



The Mirror Stage

Hostius Quadra and the Alienated Self

Brutes cannot reflect upon themselves. Bees indeed make neat and curious workes, and many other creatures besides, but when they have done, they cannot judge on them.

—ROBERT BURTON, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*

In the last portion of the first book of his tract on natural history, the *Natural Questions*, Seneca examines the physical properties of mirrors. The discussion climaxes unexpectedly with a *fabella* describing how mirrors can be put to evil use. Seneca's moralizing tale concerns the bad habits of one Hostius Quadra, a wealthy Roman aristocrat who lived at the time of the emperor Augustus.¹ The profligate nature of Hostius Quadra's sexual enthusiasm was such that it led to his murder at the hands of his disgusted slaves. The emperor's response to the murder was unexpected. The normal punishment meted out to slaves who performed such a deed was swift and exceptionally brutal. The murdered master's slave estate, whether involved in his murder or not, could expect to be executed. In the instance of Hostius Quadra, however, so great was Augustus's distaste for the man that he refused to sanction legal retribution against the guilty slaves.² Here is the beginning of the *fabella* (*Natural Questions* 1.16) (Loeb translation, and following passages).

At this point I want to tell you a little story so that you may understand how lust scorns no instrument for rousing passion and how ingenious it is for inciting its own aberration. There was a man named Hostius Quadra, whose obscene acts even became the subject of theatrical performance. He was rich, greedy, a slave to his millions. The deified Augustus did not consider him worth being avenged when he was murdered by his slaves, and [Augustus] almost proclaimed that he seemed to have been murdered justly. He was vile not only in relation to one sex alone but lusted after men as well as women. He had mirrors made of the type I described (the ones that reflect images far

larger) in which a finger exceeded the size and thickness of an arm. These, moreover, he so arranged that when he was offering himself to a man he might see in a mirror all the movements of the stallion behind him and then take delight in the false size of his partner's very member just as though it were really so big.

Several themes stand out in this first section of Seneca's diatribe. Each of these relates to the central strand of this book, the emergence of self-consciousness and a perception of self through a process of psychic isolation and "alienation from the self." Melancholia, love, boredom, and acedia were all built on, or at least were companions of, a heightened, though ill-adapted, sense of self. Suicide, time, and leisure were registered in a comparable manner, though in their cases the adaptation to the sense of self was more fruitful. In both groups this sense of alienation went hand in hand with a stronger sense of self, of, as Seneca termed it, *notitia sui*. A delicate balance was involved. Too great a sense of self could lead to a dangerous level of depression; with too little, an individual ran the attendant risks of mania. Hostius Quadra and his life of metaphor, as it were, seem to embody these dangers.

There are a number of themes that we may coax from this remarkable sequence. (These, as I hope will become apparent, encapsulate the concerns of my book as a whole.) There is a contrast between doing and watching, between activity and passivity. Hostius Quadra builds his mirrors so that he may watch himself as he has sex performed upon him. Not only is he passive in the sexual sense, but he also passively gazes upon himself as he is being entered and copulated upon. What else does Hostius Quadra attain by his lustful gaze than an acute (even exquisite) sense of himself (a *notitia sui*, as Seneca later puts it), his physical independence, and his separate but linked relation with others.³ Does he not, with his mirrors, display a remarkable level of self-awareness and, through this, a heightened sense of selfhood? This is made especially clear through the act of gazing upon oneself. It is as if a sense of self is gained only by standing outside oneself, by watching oneself whole. But there is, it seems, an inevitable alienation to be linked with Hostius's bizarre perception of himself. The being on which Hostius gazes is, after all, an illusion.

A few other observations concerning this passage need to be made. A simple contrast exists between purity and desire and between poverty and wealth. It is exactly as I have noted throughout this book: wealth and desire lead to a dangerous and overly strong consciousness of self. Finally, there is the fact that Hostius Quadra was murdered. To be sure, his sexual antics may have caused this. They may also have caused the emperor Augustus to overlook his death and to relinquish punishing his slaves. From the vantage point that I have es-

tablished at this point in my book, however, it is difficult to see how Hostius Quadra, with his mirror-clear *notitia sui*, could have ended up any other way than dead. Such a flaunting of the self, of its independence, and such a basking in psychic isolation can only enrage others. They in turn will demand retribution. In the mental sense, taken metaphorically, it bespeaks a sense of self that is so heightened as almost to resemble autism.

This “autism” is emphasized by another of the motifs in this passage, that of illusion. Hostius Quadra has developed an advanced and remarkable sense of his own person. He exhibits this for us through, above all, his manipulation of the medium of lust. When it comes to sex, Hostius Quadra is a champion of illusion—so much so that he became, following his death, a subject for the theater, the most extreme locus for illusion. Hence emerges the first of the themes, the contrast between reality and illusion. Illusion is not limited to the theater. Hostius’s devotion to illusion also manifests itself in his eschewing of gender boundaries: he was enthusiastic for sexual relations with both men and women; with other men, he offered himself passively, like a woman. With women, presumably, he played the man. Seneca even compares him to a mare, thus confusing not only Hostius’s gender claims but also his claim to human status. Illusion is evident above all in the trick mirrors. These render the genitals of Hostius’s partner much larger than they really are. It is as if, in constructing a self that is all facade or illusion, Hostius Quadra has risked the extinction of the personality. He did, in fact, as his murder demonstrates.

But let us return to Seneca’s narrative.

In all the public baths he would recruit favorites choose men by their obvious size, but none the less his insatiable evil took delight in misrepresentations. Go on now and say that the mirror was invented for the sake of touching up one’s looks! The things that monster said and did (he ought to be torn apart by his own mouth) are detestable to talk about. Mirrors faced him on all sides in order that he might be a spectator to his own shame. Also, secret acts which press upon the conscience and which every man denies he has done, he not only presented to his mouth but to his eyes as well.

What is so utterly shameless about Hostius Quadra is his total inversion of the norm. He brazenly displayed not just his sexual preferences but his strange concept of self. So at the baths Hostius openly chose his partners (large-penised men), and at home he again made the invisible visible (acts of coition that were normally invisible were made visible through and magnified in his concave mirrors). Hostius Quadra makes the unsaid said: he vaunted about his sexual acts (“the things that monster said”). Seneca makes much of the image of the mouth. It is the means by which Hostius Quadra did his bragging. But he was

also inordinately fond of fellatio. (His preference for this passive act unmans him, in Seneca's eyes. It makes his gender unspecific. It ought to render Hostius Quadra's selfhood in doubt. Yet Seneca knows that it does not, thanks to those mirrors.) Seneca reserves particular vitriol for Hostius Quadra's mouth: "he ought to be torn apart by his own mouth." Not only does it render the invisible visible, but it also challenges contemporary norms of self.

What strikes the reader most forcefully about this passage is that Hostius Quadra's identity, his brazen sense of self, is built upon a shameless passivity. That, we have seen, is the hallmark of the "new" way of registering the world that I have attempted to illustrate in each of the preceding chapters. This passivity is given emphasis in other ways within this snippet. Making the invisible visible is a process that, again, we have witnessed repeatedly in the chapters of this book: the medical interpretation of passive conditions such as lovesickness does just this; the corporealization of melancholia or the registering of time provide other powerful instances. Linked to this is the making of the unsaid said.

The establishment of selfhood paradoxically through the "alienation from self" is as apparent in this passage, therefore, as in those before. Hostius watches himself in his mirrors. His mouth, too, becomes "alienated." Rather than serving its proper purpose as communicator, it is devoted to sexual acts. So, too, are his eyes.

But, by Hercules, crimes avoid the sight of themselves! Even among those who are degenerate and inured to every disgrace there is still some modesty, very tenuous, at what the eyes see. As though it were not enough to submit himself to unheard of—even unknown—acts he summoned his eyes to witness them. Not content to see how greatly he sinned he surrounded himself with mirrors by which he separated one by one and assembled his vices. And, because he could not watch so attentively when his head dipped in and clung to his partner's private parts, he displayed his own doings to himself through reflections. He used to look at that obscene lusting of his own mouth. He used to watch men admitted all alike to his person for all the doings. Sometimes shared between a man and a woman, and with his whole body spread in a position for submitting to them, he used to watch the unspeakable acts.

Hostius Quadra's selfhood is produced through alienation and also through an inversion of the norm. So it is that his sexual preferences defy gender classification both through their completely passive nature and through their simultaneous turning to both males and females (so we hear that he was "sometimes shared between a man and a woman"). Hostius forces his very eyes to participate in this sexual alienation. Eyes cannot normally view the acts to which he

was devoted (“because he could not watch so attentively when his head dipped in and clung to his partner’s private parts, he displayed his own doings to himself through reflections”). Thanks to the angles at which his magnifying mirrors are placed, this becomes possible.⁴ Hostius watches himself, magnified and from all imaginable angles. His ability to see all of his actions and all of his body produces a bizarre form of self-mastery and, with this, a strange form of self-knowledge (*notitia sui*) that is gained (even asserted) through his ability to see himself whole, something denied to most people. But observe again the process of alienation that this entails. Hostius’s “self” is registered through the mirror. It resides in the mirror. His self, we must say, is other than his body. As we have seen repeatedly within the chapters of this book, the self is established through a process of stepping back and viewing, of alienation. The danger resides in stepping too far back. The self then can become completely other, a mere illusion. That is what Hostius Quadra risks here—and no doubt falls victim to: his “self,” that is, may become an illusion.⁵

What did the foul creature leave for performance in darkness? He did not shrink from daylight but even showed himself monstrous coitions, and gave approval of them to himself. You would not suppose that he would not have been willing to have his portrait painted in such a position! Even among prostitutes there exists some sort of modesty, and those bodies offered for public pleasure draw over some curtain by which their unhappy submission may be hidden. Thus, toward certain things even a brothel shows a sense of shame. But that monster had made a spectacle of his own obscenity and deliberately showed himself acts which no night is deep enough to conceal.

Once again there is the theme of the “invisible made visible”: Hostius performs in the daylight what is normally left unseen and for the night. Not for him is even the veiled modesty of a brothel. Hostius made manifest acts “that no night is deep enough to conceal.” Notice, too, his strange self-assertion that is gained through a type of alienation. Hostius, for example, “gives permission to himself” (as if the self were other) and would have himself, Seneca opines, captured in portrait in these odd postures (again the self becomes other).

It is a wonderful touch for Seneca, in the next section of his narrative, to have this villain speak directly to us.

“At the same time,” he said, “I submit to both a man and a woman. Nevertheless, also with that part of my body not occupied I perform the role of a male in the violation of another person. All my organs are occupied in the lechery. Let my eyes too come into their share of debauchery and be witnesses and supervisors of it. By means of a device let even those acts be seen which the position of our bodies removes from sight, so that no one may

think I do not know what I do. Nature did poorly in providing scanty accessories to human lust. She better arranged the coition of other animals. I will discover a way to deceive my sick wants and satisfy them. To what purpose my depravity if I sin only to the limit of nature? I will surround myself with mirrors, the type which renders the size of objects incredible. If it were possible, I would make those sizes real; because it is not possible, I will feast myself on the illusion. Let my lust see more than it consumes and marvel at what it undergoes.”

It is very difficult not to think that Seneca is speaking of himself, so vivid and so suggestive is his characterization of Hostius Quadra. But that is a claim for another occasion. In this passage Hostius does not deepen our conceptual understanding of his assertion of self. He does make it more plain. His inversion of the norm is again prominent: his defiance of gender, his “misuse” of his organs (all “occupied in the lechery”), his allowing his gaze to take charge over his conduct (“Let my eyes . . . be . . . supervisors of it”), his making the invisible visible, his paradoxical assertion of control (“that no one may think I do not know what I do”), and his utter fascination with his mirrors and images (“Let my lust see more than it consumes and marvel at what it undergoes”). Another aspect of this passage that may not be immediately apparent is Hostius Quadra’s alarming concern for his inner, rather than his outer, life (for interiority, as I have termed it, rather than exteriority). This may seem paradoxical. Are not all of Hostius’s actions designed to heighten his corporeal gratification? Reconsider, then, his speech as Seneca conceives it. Hostius’s assertion of self through his control over his body (“I submit,” “I perform,” “my organs,” “let my eyes,” etc.) seems more important than any physical gratification gained through this: Hostius is determined to *invent* a means for increasing his sexual pleasure. The pleasure, however, is all in his head. Sex becomes the life of the mind. As Hostius tells us: “I will feast myself on the illusion.”

Seneca concludes his sequence on Hostius with the following expostulation.

Shameful behaviour! Perhaps he was murdered quickly, even before he saw it; he ought to have been immolated in front of a mirror of his own.

This is a nice touch—to imagine Hostius murdered in front of a mirror. How else could he perish? His identity, after all, was a thoroughly alienated thing, an other; it was something formed in illusory fashion in front of his eyes. Hostius’s self was registered and given meaning only through the mirror. Could his self be finally mastered in any way other than by being extinguished within a mirror?

Were we to follow Seneca into the final sections of this first book of the *Nat-*

ural Questions, those following the end of Hostius Quadra, we would find less startling material. It is, for all that, no less instructive. In this section of the *Natural Questions*, Seneca complains that mirrors, the product of hard labor, have been devoted to luxury (1.17). Seneca lists some of the benefits of our possession of mirrors: they enable us to watch the rising and setting of the sun; they enable us to view the conjunction of the sun and the moon. Above all, he maintains, mirrors exist so that we may know ourselves (*inventata sunt specula ut homo ipse se nosset*, 1.17.4). Knowledge of self—or, as we might generously translate it, self-consciousness (*notitia sui*, 1.17.4)—is conjoined, continues Seneca, with the advantage of “good sense” (*consilium*, 1.17.4). This second quality, he explains, encourages self-consciousness (*notitia sui*): so it may cause “the handsome man to avoid infamy, the homely man to understand that what he lacks in physical appearance must be compensated for by virtue,” and so on. But Seneca argues that these advantages brought to us by mirrors come at too great a cost. In the ancient times, before mirrors had been invented, humans were better behaved (1.17.5): “that was a simpler age, content with what chance offered, and it had not yet twisted benefits into vice nor seized upon the inventions of nature for the purpose of lust and extravagance.”

Why are mirrors so dangerous? With their use, *notitia sui*, self-knowledge, is displaced by an almost erotic infatuation with self (*amor sui*). Mirrors and their discovery are to be linked with the increased prevalence of vices associated with *amor sui*, luxury and vanity. Men of old washed in streams, brushed their hair and beards themselves, then let them stream loose. This simplicity was displaced by mirrors. At first simple implements, they soon evolved to become full-length creations “carved of gold and silver, then adorned with jewels” (1.17.8). Such is contemporary extravagance, argues Seneca, that the cost of a single mirror is greater than the whole dowry of a woman who lived during the early days of the Republic. Seneca sums up his qualms as follows (1.17.10):

Luxury, encouraged by sheer opulence, has gradually developed for the worst, and vices have taken on enormous growth. All things are so mixed up by the most various refinements that what used to be called the ornament of a woman is now a man’s accoutrement; I mean all men, even soldiers. Is a mirror now used only for the sake of good grooming? There is no vice for which it has not become indispensable.

Self-consciousness (as I have paraphrased the Latin *notitia sui*) is provided with a remarkable malevolent context. While mirrors may confer on us *notitia sui*, they bring in their train such dangers that it seems that the only outcome can be to create characters like Hostius Quadra. But rather than focusing just

on mirrors and *luxuria*, I would like to look at the contexts with which *notitia sui* is associated. This will allow us to link Hostius Quadra more clearly back into the concerns of this book.

Notitia sui is above all associated with time. The passing of time allows the unearthing of mirrors, and with these emerges self-knowledge. But, alas, time's passing, thanks to *luxuria* and attendant extravagance, leads to degeneration and moral bankruptcy. Self-consciousness is also associated with desire. While mirrors may confer some psychological advantages, they breed in their owners an infatuation with self (*amor sui*). One further point, to be linked with time, deserves mention. Mirrors are associated with "adulthood." Men of old, those who washed their hair in rivers and then let it stream loose, are associated with the earth's juvenescence, when our race was new, even infant. Mirrors, the sign of our corruption, are associated with the present. We are grown-ups, and through our self-awareness, we have become self-infatuated.

Hostius Quadra is a remarkable character. He pushes things to extremes and, in so doing, rejects and resists the disintegration of his sense of self. Hostius Quadra's characterization picks up some of the key motifs of this book as a whole. The simplest of these motifs is the contrast between activity and passivity. Its relevance for the sexually passive Hostius is quite obvious. So, too, is the contrast between assertion and yielding. Hostius's corporeal antics are by and large built upon his taste for yielding. It is a taste, too, that, despite its penchant for bathhouse pickups and daylight sex, is gratified in private in a room full of mirrors. This gratification, furthermore, is based on estrangement rather than on complicity and on being hidden rather than on being visible. It is a world based more upon the mind than upon the body. Paradoxically, this world of the body is built upon signs (the mirror and sexual gratification as symbols of the assertion of self). All of these features have figured in previous discussions within this book. They find a remarkable focus within the figure of Hostius Quadra. All of the features, furthermore, are to be associated with the various passive conditions that, I have argued, became pronounced in this period.

I would like to make one further point concerning these motifs. They highlight a curious contradiction. Hostius Quadra's sexual passivity is paradoxically offset by his hilarious choice to display it. Trapped, we could say, by an ideology that judged his sexuality deviant (on sexual passivity see Richlin 1997; Halperin 1990; Foucault 1986), he pitted himself against the arbitrariness of this ideology by flaunting his passivity. His display, as Seneca's dramatic speech demonstrates, indicates considerable desire not just to revolt against societal constraint but to exhibit volitional control. This desire for control is designed to counter those who would judge the passive as lacking in control. Naturally

this display is ultimately futile (not unlike the suicides and suicide attempts of chapter 5). Illusions satisfy no one. It is undeniable, however, that by flaunting his passivity, Hostius Quadra asserts and achieves his reformulated self. Further, his conduct renders problematic the twin notions of power and control. The mirrors, therefore, provided Hostius with a means for responding to the ideological impasse into which he had been thrust. The solution to his dilemma, rather like that adopted by the suicides of chapter 5, was designed to create an aggressive personal display in front of a hostile audience.

Not just the key motifs of this book but also its key themes are captured by Hostius Quadra and his mirrors. These warrant the inclusion of his story within this final chapter. Let us, therefore, briefly recapitulate them. In part 1 of this study, I examined psychological estrangement. This meant, specifically, how it is that an individual's sense of self can disintegrate and, with this, lose its physiological integrity. I suggested that such a disintegration of personality entails the loss of the multiple reference systems produced by family and by community. Such dangerous affective (and conceptual) estrangement was the product of psychic trauma that could manifest itself in a variety of dangerous psychopathological conditions (discussed earlier in this book): melancholia or depression (chapter 1), boredom (chapter 3), lovesickness (chapter 2), and *acedia* (chapter 4) were typical. The nature of the emotional traumas could vary. Typical of those that we have observed are grief, isolation (physical and psychic), loss of family and community, thwarted desire, and the varying constraints of age, sex, or community standing.

In part 2 I examined some of the means by which individuals countered this disintegration of personality. This "reformulation of the self" is based upon an emotional and intellectual acceptance of personality disintegration. In such cases the grammar and language habitually associated with psychic disintegration is subject to an inversion. So it is that, on the matter of leisure, it can as readily lead to the valuation of a form of leisure based upon the admittedly pessimistic estimation of free time as a medium for escape (the conclusions of chapter 7). Even such a doleful matter as suicide can be viewed in this manner (as in chapter 5). Suicide can be utilized as readily as a means for the assertion of the independence of the personality as it can as a means for extinguishing this. (Chariton's suicides are not only most public affairs but are also designedly unsuccessful.) Time, in similar manner, can be seen (as in chapter 6) as a degenerative or restorative agent: it may restore Rome to its pristine glories, for example, or it may lead to personal extinction. As we have noticed in the instance of Trimalchio, overstressing or ironizing the destructive elements of time can be used, paradoxically, as a means for reinforcing personal immunity to its dangers.

How are these themes reflected in the conduct of Hostius Quadra? We might have expected Hostius to have suffered such psychopathological conditions as melancholia or depression, acute boredom, lovesickness, or even a proleptic attack of acedia; so thoroughly does he seem to have been deprived of the multiple referents and supports offered by community. On the face of things, this sexual renegade may have undergone some of the conditions inflicted on that group of pariahs whom we have seen become subject to curses or hexing or boning. So it is that Hostius experienced the withdrawal of community concern and interest (which he has forfeited because of his sexual passivity), and he was viewed and perhaps treated as a source of danger to this community (his passivity and his flagrant disregard for current sexual values were perceived as a danger; Seneca's testimony gives witness to this). Hostius may not have lost his legal rights while alive, but after his death he seems to have been treated by Augustus as a nonperson (there was no official punishment for his killers). I wonder if, while he was still alive, he experienced this state of being "dead in life"?

Yet Hostius flourished and, as far as we can tell, avoided the deprecation of melancholia and related conditions. Hostius Quadra, to use the terms emphasized in this book, reformulated his sense of self. He did this above all by a parodic inversion and exaggeration of the values of which his society seems so to have disapproved. The simplest means by which he accomplished this was in his extravagant sexual posing (bathhouse pickups and daylight sex) and through his assertion of personal independence. We can also see this parody and exaggeration through the traces of the imagery associated with those themes of reformulation that were examined in the second part of this book. So it is that Hostius Quadra makes a remarkable use of reading.⁶ How else does he use his mirrors but as a means of "reading" (interpreting the signs of) his sexual activity, his sexual prowess, and, ultimately, his means of social transgression? Hostius, after his death, was "read" by others for the purpose of stage plays, both as an object of negative moral exemplification and as an object of ridicule. Leisure, too, enters into the picture. Sex (as it was for Ovid in his *Ars amatoria*) was for Hostius, above everything else, a leisure pursuit. It was something utterly useless that provided an end in itself, offered play and pleasure, and required a high, if bizarre, level of intellectual input. His conduct, as it was portrayed on stage, provided leisure for the Roman community—how else should we understand the function of the theater? Hostius may not have been tempted by suicide, but his profoundly antisocial conduct was something that, we cannot but suspect, courted death. Augustus was so little shocked by Hostius's death that he invited no retaliation against the murderers. Does time and its relationship to the body enter into this metaphorical

matrix of the reformulation of self? Hostius, in his desire to transcend the sensual limitations of his body (to turn each of his faculties into a sensual organ), seems to have wished almost to transcend the limitations of the body and, through his superhuman sexual feats, to transcend that final limitation of the body, time itself.



Jacques Lacan is (or was) a very fashionable figure—perhaps too much so to cite in this context. But a comparison of Hostius’s mirror techniques and Lacan’s famous “mirror stage” is as inevitable as it is instructive. To those who are understandably jaded with the Parisian speculation of the sixties, all I can say is, be patient. Here is a straightforward description of Lacan’s formulation of the mirror stage. Its relevance will be immediately apparent.⁷

At a certain point, around six months, and presumably when the perceptual apparatus has reached a certain stage of development, the infant becomes aware, through seeing his image in the mirror, of his own body as a totality, a total form or *Gestalt*. The mirror image is held together, it can come and go with a slight change of the infant’s position, and his mastery of the image fills him with triumph and joy. The mirror image anticipates the mastery of his body that the infant has not yet objectively achieved. He falls in love with his image and, in contrast to the auto-erotic stage, in which he has an erotic relationship with his fragmented body, he now takes the image of his whole body as his love-object . . . Thus the infant’s *imaginary* mastery of his body anticipates his biological mastery. In Lacan’s view, any future relation with reality will be marked by this imaginary anticipation. “The mirror stage is a drama whose internal thrust is precipitated from insufficiency to anticipation” . . . There is then a fundamental “alienation” in this action. The infant’s mastery is in the mirror image, outside himself, while he is not really master of his movements. He sees only his form as more or less total and unified in an external image, in a virtual, alienated, ideal unity which cannot be touched. Alienation is this lack of being by which his realization lies in another actual or imaginary space.

This image of unity is not disturbed by the turbulent movements of the infant’s uncoordinated body. It is a mirage in a *Gestalt*, that is, an external form, which the mirror reflects back in reversed symmetry and perspective. The infant’s movements and bodily prematurity are reversed in the fixity of a big “statue” of himself. “This *Gestalt* . . . in these two aspects of its appearing [of fixity and stature] symbolizes the ego’s mental permanence and at the same time prefigures its alienating fate, the statue into which man

projects himself” . . . In Lacan’s view the formation of the ego commences at the point of alienation and fascination with one’s own image. This image is the first organized form in which the individual identifies himself, so that the ego takes its form from, and is formed by, the organizing and constitutive qualities of this image . . . The ego for Lacan is thus formed on the basis of an *imaginary* relationship of the subject with his own body. The ego has an illusion of autonomy, but it is only an illusion, and the subject moves from fragmentation and insufficiency to illusory unity.

Hostius Quadra is no infant, and his “mirror stage” is hardly the accidental and metaphorical process of self-discovery undergone by Lacan’s putative six-month-old.⁸ Yet the experiences of Hostius, as Seneca paints them and as I have just now paraphrased them, catch, in a most alarming manner, the imagery of, and even aspects of the significance of, what we have seen designated as the mirror stage.⁹

So, when it is suggested by Lacan that the infant derives his or her first knowledge of the body as a whole from the mirror, it is difficult not to think of Hostius’s antics. Through the use of mirrors, he is able to devote all of the organs of his body to a single purpose. (Thus even sight plays a role in his lubricious conduct.) The body becomes, as it were, a perceptible unified register devoted to a single, unified purpose. The knowledge that Hostius gains through his concave mirrors is not as sensually specialized as might seem at first sight, for it is his body as a whole, as a unified, single-purposed organism, that he comes to know. What’s more, the image of himself fills Hostius, just like the infant, with an enormous sense of pleasure and joy. Perceiving himself whole, Hostius, just like Lacan’s metaphorical six-month-old, falls in love with his image (his own body becomes the real love object).¹⁰ Desire, therefore, is directed inward toward himself as *amor sui*.

The extent to which ego—or, as we might say, self—is perceived and demarcated by Hostius through these mirrors is more easily determined. We have the term *notitia sui*. Hostius derives this from the mirrors.¹¹ His knowledge of the body may match that which is vouchsafed the infant and which, according to Lacan, comes through the mirror to lead, in turn, to the development of, or at least the assertion of, the ego. It may not be stretching probability to take this one step further and to claim for Hostius Quadra, as does Lacan for the infant, that the “formation of the ego commences at this point [i.e., the mirror stage] of alienation and fascination with one’s own image.”

We may, with even more confidence, claim that Hostius, like Lacan’s imagined infant, does seem to develop, through his concave mirrors, an illusion of autonomy, or, as we might put it, of control. The mirrors enable him to con-

trol and to augment his desire, to view his body whole and to manipulate sensation. (Could we state also that he moves from a sense of corporeal fragmentation to one of unity?¹² The mirrors, after all, enable him to bring all of his senses into erotic play and to see them acting through one organism.) But Hostius, like Lacan's infant, develops an *illusion* of corporeal autonomy and of self-control. I stress the term *illusion* because the control and autonomy provided for him by the mirrors is but an image. It was one, furthermore, that was no proof against his murderous slaves. So it is that we could say of Hostius, echoing Lacan, that his realization and perception of self is achieved through an illusion and that his very ego may thus be formed on the basis of an imaginary relationship between the subject and his own image. That this sense of a mastery of self ultimately leads to death is also significant.

The final point to be made is that this imaginary mastery of self and the body, procured for the infant and for Hostius through this mirror stage, is based on "alienation." How does alienation enter the picture? The perception of self, according to Lacan's model, is based upon the recognition not just of an illusion but of the self as another, as "out there." In Lacan's estimation of things, the development of a sense of self is based upon one's identification with "another" (the mirror image). I am in no position to adjudicate on the validity of this speculation. But the match between the type of self-perception I have been highlighting in this book—the notion, that is, of "alienation from self"—bears a striking relationship to Lacan's conceptual postulate. This form of self-perception, I have argued, becomes a discursive reality in the very period during which Seneca wrote. It is as if, during this very period, the psyche of the Romans and the Greeks underwent its "mirror stage." Hostius Quadra's bizarre and fruitful actions become emblematic of this change. I would like to add one final observation to this line of speculation. Lacan's understanding of self-knowledge through this process of alienation has been put to a use completely different from that which I intend here. Teamed up with Foucauldian discourse and Kristevan intertextuality, it produces the idea—argued for by Wiles (1997, 14) or illuminated by Klossowski (1947), among many others—that the notion of the stable self is illusory. Alford (1991, 4) notes that Lacan "transforms the unconscious into a type of text, arguing that it is not the case that the self uses language; rather, language uses the self." That is not my argument at all, nor is it the use to which I would wish to put Lacan's mirror metaphor. My point is far more pedestrian: self-awareness is built on distance, on a capacity to observe oneself. This is a type of alienation. I have also suggested that should the distance become too great, the risk run represents a type of psychological disintegration to be associated with depression; should the gulf become too narrow, even negligible, the risk run is that of mania and autism.

I would like to present one more piece of evidence for the type of affective experience that I have attributed to Hostius Quadra. Basing my comments on the fertile hint offered by Sandra Citroni Marchetti (1991) linking Hostius Quadra and Narcissus, I would like to compare with Hostius a well-known image of Narcissus staring fixedly at his own reflection in a destructive spring. The version of Narcissus to be examined is not that of Ovid (*Metamorphoses* 3.339–510, discussed in chapter 2). It is that provided by a well-known Pompeian wall painting (fig. 9),¹³ dating approximately to the period in which Seneca was writing about Hostius Quadra.

In this picture, Narcissus, with his clothing draped across his thighs but naked above, is seated on a large flat rock. Leaning left, he takes his weight on a straightened, vertical left arm. Resting along his right arm is what seems to be a very long javelin (as if he has just come from hunting). His head is garlanded with a wreath. The hair beneath displays ringlets, as if they were ribbons, which hang over his slight shoulders (as if he has just returned from a party). Narcissus peers, calm but rapt, down into the water of a spring, at the reflection of his neck and head.¹⁴

Narcissus is pretty in a feminine way and is perhaps twelve or thirteen years of age. He appears to be just on the verge of puberty. His groin exhibits, inconclusively, very small genitals. (The javelin in his right hand, however, is determinedly phallic.) There is a single fold of flesh on his soft stomach, just above his navel. This is, according to the conventions of this type of painting, vagina-like.¹⁵ His portrait exhibits a confusing mixture of innocence and erotic charm. A few years ago we might have said that Narcissus's status was "liminal." Certainly that adjective nicely fits his depiction in this picture. He is neither quite male nor quite female, child nor adolescent, innocent nor erotic.¹⁶ The groin, overmature for one so young, captures this ambivalence well.¹⁷ Narcissus, furthermore, is mesmerized by his own reflection. That he is in love with this is indicated in part by his intent and charmed contemplation of his own image and in part by his suggestive, charming nakedness.

What help does the idea of the mirror stage provide for a "reading" of the painting of Narcissus?¹⁸ I appeal here to the two notions of liminality and the erotic—liminality first. The Narcissus that we have observed is not a fully formulated creature: prepubescent, of almost androgynous status, but yet a man, he is now on the point of shedding these ambivalent characteristics. His mirror, the spring, may well provide him with a sense of autonomy, of a selfhood that will enable him to leave behind his liminal status. Through his reflection in the water, Narcissus for the first time gains a sense of his body as a unified, single-purpose organism. The image in the spring enables Narcissus to move from a sense of physical and psychic fragmentation—liminality—to one of



FIG. 9. Pompeian wall painting of Narcissus (ca. 69–79 C.E.).
(Courtesy of Museo Nazionale di Napoli.)

unity. Narcissus develops his sense of self (*notitia sui*) and self-unity through his mirror image.¹⁹ From this, we might speculate, develops his sense of ego.²⁰ The image in the spring enables Narcissus to bring all of his senses into erotic play and to see them acting through one organism.

Narcissus, in the myth and in its pictorial representation, falls in love with his own body. Why would he not, after all, if this is his first encounter with it whole? This *amor sui* becomes part and parcel of the understanding of his own autonomy. (There can be little wonder that poor Echo is left to her own devices, in myth and in lived experience.)

The myth of Narcissus, especially as it is given form in this fascinating painting, seems to act as a metaphor for the establishment of the personality, through alienation and otherness—the type of personality, strong but hard to sustain, that I have emphasized again and again throughout this book.²¹ Sexual attraction countered by a sense of personal incompleteness seems to be the

basis on which this change, this alienation, takes place. It is tragic, but metaphorically accurate, that this change so often results in death.²²



Let us leave Hostius, Narcissus, and their and the Roman “mirror stage” for the moment. We will return to them soon. I would like in the meantime to provide an affective map, as it were, that attempts to illustrate the relationships between the symptoms of the various mental states and conditions I have surveyed in this book. Subsequently Hostius Quadra and Narcissus can be positioned within this affective matrix.

The symptomatology begins in one of two ways. Either it begins with the sudden and usually unexpected appearance of strong or overwhelming emotion requiring resolution (e.g., love, fear, jealousy, hate, bereavement, or even the pressing need to make a very difficult decision), or it begins with the persistent bafflement caused by prolonged confinement or sense deprivation (conditions in ample supply in monastic communities subject to the deprecation of *acedia* or in less-than-salubrious Australian lockups). The various affective problems examined in this book take root when an individual who is subject to either of these two states is faced with their persisting irresolution: so the lover finds no union, the hater no revenge, or the overheated and constrained monk no release from his cell.²³

Reaction to this frustration can be either active or passive. Let us consider the active reaction first. Its most common form is a combination of anger and violence.²⁴ So it is with Medea or Dido when their love for Jason or Aeneas is threatened. They become enraged bacchantes and storm through their hometowns.²⁵ The pseudo-Aristotelian *Problema* 30.1 understood such a reaction as the product of overheating of the black bile and its exhalations to the brain. It noted a number of examples of this type of reaction, from Heracles, Ajax, and Lysander. In such cases, if anger and violence produce the desired result (e.g., union with the beloved), then the frustration is resolved, psychic stability is returned, and the individual attains a unity with his or her community. But if frustration endures (as it does, say, for Sophocles’ Ajax, whose resolution was thwarted by his comrades) and if it allows no apparent resolution, then the anger and violence is turned dangerously inward. Wemelsfelder (1989) has pointed out that animals who have been caged too long indulge in monotonously repetitive acts liable to cause self-harm.²⁶ In humans comparably self-directed violence may manifest itself as suicide (so it is with Virgil’s Dido or Sophocles’ Ajax). For humans the problem becomes particularly acute when this frustration is allied with community disapproval. For better or worse we

tend to associate such reactions with earlier historical periods, with nonurban communities, with the nonliterate, with indigenous and with premodern communities. We associate, no doubt judgmentally, such reactions with animals.²⁷ This association is only approximate. The Australian Aboriginals are both “earlier” and nonurban, but their reaction to boning is utterly passive. We tend—at least I have tended in this book—to associate certain broad qualities with this response to stimuli. So we may expect to characterize this with descriptive attributes such as activity, assertion, participation, complicity, cyclicity, the mark, the public, exteriority, lack of control, and the body.²⁸

The other reaction to insoluble and enduring frustration is passive. Its clinical manifestations are more vivid and more interesting. Basedow’s description of the symptoms resulting from the Australian Aboriginal practice of boning is very instructive. It produces a graphic register of how insoluble and enduring frustration exhibits itself in such cases²⁹ (and its registers are repeated again and again in classical literature in contexts as various as melancholia, love, madness, or even being subject to the evil eye).³⁰ The initial symptom is astonishment. Then follow blanched cheeks, glassy eyes, distorted facial expressions, voicelessness, spasms, and swooning and collapsing to the ground. The suffering individual may subsequently react in one of two ways. Psychic disintegration may follow—this is especially the case when the person seems to have transgressed (or to have wished to transgress) acceptable societal mores. Or psychic reformulation may follow. In some cases of disintegration (most typically the Aboriginal victim of boning or the lover irremediably in thrall to lovesickness) the subsequent symptoms may be outlined succinctly: there will follow sickening, fretting, abstention from food, withdrawal from the community, and finally death.³¹ Death may result from starvation or suicide.

Psychic disintegration is not the invariable result of this passive response to frustration. That is why Hostius Quadra is such an important individual. He exemplifies how it is that the personality may survive (at least for a time) and undergo a process of reformulation. The process of the reformulation of the personality (I have devoted three chapters to various aspects of this topic) seems to run through the following stages. Initially the sufferer seems to sense a need to problematize the issue of control. This is to display volitional strength and weakness. This display may involve challenging community expectations. Thus it is with Hostius’s passive sexual posturing: not only does it problematize the notion of control, but it also vigorously challenges community expectations. The simplest examples of this process are to be found in the staged suicide attempts (whether in Petronius or in Chariton) that we observed in the chapter on suicide. Problematizing is achieved there through grandiose public display—Chaereas, grief-stricken and attempting to throw himself

overboard in front of the massed Syracusan citizenry (*Chaereas and Callirhoe* 3.5), offers a fine example. It needs stressing that such suicide attempts were normally performed in front of others and that they were rarely successful. In those cases the public display was what really mattered. It is as if the sufferer, through this exhibition, aimed above all to elicit from his or her audience a strong response. Why should this response matter so? It was against this audience that the individual was to differentiate his or her values from the rest of the community and, more importantly, his or her sense of self or personal identity (Baumeister 1986 is useful on this matter). To achieve this differentiation, Hostius Quadra used passive sex and mirrors and, presumably, a total indifference to the negative public valuation of his activities. As I say, what was crucial in these cases was the eliciting from the audience of a strong response. Justification of the sufferer's predicament or personal choices was not at issue. Agreement, after all, undermines differentiation.

Following the differentiation from the community is a realignment of the individual's values and, from this, the individual's sense of personality. This is particularly marked in the case of Hostius Quadra. Such an individual perceives that there is no cohesive relationship between the aims of the community and those of the individual. Thus he or she may come to realize at this point that there is little coherent relationship between aims and outcomes, between planning and actualization, between words and things. The sense of self displayed by a man like Hostius Quadra or by a man such as Seneca's Lucius Annaeus Seneca is, I have argued, based upon such alienation, not just from the community, but also from themselves. This melancholy form of differentiation provides them with their remarkable sense of self and, paradoxically, with their strongest tool for survival. From this sense of alienation emerges the psychic stability needed to counter the dangers of the socially sanctioned disintegration of the personality. It appears, however, that though Hostius Quadra's attempts were successful on the metaphorical level, real life was another matter.



Hostius Quadra may seem like a bizarre end point for the theme of this section of this study and, indeed, for the conclusion of this book. How can such an asocial debauchee become a model for the emergence of a type of self-consciousness? If I were to attempt to sum this up in just a few words, my explanation would run something like this: Hostius Quadra is one of the few characters—if not the only one—who has been able, partially at least, to negotiate an acceptance of the arbitrariness of the relationship between himself and the world about.³² It is this negotiation, I believe, that enables his bizarre, but ef-

fective, reformulation of the self and, as a consequence, the emergence of a saving self-consciousness.

This reformulation may be spelled out in a little more detail. Its crucial stages run, to detail them abstractly, as follows: there is, first, a problematization of control, followed by a public display of self and, as a consequence, a differentiation from the community. This leads to a realignment of values. The conception of self that results from this is built, therefore, upon an alienation from the community and from the self and upon a psychic reintegration or reformulation that is in turn built upon an acceptance of the arbitrariness, as we interpret it, of the relationship between the subject and object.

Let me reemphasize how it is that these qualities are specifically to be found in Hostius Quadra's story as Seneca recounts it. It is true that it can never be known whether or not Hostius suffered the form of crisis reaction to frustration that is typical of the unfortunate characters within the Greek novel. But it is quite apparent that he suffered a form of social pressure that was every bit as extreme. The mode of sexual behavior that Hostius practiced was not something that was acceptable at Rome.³³ The pressure on him to modify was considerable: why else would he have been so parodied on stage, so much the recipient of the enmity of his slaves, so publicly the object of the hostility of the emperor Augustus, and, many years later, so greatly the butt of Seneca's fascinated, prurient scorn? It is remarkable that Hostius Quadra's reaction to this (no doubt extreme) pressure was not psychic withdrawal. It is remarkable that Hostius did not undergo some form of psychic disintegration. It appears that Hostius inoculated himself against the destruction of personality by continuing defiantly to do what he liked best. In acting thus, at least as Seneca tells the tale, Hostius was forced to undergo his process of psychic reformulation—what I have termed his “mirror stage.”

What did this entail? The problematization of control is at the very heart of Hostius's sexual behavior. His desire was to make as many of his senses as possible capable of sexual behavior. Yet to gain this corporeal and sensual control, it was necessary for Hostius to render himself the passive and dominated subject of others' sexual advances (those of males and females). The paradox in this is apparent. Through this passivity and this relinquishing of control, Hostius established a form of control of his own. In embarking on such a seemingly self-contradictory form of behavior, does he not throw the whole notion of control into the ring? Who is it that really has the control, his behavior seems to ask? Is it the active partner? Or is it the passive partner, who owns the mirrors and controls the performance and the performers, who wills himself to sexual excess, and who blatantly flaunts the sexual ideology of his society?

We can guess at the extent to which Hostius made his behavior a public display. The virulence of contemporary and historical reaction directed against him underscores the fact that he flaunted his habits. So extravagant was his display of himself that he even became the subject of theatrical representations. Could his behavior have assumed a more public role? We might also stress that this public display was built by him upon a willful differentiation of his chosen mode of behavior (and self-estimation) from that of the community: so he exhibits an asocial sexual passivity, an asocial desire to view (and to vindicate) this in front of mirrors observable not just to himself but also to his partners, and a willingness to flaunt his difference before an uncomprehending and hostile community. The resulting community hostility is most obviously to be seen in the vigor of the reaction directed toward him at the end of his life. While alive, however, Hostius saw himself as a man apart, as one who redefined the parameters of what constitutes the body and the self and even what it involves to be human. It follows from this that he underwent personally a realignment of values. We need not linger over this, for his pursuit of sense gratification at the expense of his social standing and reputation is evidence enough. The result of all of this is a remarkable alienation from the community and, paradoxically, an alienation from the self, which is symbolized through Hostius's re-creation of self within his mirrors. That Hostius's psychic reintegration emerges from this acceptance of the otherness or alienation of self is both remarkable and the point of this chapter and this book as a whole.

There are also to be noted in this context of self-actualization a remarkably consistent, if not wholly unexpected, series of qualifying descriptors. We associate Hostius's condition (and all others subject to a passive reaction toward frustration) with specific qualities. It is inexorably to be associated with a *human*, not an animal, sphere and often with those preeminently human activities of *reading* and *interpreting*. Thus it is, too, that the *sign*, rather than the mark, becomes important in this condition. A doctor must learn to read the signs of melancholy or lovesickness; he cannot diagnose the condition, as if it were a broken leg, from the mere outward manifestation of things. This condition is to be linked, furthermore, with an *urban lifestyle*, one often associated with *recent history* and with a more *civilized way of life*. It follows, then, that such a condition concerns itself more with *linearity* through time (that which makes present history an evolutionary telos), rather than *cyclicity*. It comes as little surprise that such other features as *passivity* and *yielding* (in the existential, emotional, psychic, and sexual sense) and *withdrawal* and *estrangement* (with the same range) are normally allied with these. Those liable to fall victim to a condition such as this are more often than not societies or groups or individuals whose mode of living tends to display a greater than normal degree

of *interiority* (inward-lookingness), of fondness for *privacy* and for activities associated with the *mind*. The most paradoxical of all of these qualities is that of *control*. The end product of the passive reaction to excessive frustration is either to gain or to problematize control.

The self-awareness that I have attributed to Hostius Quadra and his startling reformulation of the self is, to our modern eyes, no remarkable thing. It is merely the realization of an awareness of what these days nearly all of us possess. Yet a number of features of his affirmation deserve stressing. They are aspects of selfhood that are easily ignored and easily forgotten. The process of achieving selfhood, based so firmly on the acceptance of the arbitrary relationship between the self and the world, can be a fraught process. The inevitable frustrations involved run the risks of virulent forms of boredom and, if it is prolonged, of melancholia. They are well illustrated by reconsidering Hostius Quadra. There is always the danger of a slip into psychic disintegration—we see this most graphically in the instances of those who, unexpectedly and unaccountably, fall ill with lovesickness. This can also involve an acute psychic withdrawal, even, in some cases, a withdrawal that is comparable almost to a form of autism. Less acute forms of this process can be seen in the instances of those suffering from *acedia*.³⁴ There are also many examples of this problem in the instances of those who are subject to lovesickness. As we note in the case of Hostius Quadra, there is a risk of total community hostility formed by the utter distance from community standards that is involved in the process of frustration and alienation attendant upon this process of defining and differentiating the self.

Things do not end here. As well as the dangers, there are what we might call the costs of self-awareness. These can be cataloged easily. Self-awareness brings with it a propensity, in the person undergoing it, for boredom and melancholy. This may induce him or her even to contemplate suicide. Leisure becomes a problem for such an individual. The nagging certainty and burden of self distracts one from alterity. Alcohol (or any dopamine-inducing substance) offers relief, but, as a leisure pastime, it has its dangers. Love, too, may become impossible: self-awareness may render love an anodyne, a form of public protest, or, worst of all, a locus for extreme emotional danger because of the ever present danger of becoming subject to lovesickness. All of these experiences take place within a community from whom the subject is liable to experience immense disapproval and from whom the subject is bound to encounter enormous hostility.

The advantages flowing from such self-awareness seem petty. Self-awareness is a kind of truth, if there is ever comfort in truth.³⁵ Such a conception of self may offer proof, however temporary, against psychic disintegration, as it

may also offer proof against self-directed violence and possession.³⁶ Self-awareness, the self itself, comes therefore at a considerable cost—boredom, melancholy, intimations of suicide,³⁷ a dangerous passivity, unsatisfactory leisure, and a sad inability to love except through the lens of one's own needs.³⁸ But can there be any other way?³⁹