

ECHO AND NARCISSUS

Tiresias

The best known of all the stories that involve the transformation of a youth into a flower begins with a worried mother taking her son to see a prophet. As well as the soothsayers and Sibyls who spoke on behalf of the divine oracles, there existed certain select mortal beings whom the gods also privileged with the gift of prophecy. Arranging a consultation with one of these was not unlike making an appointment to see a doctor.

The two most celebrated seers of Greek myth were CASSANDRA and TIRESIAS. Cassandra was a Trojan prophetess whose curse was to be entirely accurate in her prognostications yet always just as entirely disbelieved. The Theban Tiresias underwent an equally stressed existence. Born male, he was turned female by Hera as a punishment for striking two mating snakes with a stick, something which annoyed her greatly at the time, for reasons best known to herself. After seven years of serving Hera as a priestess, Tiresias was returned to his original male form, only to be struck blind by Athena for looking on her naked while she bathed in the river.* That is one story that explains his blindness, but I prefer the variant that tells how he was brought up to

* Note the similarity of the offence to Actaeon's crime of spying on Artemis. The modesty of the gods while bathing was prodigious.

T. S. Eliot makes memorable reference to Tiresias in 'The Fire Sermon' section of his poem *The Waste Land*:

Olympus to arbitrate in a wager between Zeus and Hera. They had been arguing over which gender enjoyed sex the most. Since Tiresias, having been both male and female, was in a unique position to answer this question, it was agreed that his judgement would be final.

Tiresias declared that in his experience sex was *nine times* more enjoyable for females than males. This enraged Hera, who had bet Zeus that men got the most pleasure from the act. Perhaps she was basing her opinion on the inexhaustible libido of her husband and her own more moderate sex drive. For his pains Hera rewarded Tiresias by striking him blind. One god can never reverse the effects of another, so the best Zeus could do for Tiresias was to award him the compensatory faculty of second sight, the gift of prophecy.*

Narcissus

There was once a naiad called LIRIOPE, who coupled with the river god CEPHISSUS and gave birth to a son, NARCIS-SUS, whose beauty was so remarkable that she worried for his future. Liriope had seen enough of life to know that extreme beauty was an awful privilege, a dangerous attribute that could lead to dire and even fatal consequences. When

I Tiresias, though blind, throbbing between two lives,
Old man with wrinkled female breasts, can see . . .
I Tiresias, old man with wrinkled dugs
Perceived the scene, and foretold the rest . . .
And I Tiresias have foresuffered all . . .

* The honour of being asked to adjudicate amongst the gods might seem great for a mortal, but as this story shows, and as the Trojan prince Paris was to discover, the results could be catastrophic.

Narcissus reached the age of fifteen and started to attract unwanted attentions, she decided to act.

'We are going to Thebes,' she told him, 'to see Tiresias and have your fortune told.'

And so mother and son walked for two weeks all the way to Thebes and joined the queue to see the prophet that formed every morning outside the temple of Hera.

'Although you are blind and cannot see my son,' she explained to Tiresias when their turn came at last, 'you may take my word for it that all who do see him are dazzled by his looks. No more beautiful mortal ever trod the earth.'

Narcissus blushed to his golden roots at this and shuffled his feet in an agony of embarrassment.

'I know enough of the gods,' continued Liriope, 'to fear that such beauty might be more curse than blessing. The world knows what happened to Ganymede, to Adonis, Tithonus, Hyacinth and all those other boys far less beautiful than my son. So I would have you tell me, great seer, if Narcissus will live a long and happy life. Is it his *moira* to reach a contented old age?*' You who are blind see all that is invisible to the rest of us. Tell me, I beg, my beloved son's destiny.'

Tiresias put out his hands and traced the outlines of Narcissus's face.

'Fear not,' he said. 'So long as he fails to recognize himself, Narcissus will live a long and happy life.'

Liriope laughed aloud. 'So long as he fails to recognize himself?' Such a strange pronouncement could have no serious application. How can anyone recognize themselves?

* The Moirai, you will remember, were the Fates. The Greeks felt that for every individual there was a personal, singular *moira* that could be expressed as a mixture of necessity, doom, justice and fortune. Something between luck and *kismet*.

Echo

We leave Liriope joyfully thanking Tiresias at the temple of Hera in Thebes and travel a short distance over to the foothills of Mount Helicon, where the streams and meadows outside the township of Thespieae were filled with the comeliest nymphs in all Greece. So comely that they often received visitations from Zeus himself, whose weakness for a comely nymph we have already noted.

The oread ECHO was not the least comely of these, but she did have one personality trait which caused Zeus and other potential suitors to be wary of her – she was the most tremendous *talker*. A compound of village gossip, nosy neighbour and over-solicitous best friend, Echo found it impossible to hold her tongue. There was nothing malicious about her prattling, indeed she often went out of her way to speak up for her friends, to cover for them, praise them and paint them in the best light. There was an element of vanity here, for she had a lovely voice, pretty in both speech and song. Like many people gifted with a mellifluous tongue, she loved to exercise it. She was protected to some extent by the goddess Aphrodite who admired her singing, which was always in praise of love. In short, Echo was a romantic. Her detractors might call her sentimental and even slushy, mushy and gushy, but they could not deny her good intentions and fullness of heart.

Zeus enjoyed visiting Echo's sister oreads and cousin naiads in secret and Echo enjoyed being a confidante and best friend to them all. It rather thrilled her to think that her relations and companions were having liaisons with Zeus, the Cloud-Gatherer and King of the Gods himself. It was a secret she loved to hug to herself.

Hera relaxed her grip and the bird, who had gone almost scarlet, breathed again, but male chaffinches still sport pink breasts to this very day.

Echo was paddling playfully in a stream when Hera and her peacock carriage descended once more. The nymph splashed and skipped her way up the riverbank to greet the goddess, a wide and welcoming grin splitting her perfectly dimpled features. The smile of welcome quickly turned to a rounded 'O' of fear when she saw the look of rage on Hera's face.

'So,' said the goddess, with icy calm. 'You say my husband has not been here. You say he was not here yesterday. You say he was in Thespieae sanctifying a temple.'

'That's – that's certainly my understanding,' stammered a frightened Echo.

'You foolish, gossiping, chattering, scheming *liar!* How dare you try to deceive the Queen of Heaven? Who do you think you are?'

'I – . . .' For once in her life Echo could think of nothing to say.

'Well may you stutter and stammer. You love the sound of your voice, don't you? Hear this . . .'

Hera drew herself up and raised her arms high. Her eyes seemed to shine with a purple light. Echo quailed before the grandeur of the sight and wished the ground could swallow her up.

'I command your wicked, lying powers of speech to be still. From this moment you will be mute unless spoken to. You will have no power to reply except to repeat the last thing that has been said to you. None can undo this curse. Only I can. Understand?'

' . . . can understand!' cried Echo.

'That's what happens when you disobey the gods.'

' . . . obey the gods!'

'I do not forgive. No mercy.'

' . . . give no mercy!'

With a snort and sneer of triumph Hera whisked herself away, leaving the unhappy nymph shivering in fear and frustration. No matter how much she tried to speak, no words would come. Her throat seemed to catch and tighten every time. One of her sisters came upon her wordlessly retching and spluttering. 'Hello, Echo – what are you doing?'

'What are you doing?' said Echo.

'I asked first.'

'I asked first.'

'No *I* did.'

'No *I* did!'

'Well, if you're going to be like that, go to hell.'

'Go to hell!' Echo cried after her, wild with misery.

One by one all her friends and all her family shunned her. The curse inflicted upon one who had lived her life for gleeful gossip, who valued nothing above cheerful chatter and who had derived all her pleasure from prattling repartee was so terrible that Echo now wished for nothing more than to be left alone to welter in silent agony.

Echo and Narcissus

Into the painful solitude of Echo's private hell there crashed one day all the laughter, shouting and boisterous clamour of a hunt. The youths of Thespieae had chased a boar all the way into the wood, and one of the huntsmen had become separated. He was a youth of such transcendent beauty that Echo, whom the tender passion had passed over all her life, was instantly lovestruck.

The youth was Narcissus, now older and more dazzling than ever. He had never fallen victim to the tender passion

either. He had become so used to girls and boys, men and women, fauns and satyrs, nymphs and dryads, oreads and centaurs, and all manner of beings, sentient and non-sentient, shrieking and sighing and fainting away in his presence that he thought the whole business of love absurd. It turned sensible people stupid. Narcissus hated being mooned and swooned over. It maddened him to see the unmistakable look of love leaping into the eyes of others. There was something so angry and ugly about that look. Something so hungry, lost and despairing, so brooding, haunted and unhappy.

To Narcissus love and desire were sicknesses. He had been taught that lesson in the worst way possible a year before, when a boy called AMEINIAS had declared his love to him. Narcissus had replied, as kindly as he could, that he did not return his love. But Ameinias would not accept 'no' for an answer and took to haunting Narcissus's every step. He joined him on his morning walk to school, tagging along and gazing at him like a lost and adoring puppy until Narcissus could stand it no longer and yelled at him to go away and never come near him again.

That night Narcissus had been awoken by a strange sound outside his bedroom. He looked out of his window and saw in the moonlight Ameinias hanging from a pear tree, a rope around his neck. He choked out a curse before he died.

'May you be as unlucky in love as I have been, beautiful Narcissus!'

Since then Narcissus had got into the habit of keeping his head down, covering his body as much as possible and being short and gruff to strangers, never meeting them in the eye.

But now, as he looked about him, he saw that the rest of the hunting party had gone and that he was splendidly alone.

He decided to take advantage of the cool waters of the stream and its inviting mossy banks. He slipped out of his clothes and plunged into the water.

As soon as she caught sight of that lissom and golden form, half sunlit, half dappled by the shade and all streaming with water, Echo caught her breath. And when, peeping through the leaves she saw the face, the beautiful, beautiful face of Narcissus, she could no longer control her senses. Were it not for Hera's curse she would have cried out there and then. Instead she gazed in silent wonder as the naked youth laid his clothes and bow and arrows on the grass and stretched himself out to sleep.

When love comes late it comes like a tornado. Poor Echo's whole being was swept up by her feelings for this impossibly beautiful youth. Nothing, not even the horror of Hera's curse, had ever caused her heart to hammer so violently inside her. The blood pounded and surged in her ears. It was as if she was swirling in the centre of a great cyclone. She simply *had* to take a closer look at this lovely youth. If she felt such tumultuous passions swirling inside her at the sight of *him*, then perhaps it was in the nature of things that he would feel the same at the sight of *her*? Surely that must be so? She crept forward, hardly daring to breathe. With each step she found herself more and more thrilled until she was quivering and trembling all over with excitement. The stories of love at first sight that she had heard sung all her life were true after all! This beautiful boy would be bound to return her love. Cosmos and creation would not make sense otherwise.

Of course, you and I know that Cosmos and creation make no sense at all and never have. Poor Echo was about to discover the truth of this.

Whether it was her pounding heart or the cry of a bird, something made the sleeping Narcissus open his eyes just as Echo drew near.

* Ameinias, according to some sources, became a sweet-smelling herb. Possibly dill. Perhaps cumin. Maybe anise.

His eyes met hers.

Echo was a pretty nymph, lovely in fact. But it was only her eyes that Narcissus saw. That look again! That haggard, hungry, haunted look. Those needing, pleading eyes. Ugh!

'Who are you?' he said, turning away.

'Who are you?'

'Never you mind. That's my business.'

'That's my business!'

'No it isn't. You woke me.'

'You woke me!'

'I suppose like all the others you've fallen in love with me.'

'Love with me!'

'Love! I'm fed up with love.'

'Up with love!'

'It'll never happen. Never. Go away!'

'Never go away!'

'I don't care how much you wail at me. I hate the sight of you.'

'The sight of you!'

'Stop it, will you? Just don't!' cried Narcissus. 'Go away!'

'Don't go away!'

'You're driving me crazy.'

'Driving me crazy!'

'Go away before I do something so desperate . . .'

'So desperate!'

'Don't tempt me, now.'

'Tempt me now!'

Narcissus picked up his hunting sling and loaded it with a stone. 'Go. Just go. I'll hurt you if you don't. Understand?'

'You don't understand.'

The first stone missed her, but Echo turned and fled before Narcissus could reload and try again. As she ran he called out after her.

'And never come back!'

'Never come back,' she cried.

She ran from him and kept running until she fell weeping to the ground, her heart bursting with grief and shame.

The Boy in the Water

Narcissus watched her go. He shook his head angrily. Would he never be free of these silly wailing people and their whining, clutching madness? Love and beauty! Words, just words.

Hot and thirsty from all the stress and drama he knelt down to drink from the stream. He caught his breath in astonishment when in its waters, he saw the loveliest face he had ever laid eyes upon, the sweet and surprised face of a most beautiful young man. He had golden hair and soft red lips. Narcissus recognized with a thrill that the youth's beguiling and loving eyes had the hungry, needy look he had always found so repellent in others. But the very same expression on the gorgeous face of this mysterious stranger made Narcissus's chest swell and heart thump with joy. It must mean that the glorious creature in the river felt the same way as he did! Narcissus leaned down to kiss the lovely lips and the lovely lips came up to kiss his, but just as Narcissus lowered his face, the stranger's features broke into a thousand dancing, rippling pieces until he could see them no longer and Narcissus found he was kissing nothing but cold water.

'Stay still, lovely one,' he breathed, and the boy seemed to whisper the same to him.

Narcissus raised a hand. The boy raised his hand in reply. Narcissus wanted to stroke the boy's lovely cheek and the boy wanted to do the same. But the face fractured and dissolved the moment Narcissus got close.