

Introduction: Introducing Echoism

The narrative of Narcissus is a pervasive and well-known one, with a well-established history, language, and logic. This book reveals another story, one which, for reasons I seek to understand, has been both unsayable and unable to be heard. Mauriac (1958) acknowledges the challenge that,

[he] who speaks is carried along by the logic of language and its articulations. Thus the writer who pits himself against the unsayable must use all his cunning so as not to say what the words make him say against his will, but to express instead what by their very nature they are designed to cover up: the uncertain, the contradictory, the unthinkable.

[Claude Mauriac, (1958, p. 83), *La Littérature Contemporaine* In: Esslin, M. (1991, p. 38)

This book presents the findings of an extensive, in-depth study of individuals who, because they resemble closely the character of Echo in the myth of *Echo and Narcissus*, I refer to as *Echoists*. These individuals have in common a painful *absence of Being*, together with the lack of a voice that they can call their own. Almost invariably I have found a narcissistic parent or partner at the centre of their lives, and often there is a pattern of repeatedly seeking a dominant narcissist for a partner.

Until now, *Echoism* as a distinct phenomenon has gone unnamed and unrecognized. It is the aim of this book to introduce echoism as a clinical entity and as a theoretical concept. Because patients to whom I apply this term lack what I call an *own-voice*, and are without a strong sense of self, echoists are often quiet, unable to take space, or are likely to adapt themselves to the perceived wishes of others. I do not begin with a sharply drawn definition of echoism as a syndrome, but instead I draw upon my own experiences to provide clinical

vignettes throughout the book to help the reader recognise when they are in the presence of an echoist.

Echoism is the clinical counterpart to narcissism, and for every narcissistic individual there is usually an echoistic partner and any number of dependents. As the narcissist can often relate to himself as the only real subject, it raises interesting questions as to what happens to the children of such individuals, and as to who would choose a narcissist for a partner or friend and why this may be. The group of patients on whom this book centres have been in relationships with narcissistic partners or parents, and have developed specific ways of relating, some of which go back to infancy.

I have spent the last six years working with this patient group in individual therapy, in couples where the echoist¹ usually presents with her narcissistic partner, and in groups. During this period, I have spent many hours trying to understand the echoist's particular ways of being, writing up case material, collating data from groups and feedback from courses I have led, the results of which are largely presented in this book.

The mainstay of my approach has been to listen to the stories of people who are not used to being heard, who find it difficult to use their voices, and who often feel themselves to be worth less than others. This work requires many hours of patience, tolerance and faith. Although I have made many mistakes along the way, these have often proved helpful in revealing more of what the echoist does to the therapist, however unconsciously or unwittingly, in treatment.

The most common of these mistakes is to fill the space, and I go on to explain how seemingly naturally the therapist is pulled into such a position when working with echoistic patients, and why this is so counter-therapeutic. The empty space is where echoism most truthfully reveals itself – as a state that is uncomfortable to allow and in which it is most painful to bear witness.

I found very little guidance on how to work with patients who had come to me initially as part of a couple, and who presented in a very particular way with their

¹ The gender of the character of Echo in the myth is female. Accordingly, in this book, the echoist will be referred to as *she*. This concept is applicable equally to males, just as the term *narcissism* may be applied to females.

narcissistic partners. I started to observe some interesting traits and patterns of behaviour in these co-dependent patients, that I have since come to identify as echoistic, once I began to see them alone for individual work. Eventually, after publishing some early research, I began to share my findings with trusted colleagues, and echoistic patients began to be referred to me by other clinicians, or to find their way to me themselves, after reading something I had written about the echoist which resonated with them and with which they could identify. This led to further enquiry into established methods of treating the patient group with whom I was working. As narcissism is one of the most widely discussed concepts, it seemed strange to me that there was not an equivalent body of literature regarding those who are found *in relation to narcissists*, either by choice or through birth. I returned to my reliable background in the arts, as a way of trying to address the lack, with something to which I could orient myself in trying to help and understand these patients.

The myth in Ovid

As a child I became interested in myth in its oral form and in theatrical representations, particularly those found in classical Greek drama. At the age of eleven I persuaded my headmaster at Junior School to allow me to stage a production of a play that I had devised with a small group of friends and, to invite parents as well as the school congregation to attend – a request to which he agreed, with some degree of apprehension. It was not until many years later, after I began directing plays as part of my degree and later professionally, that I began to regard this debut as a successful attempt to communicate something at a time when I had very little voice of my own, or hope that my deepest anxieties might be heard or understood. This was summarised beautifully by Kenneth Tynan² in his astute observations of the functions of theatre as a tool of communication, in a critique of the work of the playwright Eugene Ionesco:

To discover the fundamental problem common to all mankind, I must ask myself what my fundamental problem is, what my most ineradicable fear is. I am certain then to find the problems and fears of literally everyone. That is the true road into my own darkness, our darkness, which I try to bring to the light of

² Kenneth Tynan, Ionesco, man of destiny?, Observer London, 22 June 1958.

day.... A work of art is the expression of an incommunicable reality that one tries to communicate – and which sometimes can be communicated. That is its paradox and its truth.

As an adult I found myself drawn to classical Greek texts and Existential Theatre of the Absurd plays, both of which offered to me as a director, the opportunity to examine something of my own experience, as well as that of the human condition. These ancient and modern texts contain, in their very essence, characters with existential dilemmas who suffer the same fate, potential and anxiety as I and all other human beings, no matter how mythically or absurdly they are represented – in fact the more removed they were from my actual self and character, the more courageously I could imbue them with my own unresolved conflicts and deepest anxieties, under the guise of theatricality and metaphor. I came to trust these texts as containing human truths which could be relied upon for deep contemplation of myself and my relationship to others, and their connections to me through being human.

As a director and theatre academic, the classical works of Aristotle, Sophocles, Euripides and the Roman Poet Ovid, occupied much of my interest. The richness of these texts is polysemic in its potential to be represented and for meanings to be both encoded and interpreted. The playwrights and practitioners Beckett, Brecht, Ionesco, Jarry, Artaud and the theorist Martin Esslin influenced much of my understanding of the existential within theatre, and provided texts in which the human condition could be lived out within the safety of the theatrical container. I mention this because I found in this period of my life and work a reliable source of truth which often revealed to me, in final stages of productions, my own unconscious or latent anxieties and fears and my unhealed wounds – which were, to some degree, offered the conditions for healing within the world of the play.

When faced with the absence of theoretical material to guide me in my work with echoistic patients, I returned to this body of theory and art, which had served me so well in the past. As I was already very familiar with the work of Ovid, and with *The Metamorphoses* in particular, I found a translation which most accurately corresponded, in its representation of Echo, to traits identified in many of the echoists I had encountered in my consulting room. In the myth, Echo is subjected to a curse by the Goddess Hera: She must remain silent except for her right to

repeat the last words of another. Because of this she must therefore, in order to have a voice, seek out another to echo back. She relies upon the beautiful youth Narcissus for her very existence, but when he rejects her she fades and ceases to exist except as a mere echo of him.

The value of having the Ovid text as a reliable source to consult whenever I am in doubt, combined with my particular experiences as a theatre person, and the undeniable reality of the dreadful plight of the patients I have worked with intensively for many years has made it possible for me to continue to pursue this difficult area of research.

In Ovid's version of the myth of *Echo and Narcissus*, the character Echo receives equal attention to her counterpart, Narcissus, yet she has been completely marginalised in the pervasive psychoanalytic literature on narcissism – a fact noted by Levy et al (2011, Ch. 1) at the outset of their historical review of narcissism and narcissistic personality:

The concept of narcissism has been the subject of so much attention and captured the public's mind [in a way that] would make Narcissus, the subject of the Greek myth from which the term is derived, very proud indeed.

Ironically, in the psychoanalytical literature too, Echo and her clinical counterpart, the echoist, have become both the literal and symbolic embodiment of the completely marginalised or silenced female voice, even though we meet her in our consulting rooms on a regular basis. This book proposes to reinstate her as a subject in her own right in an attempt to restore her to existence and have her voice heard.

Psychoanalytic and other literatures

In 2011 I was invited to contribute a chapter to an existential therapeutic text on Relationship Therapy (Van Deurzen et al, 2013, p. 88). My chapter applied various myths to a developing understanding of particular clients and the ways in which they related. I made an early speculation in this publication, that the potential to be both narcissistic and echoistic is possibly to be found in all of us.

The in-depth study that I have carried out since has revealed some very different findings, which are described in detail in this book.

While there exists literature on ‘co-dependents’ and narcissistic co-dependency, this lacks two important features: it does not identify or analyse the particular ways of being of the ‘co-dependent’, neither does it name her as a subject in her own right. This failure reinforces the very state of non-existence found at the heart of the echoist, which I discuss at length in the book and to which I introduce the reader through vignettes.

In the first chapter I hypothesise as to why the phenomenon is missing in the literature. Following a search made of relevant terms in the Psychoanalytic Electronic Publishing (PEP³) database of psychoanalytic papers going back to 1871, I found that while there are ubiquitous references to the term *Narcissistic* (20,422 at time of writing) and to *Narcissism* (12,573 at last count), there are just two references to *Echoism* and one to *Echoistic*. There are some 3464 references made to *Echo*, many of which are simply a use of the word as a noun or a verb in general discourse. Those which referred to *Echo* as a proper noun were almost always used to serve a further understanding of narcissism, with little or no interest in the echoistic figure as an entity in her own right. Those who have returned specifically to the character Echo in the myth have theorised or speculated about the phenomenon of *Echolalia* – a condition in which the individual literally echoes back the last words of the other’s sentences, and which is often found in patients on the autistic spectrum.

The term echoism has been used recently by Malkin (2015, Ch. 6), an American psychologist and relationship specialist, to mean an extreme negative presentation on the narcissistic spectrum. In the comprehensive literature search, the only paper which engages with the phenomenon of Echoism as a discrete psychoanalytic and clinical entity is by Davis (2005). In this paper the echoistic patient herself is considered to suffer from a psychopathological condition. The paper describes the role of echoistic wives found in relationships with narcissistic husbands. Davis, in discussing a narcissistic-echoistic couple, acknowledges:

... the [narcissist] husband is seen as the afflicted party, a victim of his own narcissistic introversion. The [echoist] wife is seen only as playing a foolishly passive neurotic witness. Oddly, social forces all seem to have conspired to

³ Archive 1 Version 10 (searched from 1871-2017)

generate an amnesia regarding the fundamental psychology of the wife. (Davis, 2005, p. 138).

Davis, who has made his own search of terms listed above, concludes:

The only use of the term “echoism” was in an article from San Francisco in *Psychiatric Annals* that argues for the inclusion of co-addiction as a disease in the DSM III-R, but does not seem to elaborate on the concept in any theoretical depth. (ibid.)

Davis’ paper seems to set out to remedy this, and he makes some very interesting theoretical links between primary narcissism and echoism, as well as speculating upon the way in which Freud might have drawn more heavily upon the myth of *Narcissus and Echo* in what he describes as a ‘hasty generalization’ in his theorisation of gender. Davis then veers away from the echoist as a subject worthy of interest in her own right, and the one whom we meet in the consulting room, to further theorise on emergent states of narcissism and echoism in the infant, and the speech patterns that result from these phases. The paper then enters into the territory of *Echolalia*, and away from the dreadful state of Being to which the echoist is subjected.

Davis’ application of Echo’s story as the paradigm for gender, development, and cultural treatment, both in society and in psychoanalytic thinking, is interesting and valuable but again moves away from the plight of the suffering individual. He does, however, recognise a, “vicious circle of echoism/narcissism”, and he discusses the need for a comprehensive study of echoism.

He concludes:

any therapeutic attempts to heal such a relationship must utilize techniques that address both the male’s narcissism and the female’s echoism. Indeed, what little literature that exists on this subject, which we have cited earlier in this article, seems to support this conclusion. We must observe, however, that echoism and narcissism are not the exclusive properties of gender. These are only the outcomes of external forces. Even though echoism is most commonly found in the woman and narcissism in the man, the converse and any variation therein does occur. We are confident that the psychoanalytic theory of echo-ism will prove most useful in developing a better understanding of these variations and any needed therapeutic techniques. It is probable as well that some therapeutic

techniques that seem successful but need a stronger theoretical foundation may find some encouragement here. I can see so many directions where these observations can lead. But, these directions are probably better explored at length elsewhere. (ibid. p. 149).

This book takes up that challenge, with a rich collection of clinical studies and a strong theoretical foundation, drawn from existential philosophy and psychoanalytic theories and models; it is further informed by my recent training in Daseinsanalysis and Group Analysis. I describe some key principles for treatment and an evolving approach based upon observations made from my in-depth analysis of this patient group and their responses to treatment.

Book sections and chapter outline

Section One comprises three chapters in which I provide the reader with descriptions and definitions drawn from a range of literary and theoretical material from different schools, which I use freely and in an integrated way thereafter. This may require readers from different backgrounds to do a little work in familiarising themselves with these quite different theories to provide a vocabulary and an understanding of the concepts upon which the rest of the book depends.

The particular translation of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* that I am using, that I have come to call *the source material*, is where I begin the book in Chapter One, with a close reading of Echo's narrative. I introduce some literary theoretical concepts which help orient the reader towards particular ways of approaching and interpreting both the written text and the clinical situation.

I have found contemporary Kleinian psychoanalytic theories of narcissism invaluable as a body of thinking to help me in understanding the echoist and I provide a detailed explanation of these in Chapter Two. I also give a historical account of how these theories have evolved from the first pre-psychoanalytic recognition of narcissism as a condition which was, interestingly, based upon Ovid's version of the myth. I maintain that, at this stage, the whole of our current understanding of narcissism as a condition diverged from what we may have come to understand as a dynamic relationship between two characters who enable a particular form of functioning in the other. The absence of a

consideration of the key role of Echo in relation to Narcissus has led instead to an unevenly weighted representation of just one character, upon whom the subsequent literature has become focused. This, as we can already see, is only half the story.

I use the term Being in an existential sense, as Being-in-the world, and of the individual's experience of Being. Chapter Three provides a very detailed explanation of Sartre's modes of Being and their specific application to a particular defence system operating in the echoist, to help the reader understand the existential ideas referred to in the rest of the book.

In Section Two I define two primary types of echoism. Chapter four is dedicated to Defensive echoism and chapter five to Self-destructive echoism. I include in both, examples of being with the different forms of echoism through clinical vignettes, to enable the reader to notice when they are in the presence of echoism and to be alert to echoistic traits and to the feelings evoked when relating to an echoist. I also describe and provide evidence to show how easily this phenomenon can be missed or misinterpreted.

Section Three provides a critique of research and received ideas in both psychoanalytic and existential approaches. This begins in chapter six, with an in-depth exploration of the pioneering work on narcissism by Herbert Rosenfeld, upon which much of this book is based. I go on to explicate his ideas further and introduce a concept of a god-like object, basing my concept upon further work in the field by Wilfred Bion and Ronald Britton and I provide a model for understanding the particular object relationships in the echoist's internal and external worlds.

Chapter Seven continues the theme of god-like objects, and focuses specifically on Kierkegaard's work in *Fear and Trembling*, on God's command to Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, and the Greek gods' requirement for Agamemnon to kill his daughter Iphigenia. The question of faith is central, and observations from Kierkegaard's text are used and applied to help us to further understand echoism. This section is completed by clinical work which provides real and lived examples of such phenomena, examples of how we may encounter them in the consulting room and what we might learn from them.

In Section Four section I argue for the acknowledgment of an echoistic-narcissistic complex, rather than echoistic traits being incorporated into the existing paradigm

of narcissistic conditions. I look at the presentation of echoism in couples and groups in Chapter eight and in chapter nine I consider and discuss the possible consequences of echoistic traits in the therapist.

In the final section (Five) I provide a detailed summary of the arguments extended in this book. Chapter ten offers recommendations for an acknowledgment of the work, concepts and treatment that I have begun in this area, and suggests areas for further development within the field of therapy and beyond.

I believe the particular combination of materials and theories explored in the writing of this book, and my experiences in the consulting room, have helped me to see something which is prone to being silenced and to which others have got so close, and – at the last minute – missed.