in his dreams. *All this was ridiculous, of course. It would be, at any rate, to a man like Gévigne.* On another level, it was true enough, with the truth of a lost dream found once again and full of mysterious evidence. Madeleine walked in front of him, a slim dark figure, a prey to the shadows, smelling of chrysanthemums...When she turned down the Rue des Saints-Pères, Flavières felt a sort of bitter satisfaction. Of course, that didn't prove anything, either. And yet... (34-5).

While it is later revealed that Gévigne and Renée had contrived the story of Madeleine's “possession” by the spirit of Pauline Lagerlac only to convince Flavières that Madeleine was mad, their story's resonances with Flavières' own private obsessions quickly take on a life of

their own. Flavières believes the myth of Pauline Lagerlac's resurrection in Madeleine because it provides him with a long-sought mechanism through which he can escape his fear of death; the reappearance of Pauline in Madeleine is only a "mysterious evidence" of something he had already wanted to believe – a faith wanting substantiation, which it finds in Madeleine, and the mythology Flavières constructs around her.

Indeed, it is Flavières' inability to accept mortality which leads him to project various mythologies onto Madeleine, the most important of which is the figure of Eurydice returned from the underworld. Early in the novel, after first interrupting their lunch with an allusion to Aeneas in the "nether world," Flavières encourages Madeleine to continue her meal, urging: "...go on eating, little Eurydice" (51). Although Madeleine is confused by the relevance of his allusion to Aeneas, asking "...what's that got to do with me," she responds more favorably to his second invocation of mythology; although she presciently notes to Flavières that "[y]ou'll be getting me worried with all your mythology," she admits the aptness of the comparison, declaring Eurydice "a nice name … and you did bring me back from the nether world, didn't you?" The consequences of this admission are powerful, and lasting; within a page, the novel's narrator notes that "[f]rom that day … [Flavières] playfully called her Eurydice. He would never have dared call her Madeleine. Besides, Madeleine was another man's wife. Eurydice belonged to him and him alone!" (52). At this point, "Madeleine" ceases to exist for Flavières; she is wholly subsumed by his mythologization of her as Eurydice. Indeed, when he buys her a gold lighter days before her "death," he addresses the gift not to Madeleine, but instead "*A Eurydice ressuscitée*" (54). It is only after Flavières inscribes this superimposition of Eurydice onto

Madeleine that he declares his love for her.

Unfortunately for Flavières – and Renée – Flavières' identification of Madeleine with Eurydice rests on a misreading of reality, due at least in part to the fictional narrative of Madeleine's madness contrived by Gévigne and performed by Renée. But while Flavières' misreading of his relationship with "Madeleine" is encouraged by her responses to him, it is not driven by her at all – rather, it is motivated by his own private preoccupations and anxieties, enflamed by the fictional Madeleine, but present long before her arrival in Flavières' life. In very the moment that Madeleine first accepts Flavières initial allusion to Eurydice, Flavières' thoughts makes apparent the actual content of his relationship with Madeleine is largely superfluous to the superfluity to the existence of his obsessions. Although Madeleine accepts the comparison on the basis of Flavières having "rescued" her from her attempted suicide-by-drowning, his thoughts lie elsewhere: "But instead of to the Seine and the muddy quay, his mind went back to those cave-dwellings near the Loire, whose deathly silence was only broken by the monotonous drip of water" (51). Flavières and Madeleine thus ground his allusion in different referents, as Madeleine thinks of an interaction between herself and Flavières, while Flavières is thinking only of the caves near his grandparents' house, the novel's main symbol of his obsessive preoccupation with mortality. Shortly thereafter, Flavières muses: "What a long time he had waited for this woman who was not quite at home in the daylight! Since the age of twelve, to be exact, when he had first penetrated into the heart of the earth, exploring the shadows, the country of phantoms, the dead" (52). As such, Flavières is revealed to not be interacting with Renée's performance of the role "Madeleine," any more than he is interacting with the actual Madeleine

Gévigne; his comparison of her to Eurydice is not a comment about his having rescued her, but a deeper metaphysical claim that she is manifesting Pauline's return from the “nether world” of the dead, which he identifies with the “other world” of the caves. For Flavières, Madeleine thus is nothing more than a mechanism through which he can escape his fear of death.

In truth, Flavières is not in love with Madeleine at all, but with the way that she, as a living incarnation of the myth of Eurydice, allows him to escape his lifelong fear of dying. Upon first seeing Renée in the flesh, Flavières recognizes this function, although he denies that it is the cause of his love for Madeleine, or he had believed it previously; in the same breath, he superimposes it onto his image of Renée. This process takes three steps, which all occur in rapid succession. First, Flavières thinks that Renée is merely similar to Madeleine, or, if not merely similar, at least not perfectly identical; Renée is “another Madeleine and yet the same Madeleine … Madeleine's double.” (115). This not-quite-identity almost immediately gives way to a newfound certainty that Renée is more identical with Madeleine than he had been initially willing to admit. Flavières asserts: “No, she wasn't a double”; this assertion results in an agonized wonderment: “What is it that gives absolute certainty to the act of recognition? He knew Madeleine was sitting there … in the same way that he knew he wasn't dreaming, that he was really and truly Flavières, that he was suffering agonies. He suffered because, at the same time, he was equally certain that Madeleine was dead.” Finally, he has a revelation: “Madeleine had died at the foot of that church tower … And, before her, Pauline … Nevertheless … How clear it became all of a sudden … Now, he was able to accept the truth, as consoling as it had so far been inconceivable. Just as Pauline's spirit had housed itself in Madeleine's body, so

Madeleine's had now …" (116-17) housed itself in Renée's.

In the next breath, Flavières reveals the narcissism motivating this belief, although he does not recognize it as such. Instead, he is delighted by the realization that "[i]t could even be the same with himself. Perhaps in some far-off forgotten time he had already gazed at that purplish sea, those brown sails … He, too might have been dead before – more than once, perhaps, many times … If only one could be sure! But Madeleine had been." (117). He goes on, explicitly noting that his newfound conviction has the potential to obviate his lifelong fear: "If he was right, why should he be afraid?" The next lines of the passage drip with the unselfconscious irony so characteristic of Flavières' thoughts: "What was there to be afraid of? Of waking up? Of no longer believing the miracle? Of having chased foolishly a will-o'-the-wisp? No." Indeed, this is exactly what Flavières ought to be afraid of, and perfectly sets up the novel's final scenes. Flavierèrs concludes with one more moment of self-delusion: " He was only afraid of seeing her again, as he would have to speak to her … And of course he wanted to. But would he be able to bear the look in her eyes, the sound of her voice?" As is shown in the scenes that follow, he is not; having never loved Madeleine beyond his mythologization of her, he also cannot love Renée, at least so long as she resists his attempts to fit her to his schematization of Madeleine. He himself acknowledges this, asking: "Why couldn't he simply love this woman and leave it at that, instead of poisoning their relations with his ceaseless probings … Poor Madeleine. He seemed to take a delight in making her suffer. But why, why did she refuse to speak" (133). Of course, Renée has spoken, quite a bit – she has simply refused to "admit" that she is the latest resurrection of Pauline Lagerlac/Madeleine Gévigne – and the ready answer to why Flavières

cannot simply love her in herself is that his narcissism has always made such love an impossibility. His objection to Renée is nothing but the quintessential narcissist's lament: “She was too *different*” (155).

Renée's confession at the end of the novel threatens to upheave the newfound freedom from his fear of death that Flavières has enjoyed, since wholly accepting Pauline/Madeleine/Renée's status as a real-life incarnation of Eurydice returned from the dead. Renée reveals to Flavières that “[y]ou never knew Madeleine Gévigne. I impersonated her”(165), and that she was “Gévigne's accomplice” in a “plot...to get rid of his lawful wife” and “divert suspicion” by cultivating, in Flavières, “someone who could come forward and say that Madame Gévigne had strange ideas, that she was convinced she had lived before, that death seemed to her of no importance, almost a game; someone who would be believed without question when he said he had already witnessed one attempt of hers to take her life...[a] faked attempt at suicide” (166-67). In light of this correct interpretation of events, the delicate dance of Madeleine's responses to Flavières' earlier allusions becomes apparent. Madeleine's initial confusion at Flavières' reference to Aeneas is due not to a lack of familiarity with mythology – indeed, her fluency with myth is evidenced by her grasping, unprompted, Flavières' subsequent reference to Eurydice – but with an inability to understand its applicability *to her*. She is all too eager, however, to encourage his association of her with Eurydice, as it advances her true goal: leading Flavières to develop a false narrative of the death of Madame Gévigne. What she did not know was that the cultivation of this false narrative would cost her her life.

Having heard Renée's story, Flavières must confront a seemingly intractable problem – as

Renée's account begins “drilling its way into his brain, gaining plausibility from a hundred details that fitted in” (168), it would appear that he has no choice but to abandon his mythologization of Madeleine as Eurydice. This would be tantamount to admitting that the fears he identified upon first extending the comparison to Renée – “Of waking up … no longer believing the miracle … having chased foolishly a will-o'-the-wisp?” – were justified, an admission of the being of the other on its own terms that his narcissism had previously rendered impossible. Moreover, it would require a return to the agonizing fear of mortality that his narcissism had already driven him to such absurd lengths to escape.

Ultimately, Flavières refuses to relinquish his misreading of the events of the novel as a realization of the myth of Eurydice, a refusal which cements his status within the novel as its version of the figure of Narcissus. Although Renée/Madeleine must be seen, and have been shown, as functioning primarily as Narcissus' reflection in the novel's version of the myth, Flavières final exchange with Renée bears an uncanny similarity to Narcissus' final exchange with Echo: “'Madeleine,' he murmured beseechingly. She dried her eyes, pushed back her hair. 'I'm not Madeleine,' she said.” In both cases, an utterance by the male figure is returned imperfectly, by the woman who loves him. While Echo can only repeat diminished versions of Narcissus' utterances, Renée augments Flavières' speech, an assertion of independent existence more powerful than Echo's, but no less doomed to failure. While Narcissus simply refuses Echo's pleas, leaving her to die heartbroken and alone, Flavières reacts more violently to Renée's alteration to his words: “With his teeth clenched, he seized her by the throat with both hands. 'You're lying,' he groaned. 'You've never stopped lying.' But can't you see that I love you, that I've