

Narcissus and Echo

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Echo: *See* Narcissus

In 1937 Salvador Dali painted what was to become one of his most acclaimed works, *Metamorphosis of Narcissus*. The previous year his fellow surrealist Max Ernst produced the less well known *The Nymph Echo* (Figure 20.1).

Surrealists saw in classical myth a vehicle for the dream-like free association of objects, below the level of rational consciousness, which their reading of reality calls for. Hence the case in Dali's painting. Two Narcissus figures are set in a fantasy landscape of red cliffs and volcanic sky: the first is a kneeling sculpture with a faceless head looking at his reflection and the second a bodiless hand holding an egg from which the narcissus flower grows. While Echo is absent from Dali's picture, she is the title figure in Ernst's *The Nymph Echo*. The setting here, fantastical once again, consists of monstrous vegetation that serves to camouflage a small standing nude – Echo – in the top right-hand corner of the canvas. The contrasting reputations of these works by Dali and Ernst (and indeed the unobtrusive presence of the nymph in Ernst's canvas) mirror much of the reception of Narcissus and Echo. Echo is taken to be of secondary importance. In Reid's *Oxford Guide to Classical Mythology in the Arts* (1993), representatively, she is listed in the index, simply: "See Narcissus."

Narcissus, the beautiful boy who falls in love with his own reflection, engenders a copious tradition in post-classical art, literature, and thought. Son of the river god Cephissus and the nymph Liriope, Narcissus grows up to be a handsome youth who rejects his many suitors. Pausanias (9. 31.7–9) rationalizes the story with the suggestion that Narcissus' image reminds him of a beloved twin sister, now dead. The Greek mythographer Conon (*Narr.* 24) tells us that Narcissus killed himself in guilt over the suicide of spurned (male) lover called Ameinias. It is Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (3. 351–401) that unites Narcissus with Echo. The loquacious nymph had been



Figure 20.1 *The Nymph Echo*. Source: Max Ernst 1936. Reproduced with permission of Museum of Modern Art, New York.

punished by Juno for distracting her while Jupiter slipped away to commit adultery. Condemned now to repeat the speech of others, she falls in love with Narcissus, but can only communicate by repeating his words; and in her unrequited love she fades away to a mere voice, while her bones turn to stone. Meanwhile, Narcissus, catches sight of his own reflection in a pool, and, unable to embrace his image, pines away to be transformed into a flower on his death.

The Narcissus myth raises both pictorial and philosophical questions concerning “the distinction between illusion and reality and that between self and other” (Spaas 2000, 1). Leon Battista Alberti’s treatise on painting *Della Pittura* (1435–1436) actually ascribes to Narcissus the invention of painting – thus connecting the image, but also the self, with artistic creativity. In the same period, the myth is widely interpreted as a moral allegory, while in later centuries it becomes a parable of creative autonomy, or, very differently, of homoerotic desire. Around the beginning of the twentieth century, Sigmund Freud appropriates Narcissus as a central concept of psychoanalytic theory, which Jacques Lacan and then Julia Kristeva refine to illuminate ego formation in child development.

But what about Echo? Although she is there, with Narcissus, in Ovid’s influential text, Echo receives remarkably little attention until the modern age. Independently of Narcissus she does make an appearance as a divine or prophetic

character (Hollander 1981, 15–17) found in Henry Reynold's Neoplatonic treatise *Mythomystes* (1632) and then in Milton's *Comus* (1634). Otherwise, she is relegated to a minor role in the myth's reception until reclaimed as a pathetic love-lorn heroine in Victorian painting. Then, belatedly, a quite different Echo emerges at the end of the twentieth century, when she becomes a significant figure in debates concerning gender and language. In particular, Jacques Derrida relates Echo's repetitions to his philosophy of speech. In tracing the diverse receptions of Narcissus and Echo, then, this chapter will investigate the way that Echo is at first marginalized, then brought into play to take over the major role previously ascribed to Narcissus.

Metamorphosis of Narcissus

Medieval reworkings of the Narcissus myth tend to moralize him. The anonymous twelfth-century Norman-French *Lai de Narcisse* is a meditation on the futility of unrequited love and in Guillaume de Lorris's thirteenth-century *Roman de la Rose* Narcissus is depicted as the cruel beloved. This moralizing continues into the early modern period with neo-Platonic readings, deriving from Plotinus' third-century CE *Enneads* (1.6.8), where Narcissus is a symbol of selfish arrogance. In his *Commentarium in convivium Platonis de amore* (1496), Marsilio Ficino takes Narcissus as an example of one who loves the transient body over the eternal soul. The *vanitas* associations of the futility of earthly love are made explicit in sixteenth-century emblem books: thus in the 1546 edition of Andrea Alciato's *Emblematum liber*, under the label "self-love," an illustration of Narcissus gazing at his own reflection is used to exemplify the vice of solipsism.

Caravaggio's *Narcissus* (1597–1599) draws on the *vanitas* iconography of emblem books, but the painting also hints at a more sympathetic character who, in contemplating his reflection, may show awareness of his true self. As is characteristic of the artist, the combination of sixteenth-century dress and timeless setting point invites reference to the eternal meaning of myth. The philosophical potential of the figure is further explored in the work of the Italian Baroque poet, Giambattista Marino in his poetic cycle *La Galeria* (1620), where a comparison of art and nature shows image triumphant over reality. Yet Narcissus' status as cautionary tale does not disappear: in Ben Johnson's play *Cynthia's Revels or The Fountaine of Selfe-Love* (1601) the hapless youth is rebuked for his vanity. The trope is revised in Jean-Jacques Rousseau's early comedy *Narcisse ou l'amant de lui-même* (staged in 1752), which duly mocks "amour propre" ("self-love"). A more light-hearted construction of Narcissus as the beautiful egotist features in Rococo art with François Le Moyne's *Narcissus* (1725–1728), showing a rosy-cheeked and golden-haired boy, admiring his image in a pool.

In the Romantic age, Narcissus gains a new gravity. In 1798 August Schlegel declares that "Dichter sind doch immer Narcisse" ("Poets are always Narcissi")

(Vinge 1967, 305), and in the century that follows writers and artists repeatedly see Narcissus as a symbol of creativity. At the same time, a homoerotic subculture that uses classical myth as a convenient code embraces him, along with Icarus, Hylas, and Hyacinthus as “the tragic youth: the beautiful boy doomed to die at the height of his beauty” (Barrow 2001, 128). This is the Narcissus of French Symbolist artist Gustave Moreau (1890), in whose depiction an androgynous nude displays his body, his eyes gazing out at the viewer as much as concentrating on himself. André Gide’s *Le Traité du Narcisse* (1891) revises the myth, excluding Echo altogether, and returns to the notion of Narcissus as creator. In the same year, Paul Valéry publishes his first Narcissus poem: “Narcisse parle.” Coming back to the theme later with “Fragments du Narcisse” (1926), and “Cantate du Narcisse” (1939), he converts the Narcissus figure into an emblem of poetic self-discovery.

While Valéry was working out his own poetic identity through myth, Narcissus was to take on new connotations in the field of psychoanalysis. The English psychologist Havelock Ellis first used the phrase “Narcissus-like tendency” in an 1898 article, and, in the following year the term narcissism was coined in a discussion of Ellis’s article by German psychiatrist Paul Näcke. The concept was then developed by Freud in a 1914 essay entitled “Zur Einführung des Narzißmus” (“On Narcissism”). For Freud, “primary narcissism” is a normal element of child development in which the infant connects self-identification and libido with the crucial formation of the ego associated with the individual’s initial attachment to their own body as love object. “Secondary narcissism,” by contrast, is a psychopathological state in which a person’s libido fails to transfer to another love object and withdraws from the world.

Freud’s principle of “primary narcissism” (and its connection with the formation of the ego) is recast by Jacques Lacan. Lacan developed the model of the “mirror stage” in which an infant of six to eighteen months recognizes its own reflection as a whole rather than as the fragmented self that it had perceived hitherto. We only become a unified subject only when we identify an externalized image of ourselves that we then view as the first love object. This principle is subsequently an influence, in turn, on Julia Kristeva’s narcissistic theory (See “Tales of Love” section below).

Meanwhile, under the more general influence of Freudian understandings of dreams as revelations of the unconscious, surrealist artists and writers explore oneiric imagery where combinations and dispositions of objects offer a challenge to rational order. The *Metamorphosis of Narcissus* was the example of his work that Dali brought with him when he met Freud in London in 1938 (he had already met Lacan, in 1933, but long before the publication of Lacan’s theory of the mirror stage in *Écrits* [1966]). Produced by Dali’s “paranoiac critical method,” the painting not only foregrounds the irrational, but seems to invoke Freud specifically, in that its double Narcissus figures could be related to the two Freudian narcissistic stages. On the right of the painting, however, a third Narcissus stands in the background in the form of a male nude evoking classical statues of the youth, while, to his left, more nudes are crowded together, Narcissus’ unrequited lovers.

The desert landscape, recalling the Catalonian coastline familiar in Dali's work, is barren, but signs of life are indicated by ants crawling over the stone hand and by an emaciated dog eating the remains of a carcass. These eerie details, nevertheless, are subordinate to an overall mood of joy at the birth of new life. In an illustrated pamphlet accompanying the painting Dali published a newly composed poem that adds an autobiographical meaning to the works. The poem ends not with death but with metamorphosis:

When that head splits
When that head bursts
When the head shatters in pieces
It will be the flower,
The new Narcissus,
Gala,
My narcissus.

(Lomas 2011, 167)

While neither painting nor poem include Echo, the female presence at the end of the poem is Dali's wife and muse, Gala. It is his love for her that saves and revives him, so that he escapes the death of the classical Narcissus as told by Ovid and retold in other versions of the myth.

Contemporary artists continue to explore the Narcissus theme. German conceptual artist Olaf Nicolai's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Weeping Narcissus* (2000) is a life-size cast of Nicolai himself, in which a motor produces tears that fall into a plastic pool. An ironic allusion to Narcissus as Romantic trope of individual creativity, this work also suggests postmodern notions of authorship: the artist cries over the death of the author as well as his own self-image.

At the same time, the myth has also been the subject of cross-gender transformations, whereby female artists identify themselves with Narcissus and not Echo. In 1965 Japanese artist Yayoi Kusama created an unofficial installation at the Venice Biennale entitled *Narcissus Garden*. Consisting of 1,500 silver-colored balls accompanied by the artist herself, the installation produced an effect of a shimmering lawn that evoked both a mirror and Narcissus' pool. And water is once again the focus of Swiss conceptual artist Pipilotti Rist's video installation, *Sip My Ocean* (1996), where Narcissus' pool becomes an ocean, and shots of a coral reef are combined with doubled close-ups of the artist's own body.

Narcissus and Echo

Narcissus is a common figure in Roman art. In Pompeian paintings, he is depicted alone, whereas "Echo, if present at all, appears as a diminutive figure in the background, looking out of a cave or lurking behind a rock" (Panofsky 1949, 113).

Medieval and early-modern reception follows Roman visual models: retellings of the myth tend to concentrate on Narcissus alone. Echo makes an appearance in sixteenth-century pastoral love poetry, and, with Narcissus, she features prominently in early opera, where her role leads to compositional innovations in the shape of the “choral echo” and the “echo aria.” Between 1638 and 1793 no fewer than 15 Echo and Narcissus operas were performed throughout Europe (Marek 2012), although none achieved a permanent place in the operatic repertoire.

In the visual arts, Echo is, at first, less in evidence. Aside from in a small number of Florentine cassoni (Baskins 1993) Narcissus and Echo do not appear together until the seventeenth century. Poussin’s *Echo and Narcissus* (1627–1628) shows a dead Narcissus and a grieving Echo, while the same configuration is also included in his *Birth of Bacchus* (1657). In Poussin’s *The Realm of Flora* (1630) Narcissus is depicted along with others who are transformed into flowers after death. This time, though, he is still alive and gazing at his own reflection in a large vase of water, offered to him by a seated female figure, who is identified as Echo by Panofsky (1949). In holding the vase Echo is an agent in Narcissus’ fate. After Poussin the subject enters the landscape genre with Claude Lorrain’s *Landscape with Narcissus and Echo* (1644) and (much later) Turner’s *Narcissus and Echo* (1804). In both of these Narcissus is observed by three nymphs, but it is unclear which one is actually the Echo of the title.

It is only in the Victorian period that Echo begins to take on a more prominent role in visual art. Whereas a homoerotic Narcissus is common in decadent poetry and Symbolist painting, academic art seeks to heterosexualize the myth. In Solomon J. Solomon’s *Echo and Narcissus* (1895), a feverish Echo clasps a heedless Narcissus; she gazes longingly into his face as he looks at himself in the pool below; and in John William Waterhouse’s *Echo and Narcissus* (1903), a coy Echo glances wistfully at Narcissus while he leans over the water, enchanted by his own reflection. In both paintings Echo’s drapery falls from her body, and it is the female nude that is positioned to attract the viewer’s attention, rather than the less prominent Narcissus. For the first time, Echo takes pride of place in picture titles, and now she even appears on her own in paintings by G. F. Watts (1844–1846), Alexandre Cabanel (1874), and Henrietta Rae (1906), and sculpture by Edward Onslow Ford (1895). The nineteenth century casts Echo as a deserted heroine (like Ariadne), who is unlucky in love (like Tennyson’s Mariana) and fated to die young (like the Lady of Shalott). Here artists defer to gender stereotypes of the period, but, even so, the new prominence given to Echo paves the way for the twentieth-century engagement with her myth and its contemporary relevance.

The Nymph Echo

In the Lady’s Song from Milton’s *Comus* (230–243), a young woman looking for her brothers in the woods calls out for help to Echo, addressing her as “sweet Queen

of Parley, Daughter of the Sphere.” Her song is followed by several scenes of verbal exchange with Comus himself, the eloquent villain of the masque. Avoiding Comus’ attempt at seduction, the Lady defends her chastity with intelligent debating skills and through adroit word play. In appealing to the “Queen of Parley,” the Lady herself takes a surprisingly assertive role for a female masque character traditionally cast as modest and naive. Milton’s Lady “is a rare voice issuing from the tantalizing zone of female silence” (Shullenberger 2008, 172), and, as such, presents an early example of the association between Echo and a constructive female identity.

More recently, feminist thinking has reinterpreted Echo across a range of subjects. Some critics see the nymph as a passive presence, a paradigm of women’s roles within the patriarchy, lacking voice and power. In Segal’s (1988) reading of works by French male authors, Echo is a symbol of the silencing of women’s speech, while Lawrence’s (1991) examination of Hollywood uses Echo to illustrate the way that women’s voices are interrupted and repressed within patriarchal narratives. Similarly, Nouvet (1991) finds Echo imitative and inferior; Spivak’s (1993) postcolonial study comprehends Echo’s speech as chance rather than choice; and in Blanchot’s (1995) interrogation of language, Echo has no qualities of otherness and is merely an auditory illusion.

Others writers find a more positive meaning in Echo’s repetition of Narcissus’ speech. Greenberg’s (1990) study of the female reader figures Echo as woman confronting male text who must revise his words to provide her new meaning. Likewise, Berger’s (1996) analysis of language and gender argues that Echo does not repeat but transforms Narcissus’ language into words that express her own desire. Petek’s (2008) psychoanalytical study of film spectatorship reads the communication between Echo and Narcissus as a dialogue. And the Echo of George Sandys’s 1632 translation of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* is interpreted by Bloom (2001) as signaling female agency.

Ovid’s text itself has been the subject of much debate among Latinists. In 1976 Brenkman described Echo’s story as “the drama of the self’s identity and integrity restored” (301). More recently, Tissol (1997) reads the nymph as a creative manipulator of language who makes Narcissus’ words her own, whereas Salzman-Mitchell (2005, 37) sees no self-agency but only an empty voice. Strikingly, though, Rimell (2009) argues that Echo’s repetition becomes originality: as a carrier of Ovidian wit, she is identified with the authorial voice itself.

All in all, most scholars convincingly agree that Echo is a symbol of female resistance rather than oppression. Ingeniously, she transcends her vocal limitations to reclaim an independent voice. This is also the Echo of Derrida, whose meditations on Narcissus’ speech identify, in Echo, an “infinite cunning” (Derrida 2004). In Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, Derrida suggests, the meaning of the scene hinges on the imperative “come” (2005, xii). After Narcissus cries “veni” (3.382) – “come” – Ovid’s text continues, “vocat illa vocantem” – “she calls as he calls.” Echo’s reply is more than reiteration: her choice of word even allows her to begin a conversation with

Narcissus. As the exchange continues, Echo “speaks the other and makes the other speak” (Derrida 1989, 37–38). When Narcissus calls out “ecquis adest?” (3.380) – “is anyone here?” – Echo repeats, as if in reply, “adest” – “here”; and when he suggests “huc coeamus” (385) – “we must come together,” Echo assents with “coeamus” (387) – “come together.” Echo’s repetitions thus acquire an important communicative significance:

In repeating the words of the other, she signifies her own love. By repeating his words, she responds to him. By repeating, she communicates with him. An amazing ruse: she speaks for herself by just repeating his words.

(Derrida 2004)

Yet a generation or so before Derrida, or before modern feminism, the painter Max Ernst had already invested Echo with significance. Ernst produced several versions of *The Nymph Echo* [Figure 20.1]. Amidst exotic undergrowth we see a small green nude. Standing on a ledge beneath a broken pillar and accompanied by a snake, Echo peers over the top to look at a lion who returns her gaze. Seemingly in constant flux, the aliveness of the jungle vegetation is heightened by the presence of two human hands camouflaged in green, but emerging distinctly between giant leaves. The interaction between human, animal, and vegetational typifies the distinctive surrealist interest in hybridity. Where modernism blurs the boundaries between human and animal, and human and machine, with references to advances in biology and technology, surrealism embraces the liminal space between natural and artificial, myth and reality.

Loreti (2011, 12) suggests that Ernst’s Echo “finally possesses Narcissus” through the linking of her natural presence to his transformation into a flower. But nothing in the painting points to Narcissus: instead this is Echo’s story. Ovid tells us that after she fades away to a voice, “inde latet silvis nulloque in monte videtur/omnibus auditur: sonus est, qui vivit in illa” (“she hides in the woods, no longer seen on any hill, but heard by all, it is her sound that lives on within her”), (Ov. Met. 400–401). Examining Ovid’s text, Berger (1996) notes that, when rejected by Narcissus, Echo “is always there, dissolved by pain and henceforth intermingled with the forest into which she has retreated”; and when Narcissus dies “she outlives him, as she has outlived herself” (630). Just so, Ernst paints Echo as an eternal presence merging with the woods she lives in. Outside Ovid, mythological tradition depicts Echo as pursued by Pan (HH 19; Longus 3.22; Mosch 5; Nonnus, *Dion.* 15. 306; 48. 489), as a nymph who leads a solitary life in mountain caves (HH 19; Sen., Troad. 107) or as one who dwells in the rocks of the thick forest (Aristoph., *Thesm.* 970). All these Echoes exist without Narcissus.

In the 1930s, Ernst painted a number of jungle landscapes. These include *Garden Airplane-Trap* (1935), where carnivorous plants attack airplanes as if they were insects, and *The Joy of Life* (1936), in which plant and insect morph into one another

in tangled undergrowth and take on monstrous proportions, dwarfing figures of a woman and a lion. These settings recall a trip the artist made to Singapore, Indochina, Angkor Wat, and the jungles of Southeast Asia in 1924 (Spies and Rewald 2005, 5). Ernst's exotic plants and animals derive from reality, but are magnified and transformed as if in a dream. The artist refers to these works himself in classical-mythological terms:

On my return to the garden of the Hesperides I follow, with joy scarcely concealed,
the rounds of a flight between two bishops ... Voracious gardens in turn devoured by
a vegetation which springs from the debris of trapped airplanes [...] With my eyes
I see the nymph Echo.

(Ernst 1961, 14)

Along with the hybridity of plant, animal, and human, comes a conflation of antiquity and modernity whereby the painter sees a classical nymph after viewing modern airplanes. In marked contrast with the abandoned heroine of the Victorian imagination, Ernst's Echo merges with the undergrowth of a tropical jungle and communes, or communicates, with plants and animals within which she has become herself a vibrant life force, both positive and current.

Tales of Love

Building on Freud and Lacan, Julia Kristeva turns to Narcissus, a figure who occupies “a very particular place [...] in the history of Western subjectivity” (Kristeva 1987, 105) in her *Histoires d’amour* (1983; translated as *Tales of Love*, 1987). She rejects Freud’s primary narcissism as a stage in infant development in favor of a “narcissistic structuration” (Kristeva 1987, 44) that provides the infant with a way of understanding the difference between self and other. She develops the notion of a “chora”: a psychic space in which the infant resides, initially oriented towards the mother. At first, the infant imagines the mother’s breast to be part of itself, until it then realizes itself as a subject distinct from the mother. Separation from the maternal means confronting “the abject,” but the stage of abjection is a precondition of narcissism, and distinguishing the real from the symbolic is achieved through the narcissistic imagination. Kristeva compares this process with the development of speech. Incorporating the speech of the other, the infant is able to identify itself:

In being able to receive the other’s words, to assimilate, repeat, and reproduce them,
I become like him: One. A subject of enunciation. Through psychic osmosis/
identification. Through love.

(Kristeva 1987, 26)

Kristeva's analysis draws on Narcissus, who is a central figure in *Histoires d'amour*, and yet her discussion of language is far more pertinent to Echo. Like the nymph, the infant assimilates, repeats, and reproduces words. For Kristeva, words as well as images make up the imaginary, and indeed have primacy; words "in the final analysis, shape the visible" (Kristeva 1987, 37). The creating of boundaries between self and (m)other is the process that leads to self-identification. In Kristeva, as in Lacan and Freud, a sad tale of unrequited love yields explorations of human development, as it had once generated moral lessons and paradigms of creativity. Echo herself, for centuries a bit-player in the Narcissus story, is reclaimed as pitiful heroine, then as feminist symbol of resistance, but finally as the secret of communication and identity itself.

Guide to Further Reading

Vinge (1967) remains the most comprehensive discussion of the literary reception of Narcissus up to the Romantic period. Knoespel (1985) concentrates on medieval literature, in particular, and Hollander (1981) looks at Milton, but also offers an overview of Echo's classical sources and their meanings. In the field of the visual arts, Bann (1989, 105–156) presents a thematic analysis of Narcissus in paintings including a close reading of Caravaggio's picture. Chadwick (1980) still offers the fullest overview of myth and surrealism. Ernst's *The Nymph Echo* is discussed in Warlick (2001) and Spies and Rewald (2005), an exhibition catalogue accompanying a retrospective at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

Dali's *Metamorphosis of Narcissus* has generated a vast bibliography: Finkelstein (1996) offers a summary of debate and full interpretation of the painting. See also the fascinating discussion in Lomas (2011), a catalogue accompanying an exhibition at the Fruitmarket Gallery in Edinburgh. The exhibition showed Dali's work alongside a selection of surrealist photography and film, as well as works by contemporary artists. A significant counterpart to *Metamorphosis of Narcissus* was *Narkissos* (1976–90), a collage by San Francisco-based artist Jess. Intended as a homage to Gustave Moreau, it illustrates the artist's three decades of research into the reception of Narcissus. The catalogue also includes discussion of works by Rist and Kasuma, while Kasuma's *Narcissus Garden* is also the subject of Cutler (2011).

Of the feminist responses to Echo in the field of literary and cultural studies, Berger (1996) is the most illuminating. Although the focus of Petek (2008) is film spectatorship, the first three chapters offer useful engagement with the myth of Narcissus and Echo in the psychoanalytical works of Freud, Lacan, and Kristeva. For a discussion of Kristeva's Narcissus, also see DeArmitt (2005), and for Derrida's Echo, see DeArmitt (2009).

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