



John William Waterhouse, *Echo and Narcissus*, 1903. Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool.

STATE OF AFFAIRS

Narcissus, Echo, and the Sacred Value of Academic Freedom

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In highlighting features of narcissistic relationships, the myth of Narcissus and Echo can help us appreciate the importance of academic freedom for the health of the Church. Stories often give us a glimpse of our own lives from outside our usual, egocentric frame of reference. An example of this is found in 2 Samuel chapter 12, in which the prophet Nathan tells David a story about a rich man who has taken a poor man's beloved lamb rather than slaughtering one of his own to feed a visitor. When David hears this, his "anger was greatly kindled against the man; and he said to Nathan, 'As the Lord lives, the man who has done this deserves to die; and he shall restore the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing, and because he had no pity.'" Nathan capitalizes on this

moment of David's indignation, saying to him, "You are the man," thus allowing David to realize that the rich man he has just condemned is actually himself, disguised in Nathan's story, and that the crime of taking the poor man's lamb is just a tame reflection of his own crime, in which he had "smitten Uriah the Hittite with the sword, and . . . taken his wife" to be his own. The parables of Christ, in some cases, have a similar effect, allowing us first to appreciate the implications of truth when they pertain, as the parables present them, to people and situations external to ourselves. In this way, these stories bypass the self-protective distortion we often introduce into our hearing when asked to consider a truth as pertaining directly to ourselves. Later, we are left to struggle

with the fact that there is no basis for exempting ourselves from the truth we have so readily endorsed when we imagined it applying to others.

Mythology provides a wealth of such material. Historically, psychology has relied upon mythological stories for their uncanny ability to illumine and mirror psychological and social dynamics that we have difficulty seeing without such a reflective medium. The story of Oedipus is one notable example of this, and the myth of Narcissus is another. Discussion of the latter commonly focuses on the image of Narcissus gazing at his own reflection as a picture of our potential to become obsessively entrapped with our own image, occasionally to a degree that might be described as pathological.

Another element in the story of Narcissus typically receives less attention, though it can add significantly to our understanding of what narcissism entails. This less-examined element is the figure of Echo, a nymph, who, we are told, falls in love with Narcissus, and, through her pining for him, is reduced to being nothing but an echo of whatever Narcissus says. The inclusion of Echo in this story corresponds with the fact that, in the lives of individuals with narcissistic tendencies, there are frequently other people who function as dutiful echoers of the narcissist.

While narcissism exists in varying forms and degrees, it is primarily understood as a condition in which an individual with a radically insecure sense of self maintains a degree of personal stability by exercising control of their external environment. As long as the environment mirrors to them the image they need to see in order to feel adequate, all goes well. If something in the environment fails to do this,

though—for example, if others do not sufficiently affirm the narcissist, or if they assert their own individual perspectives (thus relativizing the narcissist's perspective, demoting it to the status of a point of view rather than a definitive statement of reality)—the narcissist becomes hostile toward the environment and either attacks it or withdraws from it. It is easy to understand, then, why echoers frequently accompany narcissists. Many of us have had the feeling of “walking on eggshells” around certain people. This feeling comes from the sense we have that, if we slight them in any way, either by insufficiently affirming them or by including too much of our own unique selves in our interaction with them, we may incur some kind of punishment, which can include rage, criticism, or silence.

Echo, in the story, is not without her own share of responsibility for this narcissistic dance she finds herself in. Though, on one level, she may be seen as the disadvantaged one, she, too, is trying to bolster a fragile self—not by controlling her environment, but by trying to identify herself so perfectly with the needs of the other that any question about who she is is fully settled.

The cost of such relationships exceeds that of the discomfort both parties feel—with Narcissus struggling to constrain whatever in the environment might challenge his fragile sense of self and Echo devoting herself, as much as possible, to fulfilling these conditions in her interactions with him. This emotional pain merely expresses the compromise to their personhood both experience within this relational system, in which each functions, effectively, not as a person but as an object, used or managed by the other. To the extent Narcissus-Echo

dynamics are operative, there is a diminution of the personhood of both people involved. This is because each, in his or her own way, is using the other to shore up a fragile self. The dialogue between them, as Martin Buber described it, is not *I-You* but *I-It*.

Buber describes the I in an I-It relationship—that is, the deficient I in need of an It to feel whole—as being qualitatively different from the I in an I-You relationship, though we use the same word in both cases. “When one says You, the I of the word pair I-You is said, too,” and, “when one says It, the I of the word pair I-It is said, too.” “I-You can only be spoken with one’s whole being,” whereas, “I-It can never be spoken with one’s whole being.”¹ In such interactions, we overlook, among other things, the freedom and uniqueness we each possess, reducing ourselves to functions. Kallistos Ware cautions us of this danger:

Human beings are not counters that can be exchanged for one another, or replaceable parts of a machine. Each, being free, is unrepeatable; and each, being unrepeatable, is infinitely precious. . . . Each is irreplaceable, and therefore each must be treated as an end in his or her self, and never a means to some further end. Each is to be regarded not as object but as subject. If we find people boring and tediously predictable, that is because we have not broken through to the level of true personhood, in others and in ourselves, where there are no stereotypes but each is unique.²

When we are either Narcissus or Echo, we treat others as objects, stereotypes, as means rather than ends. We reduce them to the status of “parts of a machine,” operating in service of our own fragile self.

The implications of the Narcissus-Echo relationship are not only psychological; they are also theological, in that they impair our apprehension of what is essential in our own personhood and in the personhood of the other. Further, these implications are not only personal, but also systemic and institutional. According to Buber, we look to institutions to organize our community life when, because of our I-It perspective, we have lost the experience of genuine encounter, reciprocity, and relationship. “Institutions are what is ‘out there’ where for all kinds of purposes one spends time, where one works, negotiates, influences, undertakes, competes, organizes, administers, officiates, preaches; the halfway orderly and on the whole coherent structure where, with the manifold participation of human heads and human limbs, the round of affairs runs its course.”³ We know, from experience, that institutions fail to give us a genuine sense of community life, even when infused with the passion of our individual or collective feelings. In the institutional setting, we continue to treat each other as objects, and we project upon the institution our hopes for something that will enable us to transcend our isolation—the isolation that is inevitable when we have turned every *other* into a means of fulfilling our own need.

These dynamics are especially egregious when they appear in the setting of the Church. Strictly speaking, Narcissus and Echo have no place there. When our interactions toward others aim, consciously or unconsciously, toward getting them to mirror back what we need in order to feel stable in ourselves, or when we continue to try to master an eggshell-covered landscape because our own stability requires maintaining the approval of someone who is using

¹ Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Walter Kaufman (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1970), 53–54.

² Bishop Kallistos Ware, *The Orthodox Way* (Crestwood: SVS Press, 1996), 51.

³ Buber, *I and Thou*, 93.

us to fulfill their own self-needs, we are seeing neither ourselves nor the other in full personal and theological significance. Yet, in the Church, it can be especially tricky to differentiate between the echoing that is the appropriate expression of faithfulness to the tradition and the echoing that is the result of employing others in the maintenance of one's unconscious psychological needs.

There are several aspects of Church life in which a kind of echoing serves to indicate our understanding of and consent to sacred tradition. The Greek word *paradosis* is translated in the New Testament as *tradition* (from the Latin *traditio*), signifying "the action of handing over."⁴ The admonition of Jude 1:3, "to contend for the faith which was once for all delivered [*paradidomi*] to the saints," highlights a fundamentally conservative relationship to the teachings we have received—the importance of faithfully preserving them. The word *catechumen*, to describe someone who is preparing for holy illumination, contains within it the root of the word "echo," suggesting not only the sound that is transmitted by a teacher, but also the repetition of that sound by the student to demonstrate that the teaching has been accurately received. In the early Church, at the end of Lent and just prior to their baptisms, the catechumens—having been instructed in the articles of the Creed throughout Lent—would participate in the *redditio symboli*—that is, they would "give back" the symbol of faith (the Creed), by publicly reciting it by heart.⁵ By this means they would "profess their personal acceptance of the faith that had been handed on to them."

In addition to this literal echoing of the catechumens, there are other areas of Church life in which it

could seem that echoing is our prime task. Consider how Saint Ignatius of Antioch described the preeminent role of the bishop and the function of the priests and deacons:

I hasten to urge you to harmonize your actions with God's mind. For Jesus Christ—that life from which we can't be torn—is the Father's mind, as the bishops too, appointed the world over, reflect the mind of Jesus Christ.

Hence you should act in accord with the bishop's mind, as you surely do. Your presbytery, indeed, which deserves its name and is a credit to God, is as closely tied to the bishop as the strings to a harp. Wherefore your accord and harmonious love is a hymn to Jesus Christ. Yes, one and all, you should form yourselves into a choir, so that, in perfect harmony and taking your pitch from God, you may sing in unison and with one voice to the Father through Jesus Christ.⁶

Finally, the notion of ourselves as echoers would seem to be supported by our belief that catholic truth is marked by consensus across space and time. This principle was best articulated by Saint Vincent of Lérins, who described sound Christian teaching as that "which has been believed everywhere, always, by all."⁷

In at least these instances, then—catechumens' demonstration of their understanding through repetition of what they have been taught; the emphasis upon bishops, priests, and deacons as the means by which God's mind is reflected; and the identification of catholic truth with universal consensus—the fulfillment of our role as Orthodox Christians could be imagined as consisting merely of handing on, repeating, and echoing.

⁴ *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed., s.v. "tradition."

⁵ Robert Cabié, "Christian Initiation," in *The Sacraments*, tr. Matthew J. O'Connell, new ed., vol. 3 of *The Church at Prayer: An Introduction to the Liturgy* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1987), 28.

⁶ St. Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch, "The Letter of Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch, to the Ephesians," in *Early Christian Fathers*, Cyril C. Richardson et al., eds. and trans. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 88–89.

⁷ St. Vincent of Lérins, *The Monitory of Vincent of Lérins* 2.6, in *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Series 2, eds. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1995), 11:132.

This invites the question, though, of whether echoing can sometimes be emphasized to an unhealthy degree, to the detriment of other values necessary to healthy church life.

A culture with the features described above, in the absence of mitigating factors—which can include adequate spiritual and psychological self-awareness, especially on the part of those in leadership—can serve to mask and legitimize the dynamics associated with Narcissus and Echo. We can imagine extreme scenarios in which that danger seems likely. Catechism can become the rote repetition of formulas, with doubts or questions discouraged as inappropriate or unspiritual. Relationships between bishops and lesser clergy, and between clergy and lay people, can become narrowed and distorted when they are seen primarily as expressions of authority and obedience. Sermons can become little more than recitations of patristic sources, equating the inclusion of any modern perspective with dangerous novelty.

While Orthodoxy understandably places paramount importance on its harmony and unity, have we sufficiently considered the risks that ensue when we consciously or unconsciously identify the guardian of that unity with repetition and echo? For one, though echoing can demonstrate that a teaching or direction has been faithfully received, the Church is about more than just the error-free transmission of information. Information and direction, essential as they are, find their purpose only in the context of relationships that make possible the emergence of Christ in the lives of the people who receive them. And, while echoing can be a vital component in the validation that occurs in healthy relationships, demonstrating that one

has really heard what the other is saying (in couples therapy, for example, echo-listening forms the basis for a variety of exercises), validation cannot be reduced merely to echoing—especially in a relationship of I-You rather than I-It.

Approaching the Church as though it should be nothing but an echo chamber entails interpreting tradition in a one-sided way. For example, even Saint Ignatius's admonition to act "in accord with the bishop's mind" does not, upon close reading, bear out this interpretation. The bishops "reflect the mind of Jesus Christ," but it is ultimately God's mind with which we, and they, are harmonized. The analogy Ignatius provides is that of a choir, and it is from God that we are to take our pitch. Though a choir director serves a unique coordinating function, the music, which both director and choir serve, transcends these roles and resonates through all equally. Likewise, though the clergy, with their charisms of order, reflect God's presence in a particular way, they nonetheless remain recipients of that presence alongside all the faithful.

This observation corresponds with Buber's answer to the failure of institutions to provide an experience of genuine community. He says:

True public and true personal life are two forms of association. For them to originate and endure, feelings are required as a changing content, and institutions are required as a constant form; but even the combination of both still does not create human life which is created only by a third element: the central presence of the You, or rather, to speak more truthfully, the central You that is received in the present.⁸

⁸ Buber, *I and Thou*, 95.

Recognition of “the central You,” which, in the life of the Church, is nothing other than Christ, is what can allow us to avoid treating ourselves, others, and the Church itself as objects. This central You, in the Church, is our opportunity to begin to know ourselves as the I of the I-You rather than of the I-It. It is here we begin to heal our narcissism, as we discover a divine-human source of validation that allows us to reduce our dependence on others to reflect back an image of ourselves that compensates for our internal instability. Also, as we find ourselves addressed as a fully-personal You, we begin to discover our own voice, beyond the mere echoing that accompanied us in the role of the It we became while desperately trying to fulfill the self-needs of others.

To support the possibility of I-You relationships in the Church, though, we must allow for interactions in which everything is not merely an echo of something else. This includes releasing others from the obligation to echo us perfectly—and our awareness of how, when we find ourselves merely echoing, we are reducing ourselves and those we echo to the status of an It. On a personal level, our transcending the dynamics of Narcissus and

Echo can be aided by our participation in confession, competent spiritual direction, and, where appropriate, psychotherapy.

On an institutional level, though, one way among many that the Church can signify the value it places on I-You relationships is by explicitly permitting a zone in which the requirement for precise echoing of traditional content is loosened—not with the intent of compromising tradition, but so that it can be enlivened, its treasures framed in ways not previously considered, in light of our best possible assessment of the here-and-now realities of our earthly mission. “Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others weigh what is said” (1 Cor. 14:29). This early model, in its own way, guarded the prerogative of the Church to decide what utterances to accept and what to reject, while simultaneously not squelching the font out of which those utterances arise. Such is the sacred value of academic freedom—and, more broadly, freedom of thought. It preserves for us the possibility of hearing and responding to truth in new ways. It is one space—not the only one, but an important one—where we can know ourselves to be more than echoes. ✱



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