

Lost in Paradisiacal Beauty: Milton's Re-Writing of the Narcissus Myth

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Few writers in English literary history seem to have been as haunted by the mythological figure of Narcissus as John Milton, the most significant harmonizer of Roman and Biblical mythology in world literature. Apart from his inherent narcissism as a poet who -in the same conventional vein as classical authors like Ovid and Horace had previously established- is totally convinced of the moral, ideological and artistic benefit of the preservation of the valuable inheritance of his own lines for posterity, Milton also alluded -implicitly or explicitly- to the ill-fated youth in some of his most important poetic works.

This is the case of *Comus*¹, where Milton makes the Lady in this masque sing a beautiful song to Echo (lines 230-243), the immortal voice always accompanying Narcissus in post-classical recreations of Ovid. As Wilmon Brewer has stated, here the poet “showed his Lady invoking the assistance of Echo and likening her brothers to Narcissus” (Brewer, 1978, pp. 548-9). But Milton's most audacious interpretation of the Narcissus myth appears in his masterpiece, *Paradise Lost* (1667)², the very epitome of mythological dynamic compilation, containing a superb mixture of classical, Biblical and personal mythology. Narcissus could not be exempted from the myths adapted by Milton in his *magnum opus*. However, the English poet's interpretation of the legend contains remarkable features which it is our purpose to investigate, despite the relatively large amount of criticism already devoted to the matter from traditional perspectives³.

It is obvious that Milton's account of the Narcissus fable was lifted straight from Ovid's *Liber III* (339-510) of his *Metamorphoseon* -together with Virgil's *Aeneidos*, the main source of his mythological knowledge. Milton's linguistic familiarity with Latin gave him direct access to the original Latin text, whose *editio princeps* dates back to as early as 1471. At the same time, the writer's concern with Ovid corresponds itself with the general European Ovidian revival of the seventeenth century, a period which can conveniently be termed an *aetas Ovidiana*. In England alone the catalogue of the British Museum totals thirteen translations into English of the text, these being the work of John Brinsley (1618) and, especially, George Sandys (1626), whose version was the most accurate and influential (Vinge, 1967, p. 179 ff.). All these translations followed the well-known first attempt undertaken by Arthur Golding in 1567, the so called “Shakespeare's Ovid”⁴, because of the great Bard's approach to, and contact with, the Ovidian text through Golding's version.

Apart from these translations, several other writings by English authors show the influence of the seventeenth-century Narcissus cult more clearly, although on the whole none of these texts provide significant innovations or new treatments of the myth as far as the conventional allegorical and moral rea-

dings coming from classical or early-Renaissance writers are concerned. The most relevant examples are Francis Bacon's *De Sapientia Veterum* (1609; where a chapter is entitled "Narcissus, sive Philautia"); Sandy's explications to the second edition of his translation of the *Metamorphosis* (1632); Alexander Ross' *Mystagogus Poeticus or the Muses Interpreter* (1647); Henry Reynolds' "Tale of Narcissus" in his essay of literary criticism *Mythomystes* (1632), which follows Euhemeristic patterns. Seventeenth-century English mythological poems on the Narcissus fable, inserted in a pastoral framework, include: Richard Brathwait's *Narcissus Change* (1611); James Shirley's *Narcissus or the Self-Lover* (1618); Ben Jonson's Echo-scene in *Cynthia's Revels, or The Fountaine of Selfe-Love* (1601); stanzas from poems by George Chapman (*A Hymne to Ovr Sauior in the Crosse*, 1612) and Henry More (*Psychozoia*, 1642). To these should be added the anonymous *Narcissus, a Twelwe Night Merriment* (1602), a dramatic version of the Narcissus theme.

The approaches suggested by the examples quoted above -both artistically and philosophically- do not attain the imaginative and rich undertones provided by Milton's treatment, perhaps with the exception of Bacon's writings. Moreover, it is significant to note that, apart from More's *Psychozoia*, the great poet does not seem to have been directly influenced by any of his countrymen. His main patterns are foreign and 'more prestigious', mostly those set up by Plotinus and the fifteenth-century Italian neo-Platonist Marsilius Ficinus, as will be seen later.

Paradise Lost IV, 449-491 shows a sexual reversal of the roles in the Ovidian tale. We hear Eve's voice mnemotechnically putting together her memories of the very moment at which she was created from Adam's flesh. Before this, Eve's speech has echoed the recurrent fact of remembrance: "*That day I oft remember, when from sleep/ I first awaked...*" The setting where she is created can be described as the archetypal *locus amoenus*, the same location appearing in the Ovidian source and also coincidental with the pastoral framework of the myth in seventeenth-century poetry. Milton's *Paradise* itself corresponds to a pastoral landscape, and Nature is conceived of in a conventional way.

Eve wondered about her origins: "*...much wond'ring where/ And what I was, whence thither brought, and how*". Narcissus' origins are known, though 'shameful', the product of the river Cephissus' rape of the beautiful nymph Liriope (literally in Ancient Greek, 'the lily-shaped'). Both parents underline Narcissus' fate: Cephissus is the personification of a river -and therefore composed of water- and Liriope contains in herself a reminder of the boy's transformation into a flower at the end of his tragedy. On the other hand, Eve's generation comes directly from the God of the Old Testament through human means: Adam's flesh. Thus, Eve is Adam's sibling and 'daughter', one and at the same time.

Water is also present in Eve's narcissistic fascination: a "*liquid plain*" which, as Narcissus' pool in the Ovidian source, possesses the improbable feature of remaining unmoved, like the polished surface of a mirror. However, there is a significant difference, for the pool is "*Pure as th' expanse of heav'n*", adding thus a clear neo-Platonic simile with obvious Christian connotations. Eve emphasizes this idea some lines below, when she says: "*... and laid me down/ On the green bank, to look into the clear/ Smooth lake, that to me seemed another sky*". Eve later describes her reaction before the quiet water. She stresses her lack of experience from an intellectual perspective ("*With unexperienced thought*"), a feature which will later on propitiate Satan's success in tempting her, who -as she admits once and again- is not very clever. Experience is not here the opposite of innocence.

Eve's account of her first impressions are centered on the visual field (coherently accompanied by verbs and nouns connected with this type of perception: "look", "looks", "eyes", "seest"), the most imme-

diately empirical reaction in a human being who has just been created. But, as the Platonic axioma establishes, human senses are deceptive, for they are physical and therefore removed from the spiritual links with the World of Ideas. As in the case of Narcissus at the beginning of his tragic process, Eve does not recognize herself in the waters of the pool, thinking that the figure, the "shape" she is contemplating, is a different self, an "other". Whereas Narcissus is fatally doomed by his parents' inheritance, his posterior behaviour and the soothsayer Tiresias' prophecy that he would live a long life "if he does not know himself" (*"Si se non noverit"*), Eve is saved from a fatal destiny by the intervention of her partner, Adam, who makes her aware of the separation between herself and the "other" figure chiasmatically reflected in the ideal water.

For chiasmus is, appropriately enough, the main rhetorical device to appear in Milton's fragment, as was the case in Ovid's fable. The visual image of Eve playfully contemplating her own reflection without being conscious of the fact is counterpointed by the verbal mirroring of syntactic structures. This fact, which critics had paid little attention to, is another sign of Milton's referential link with the Ovidian text, his re-creation of the episode being an adaptation of the Roman master.

As soon as Eve sees her image in the pool, she is, like Narcissus, intensely in love -love at first sight- with her own self. She is also guilty of the sin of *philautia*, or self-love. Very like Narcissus, and in pretty much the same way as Echo, she pines with "vain desire". And the modifier is here extremely important, for the adjective "vain" is recurrent in many moral and allegorical interpretations of the Narcissus myth, and is not excluded, for different reasons, from the original Latin source. The word appears in Plotinus, Marsilius Ficinus, Bacon, Sandys, Reynolds... It is a neo-Platonic reminder of Narcissus' *stultitia*, for it intrinsically refers to the vain prevalence of the physical world rather than the "more relevant" spiritual dimension. "Vain" obviously comes from *vanitas*, the eternally exemplary sin of pride which was also one of the Biblical causes of the Fall. In allegorical exegesis Narcissus was conceived of as the embodiment of "vanity", and is commonly regarded as a picture of earthly folly (Vinge, 1967, p. 123).

However, as a woman -and the sexual inversion is essentially significant in Milton, as we shall see later-unexperienced Eve, the archetype of female humanity in the Christian tragedy of the Fall, is lost in Paradisiacal Beauty, for it is her outward appearance that leads her astray and puts her in a dangerous position. Beauty is probably the key idea in a neo-Platonic context, but there is an evident distinction between spiritual and material beauty. Plotinus (*Enneads* I: 6: 8) discussed the relationship between one and the other. As Louise Vinge summarizes (1967, p. 37), "*The problem is principally a matter of how man, who is living on earth, will be able to reach Supreme beauty, the beauty which is hidden in the holy of holies and which can only be seen by the initiated. Plotinus urges them to enter the holy and leave behind everything that eyes can see*". The philosopher's own words seem to be addressed to people like Narcissus and Eve, who follow the wrong physical path: "*When he perceives those shapes of grace that show in body, let him not pursue: he must know them for copies, vestiges, shadows, and hasten away towards That they tell of. For if anyone follow what is like a beautiful shape playing over water -is there not a myth telling in symbol of such a dupe, how he sank into the depths of the current and was swept away to nothingness?*" Eve's reflection is thus termed "a shape", "a shadow", and represents the fruitless objective of "vain desire" in this neo-Platonic context.

In his moral and allegorical interpretation of the Narcissus myth, Milton's primary source for concepts is the Italian Marsilius Ficinus, whose main concern is also to revive the Platonic idea of Beauty in his influential *Commentarium in Convivium Platonis* (1469). The cult of 'the Beautiful' provides Man with his principle means of contact with God. The dichotomy entails again the mental and the physical,

and the prevalence of the former rather than the latter. In a complex poem dealing with “*justifying the ways of God to men*” from metaphysical and theological perspectives, it is perhaps important to quote Ficinus’ threefold division which describes God as out of eternity, the angel as existing entirely in eternity, and the soul as partly in eternity, partly in time. Ficinus used the image of light pure and simple as the attribute of God’s beauty. God comes to be the source of all beauty, therefore the source of all love (Vinge, 1967, pp. 123-8).

Eve’s “vain” fascination with her own reflection, which is essentially physical, is thus the opposite of spiritual beauty and is then the very epitome of earthly folly. It is another form of this earthly folly, her thirst for knowledge which is outside the self -for in the neo-Platonic explanation Narcissus’ tragedy consists of his “not knowing himself”, asserting with this the reversal of the gnomic sentence *gnozi s’autòn*-which will propitiate Eve’s, and consequently Adam’s, Fall.

Milton copies another element from Ficinus, which Henry More had just adopted in his *Psychozoia* as a means of developing allegorical poetry. As Louise Vinge states (1967, pp 224-5), the Italian neo-Platonist “*bad finished his explication of the significance of Narcissus’ fate by observing how Diotima had led Socrates from the body to the soul and finally to God*”. This is the so called “instruction motif”, which clearly appears in Milton’s fragment. It is Adam (who else?) who addresses Eve, “teaching” her that the shadow she is seeing is herself (l. 467). Now Adam revitalizes Echo’s function, for it is his voice that she first perceives as an aural stimulus. Adam possesses experience and, more importantly for Milton, “*manly wisdom*”. But there is still another relevant hint: Eve’s true reflection is not her own image in the mirror provided by the clear waters of the pool, but Adam himself, for she has been created from his own body in a process of parthenogenesis not devoid of classical mythological relationships. As her brother and “father” to a certain extent, Eve is Adam’s *Doppelgänger* in a role that poor Echo was unable to fulfil, taking into account the fact that she was but a fake repetition of Narcissus’ voice.

Adam’s strategy to defeat Eve’s narcissism is, curiously, another kind of *philautia*, the same that -with a sexual inversion- we can find in the first sequence of Shakespeare’s *Sonnets* and beautifully exemplified by “Sonnet 3”: he is promising her the possibility of engendering through him “*Multitudes like thyself, and thence be called/ Mother of human race*”. By becoming a motherly figure, *the* mother, Eve will satisfy her primary female narcissism, creating an unlimited number of copies, reflections of herself. It goes without saying that Adam is also satisfying his patriarchal egolatry.

Eve’s first impulse is to follow the manly, tall and handsome figure. But her attachment to her own shadow, which is more “*fair*”, more “*winning soft*” and more “*amiably mild*” to her than was the Nymph’s shadowed (if pragmatic) message to Narcissus: *coëamus* (both “let us meet” and “let us make love”), makes her turn back to the “*smooth wat’ry image*”.

Adam cries aloud (voice once again), and now his arguments persuade the girl haunted by her own reflection. Apart from patriarchal connotations and a hint at emotional blackmail, Adam emphasizes the fact that she is flesh of his flesh and therefore he is her authentic *Doppelgänger*, her double. They are intrinsically united, each a complement of the other, for Eve’s creation entails not only Adam’s physical attributes, but also spiritual connotations. Eve is Adam’s narcissistic reflection, at the same time that she is his possession: “*Part of my soul I seek thee, and thee claim/ My other half!*” Eve is utterly convinced and “*from that time see(s)/ How beauty is excelled by manly grace/ And wisdom, which alone is truly fair*”. In Milton’s neo-Platonic view, the Paradisiacal beauty of Eve’s outward appearance is surpassed by the deeper beauty of manly grace and wisdom. Eve’s “*vain desire*” is defeated by real love of herself

embodied by Adam, her *alter ego*. The interpretation of the passage is related not only to the Narcissus fable, but also to the myth of the Hermaphrodite in Plato's *Symposium*, with Aristophanes' magnificent account of human beings' original duality, fragmented also because of a transgression and the subsequent divine punishment⁵.

Few commentators have paid attention to the following lines, which describe a scene of conjugal love with erotic and sexual implications, and where there is further chiasmic re-creation of the preceding lines to Ovid's account of the Narcissus myth, which -and this should not be forgotten- are included in the global framework of the story of Tiresias. The cause of the wise man's blindness and compensatory ability to see the future has its origin in a marital dispute between Jupiter and Juno as regards the mute point of who feels more sexual pleasure when making love, man or woman. Tiresias has had experience of both the male and female viewpoints, given that he was turned into a woman when bothering two serpents while copulating, which makes him the best arbiter. His siding with Jupiter's opinion will bring down Juno's punishment upon him. This will amount to the loss of his physical sight and the acquisition, by the god's benevolence, of the gift of prophetic foresight. Narcissus' story is an *exemplum* of Tiresias' powers in this respect.

Milton presents Jupiter and Juno in an unusual scene in classical mythology of marital harmony between husband and wife -the god and the goddess being siblings too. The English poet uses a simile relating Adam and Eve's love to Jupiter and Juno's amorous exchange of smiles, one of the few occasions when the goddess is not tormented by Jupiter's proverbial infidelities:

“... he in delight
Both of her beauty and submissive charms
Smiled with superior love, as Jupiter
On Juno smiles, when he impregns the clouds
That shed May flowers; and pressed her matron lip
With kisses pure...” (ll. 497-502).

Immediately after this episode, Satan's envy of Adam and Eve's happy state will make him plot their ruin.

On the whole, as Louise Vinge has accurately stated (1967, p. 226), Milton's technique when applying Narcissus' fable to his own poem is that of adaptation, never mentioning the name of the youth in a simile. Many problems of gender are suggested by the poet's inversion of male and female roles with respect to the source, relating Eve with Narcissus, and Adam -to a certain extent- with Echo. However, the patriarchal discourse impregnating these lines is somewhat mitigated by the fact that in the end Adam and Eve are the same being from a metaphysical perspective. Poor relief for feminine and feminist approaches to the text, we are afraid to say.

Before we put an end to our analysis, it is perhaps relevant to emphasize that intertextuality is the main characteristic of literary texts. If Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, III was the source for Milton's recreation of the Narcissus myth, Milton's *Paradise Lost*, IV is the referential text for a striking romantic interpretation of the same episode we have been dealing with. We are referring to Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), a novel which, among many other links with *Paradise Lost* -a quotation from the poem precedes the whole book, the monster reads Milton's masterpiece and is linguistically and vitally influenced by it, becoming a representation of both Satan and Adam, in the same way that Victor Frankenstein is a mock

figure of God as a creator...⁶, presents another turn of the screw in connection with Milton's passage. For the monster, that painful epitome of ugliness, symbolizes the opposite figure to that of beautiful Eve. The short extract in Chapter XII where the monster in his horrible sublimity -a chiasmic Eve and the anti-Narcissus-is conscious of his utter deformity, deserves to be quoted in full and provides an adequate counterpoint to Eve's irresistible appeal to her own narcissistic reflection, lost in Paradisiacal beauty:

"I had admired the perfect forms of my cottagers- their grace, beauty, and delicate complexions: but how was I terrified, when I viewed myself in a transparent pool! At first I started back, unable to believe that it was indeed I who was reflected in the mirror; and when I became fully convinced that I was in reality the monster that I am, I was filled with the bitterest sensations of despondence and mortification. Alas! I did not yet entirely know the fatal effects of this miserable deformity"⁷.

NOTES

¹ John Milton 1973: *Comus*. Frank Kermode & John Hollander (eds.): *The Oxford Anthology of English Literature*, vol. I. New York, London and Toronto: O.U.P. (pp. 1222-51).

² John Milton 1975: *Paradise Lost*. Ed. Scott Elledge. New York and London: Norton Critical Edition. All quotations from now on refer to this edition.

³ See Louise Vinge 1967: *The Narcissus Theme in Western European Literature Up to the Early 19th Century*. Lund: Gleerups (p. 392, endnote 92). Quotations are from this edition from now on.

⁴ Ovid 1961: "Shakespeare's Ovid". *Arthur Golding's Translation of the Metamorphoses*. London: Centaur Press.

⁵ Plato: *Symposium*, 189 B-195 A.

⁶ A more complete investigation on the relationships between *Paradise Lost* and *Frankenstein* can be found in my book *Narciso: mito y dualidad conceptual en la literatura inglesa victoriana*. Ph. D. Thesis. Madrid: Universidad Complutense, 1993 (forthcoming).

⁷ Mary Shelley 1969: *Frankenstein*. Ed. M.K. Joseph. Oxford and New York: O.U.P. (p. 114).

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