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# OID'S NARCISSUS (*MET.* 3.339–510): ECHOES OF OEDIPUS

INGO GILDENHARD and ANDREW ZISSO



## NARCISSISTIC THEBES?

OVID'S TALES OF Echo and Narcissus, while mutually enhancing in their magnificently suggestive symmetries,<sup>1</sup> have long been considered an oddity in their larger narrative context.<sup>2</sup> Otis, for instance, is not alone in feeling that they are quite "extraneous" to the Theban milieu which dominates this particular stretch of the *Metamorphoses*, since they seem only superficially linked to the tragic city through the figure of Tiresias.<sup>3</sup> Some scholars have tried to solve the problem of their inclusion in Ovid's "Thebaid" (3.1–4.603) by pointing to thematic correspondences that connect "Narcissus and Echo" to other episodes in the narrative vicinity, such as fatal love,<sup>4</sup> the intervention of a vengeful divinity,<sup>5</sup> or the problematization of sight.<sup>6</sup> Such sequences of thematic patterns, though, are a rather ubiquitous "surface phenomenon" which can be traced in various ways throughout the entire poem, and which hardly ever explain Ovid's poetry in and of themselves.<sup>7</sup> Thus, such the-

<sup>1</sup>Scholars tend to assume that the linking of their fates is indeed an Ovidian invention. See most recently Kenney 1986, 392.

<sup>2</sup>On the question of Ovid's possible sources see Eitrem 1935; Castiglioni 1906, 215–19; Rosati 1983, 10–15. As Hardie points out (1988, 73), "the extent of Ovid's originality in his handling of the stories of Narcissus and Echo is difficult to gauge given the fragmentary state of our knowledge of Hellenistic poetry."

<sup>3</sup>Otis 1966, 231.

<sup>4</sup>Schmidt 1991, 111–12.

<sup>5</sup>For the significance of this theme in Ovid's Theban cycle see Hardie 1990.

<sup>6</sup>For a graphic illustration of the recurrence of this theme throughout Ovid's *Thebaid* cf. Cancik 1967, 46.

<sup>7</sup>Perhaps the most useful study of thematic patterning in the *Metamorphoses* is Schmidt 1991. Yet even his very flexible analysis of Ovid's *Themenführung*, a concept borrowed from music, is unable to explain the presence and function of the Narcissus and Echo episodes in their wider context (cf. his discussion on pp. 111–12), ultimately showing the limitations of this line of approach when it comes to understanding the poetics of a specific passage (which is, admittedly, not Schmidt's interest).

matic links should not be considered a sufficient justification for Ovid's rendition of the Narcissus and Echo episodes at this point in the poem. Nor should one invoke poetic license, as Bömer does when he suggests that Ovid here merely branches out into the wider mythology of Boeotia (Narcissus being a Boeotian youth).<sup>8</sup> Rather, here as elsewhere the narratological enigmas of the *Metamorphoses* are rooted in the peculiar logic of Ovidian poetics.

Within Ovid's Theban history, the presence of Narcissus is not the only puzzling feature. The narrative is here constructed around a remarkable absence as well. As Zeitlin has demonstrated, the imagination of Attic drama, which informs this section of the *Metamorphoses*, employs three principal clusters of myth in order to render Thebes on the tragic stage: the events surrounding Cadmus' arrival in Boeotia and his founding of the city; the house of Laius, in particular the story of his son Oedipus; and the conception and birth of Dionysus as well as his confrontation with his cousin Pentheus upon returning to his maternal city.<sup>9</sup> The third book of the *Metamorphoses*, which contains the first half of Ovid's Theban narrative, is clearly influenced by the structuring principles used by the tragic playwrights to fashion a thematics of Theban mythology. The book opens with a restaging of Thebes' *ktisis* legend (3.1–130), and the *sparagmos* of Pentheus provides the appropriate closure (3.511–733), set up and anticipated by the Semele episode (3.253–315). But Ovid curiously excludes the house of Laius, skipping over a vital part of the city's mythological corpus. Even more surprisingly, he does not make up for this peculiar omission elsewhere in the poem.<sup>10</sup> The absence of any extended reference to the myth of Oedipus in Ovid's otherwise rather comprehensive mythological compendium is a remarkable silence, and one that merits investigation.

At first glance it does appear that Ovid swerves boldly from his all but predetermined narrative path by recounting the episode of Narcissus at the very juncture when the sequence of Theban legends calls for the appearance of an Oedipal figure. Yet the poet does not simply efface the horizon of expectation established by the sequence of Theban

<sup>8</sup>Bömer 1969, 538–39. Cf. Ludwig 1965, 28–29.

<sup>9</sup>Zeitlin 1990, *passim*.

<sup>10</sup>The only allusion to the significance of Oedipus for Theban lore occurs in Pythagoras' discourse in book 15, where Thebes is afforded the epithet *Oedipodioniae* (15.429).

tales. The glaring absence of Oedipus and the baffling presence of Narcissus are in fact flip sides of the same problem. As has been suggested by Loewenstein and Hardie, Ovid uses Narcissus to render vicariously the thematic complex of Oedipus by relating his Narcissus tale to the most powerful literary representation of Oedipus' fate, Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus*.<sup>11</sup> We now build on this insight and further explore the precise modalities by which Ovid turns Sophocles' Oedipus and his own Narcissus into the Tweedle–dee and Tweedle–dum of an extraordinary intertextual dynamic.

### ESTABLISHING THE INTERTEXTUALITY

An intertextual relationship, especially one as seemingly arbitrary as that between Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus* and Ovid's Narcissus narrative, needs to be strongly marked if it is to be appreciated by the audience.<sup>12</sup> Ovid signals the connection by introducing the figure of Tiresias into his text immediately before the tale of Narcissus, recounting an old version of how Tiresias acquired his gift of prophecy.<sup>13</sup> Through his habit of striking copulating snakes with a stick, Tiresias had been transformed from man to woman and back again, enabling him to have experienced sex as both. He was therefore called upon by Jupiter and Juno to mediate an Olympian quarrel over which partner derives the greater pleasure from the act of sex. For siding with Jupiter in attributing the more intense pleasure to the female, Tiresias was struck blind by the infuriated Juno; but he was compensated with prophetic knowledge by her well-pleased husband (*Met.* 3.316–38).

This peculiar episode adumbrates the ambiguous terms on which Ovid establishes a transference of meaning from Sophocles' play into the *Metamorphoses*. On the one hand, the timely narrative entrance of

<sup>11</sup>Cf. Loewenstein 1984, 33–56 *passim*, to whose perceptive analysis the present reading is much indebted, and Hardie 1988, 86: "Behind the Narcissus story there hovers the figure of the Sophoclean Oedipus, the glaring absence from the narrative surface of Ovid's Theban books, *Metamorphoses* 3 and 4, but a ghostly presence in much of the drama of blindness, sight, and insight, particularly of the third book."

<sup>12</sup>For a good discussion of the marking of intertextuality see Broich 1985, 31–47.

<sup>13</sup>The *Metamorphoses* version dates back to Hesiod. For Ovid's sources see Bömer 1969, 530. Cf. now O'Hara (1996), who argues for a lost Hellenistic poem of the first century B.C.E. on Tiresias' multiple sex changes.

the omniscient seer who haunts theater scripts in general and Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus* in particular is the perfect setup for the thematic correlations that Ovid constructs between the Theban king and the Boeotian youth. Yet at the same time, the sharp contrast between the old and somewhat embittered Tiresias of *Oedipus Tyrannus*, who curses his wisdom (cf. 316–17) and is even suspected of political intrigue, and the Ovidian expert on sexual orgasms, nicely prefigures the translation of tragic subject matter into the sphere of the erotic. As befits a prophet, Tiresias foreshadows the narrative terms and intertextual poetics of the upcoming episode, both inaugurating a conceptual space within the *Metamorphoses* in which Ovid can rehearse Oedipal configurations and anticipating the erotic elements in the transtextual relationship of Narcissus and the Theban king.

Tiresias continues to promote the Oedipus connection within the Narcissus narrative proper. Asked by the anxious nymph Liriope whether her son Narcissus would reach old age, the seer cryptically responds with an adaptation of the Apollonian maxim *gnōthi seautōn*. Narcissus will only enjoy a long life *si se non noverit*—if he does not know himself (3.348).<sup>14</sup> By alluding in his first prophecy to this famous Delphic saying, Tiresias invokes a narrative background defined by the numinosity of Apollo and his oracle at Delphi, which loom so large over Sophocles' drama as well. In fact, at the very moment Iocasta grasps the truth, she tries to counter Oedipus' obsessive and self-destructive search for his true identity with an inversion of the Delphic "Know Thyself" which is exactly analogous to Tiresias' response to Liriope: ὦ δύσποτμ', εἴθε μήποτε γνοίης ὅς εἶ (*OT* 1068). Like Ovid's Tiresias, Iocasta reinterprets the Delphic imperative in an existential sense and inverts its message, as she tries to prevent the unfolding disaster of self-knowledge and introspective doom. Tiresias' prophecy about Narcissus' fate thus signals from the very outset that a typically Oedipean dialectic of blindness and insight is inscribed into the life of Ovid's protagonist as well.

Perhaps the greatest source of Tiresias' aura and fame in tragic

<sup>14</sup>Cf. the discussion in Cancik 1967, 47–48, which emphasizes that in Ovid the original theological and moral implications of the saying are lost in favor of a new psychological, existential significance. Ovid here also rewrites his earlier poetry and dogma. Cf. *Ars* 2.497–501, where Apollo appears to the poet and reapplies his doctrine to the pursuit of love: *qui sibi notus erit, solus sapienter amabit*.

discourse is his affiliation with the catastrophe of the house of Laius. Oedipus' dismissive taunt about the seer's abilities at *OT* 390 (ἐπεὶ φέρε' εἶπέ, ποῦ σὺ μάντις εἶ σαφής;) has been satisfactorily answered by the end of the play, and Tiresias' knowledge of Oedipus' true identity and his crimes is a crucial instance of the dire credibility which Apollo and his seer enjoy in Greek mythology. In like manner, Tiresias' status as a prophet in the *Metamorphoses* derives largely from his involvement with the fate of Narcissus. Through a deceptively nonchalant (and thus typically Ovidian) transition, the entire Narcissus episode appears to be introduced into the narrative merely to show the unfailing veracity of Tiresias' predictions.<sup>15</sup> Appropriately, the tale is framed by references to his widespread celebrity, which is based precisely on his correct articulation of Narcissus' terms of existence (cf. 3.339–40 and 511–12).<sup>16</sup> In short, the figure of Tiresias and the specter of the Delphic oracle locate Ovid's tale of Narcissus within Sophocles' Oedipal imagination, delimiting from the outset the textual boundaries of the static epyllion through a dynamic, intertextual "frame."

### EXPLORING THE INTERTEXTUALITY

The intertextual extravaganza Ovid stages between his own text and Sophocles' is characterized not by specific verbal resonances but rather by structural and thematic parallels which are further embedded within a consistent program of generic displacements. As Ovid reconfigures Oedipal constellations within his poem, he reproduces the plot structure, the primary tropes, and the central thematics of *Oedipus Tyrannus* but projects the politico-tragic fate of Sophocles' protagonist inversely into the domain of private passion located within a bucolic landscape. The intricate grammar of intertextual transformation that underpins and regulates Ovid's Narcissistic adaptation of the Sophoclean play thus divides into two principal modes of operation, which may be classified as "analogical" and "dialogical."

<sup>15</sup>For useful observations on Ovid's transitions see Keith 1992, index s.v. "Transitions between episodes."

<sup>16</sup>Cf. Brenkman 1976, 325: "We thus find Tiresias stationed at either end of the mythos and presiding over its meaning, the figure of the narrative's truth." But he does not link Tiresias to the Sophoclean intertext.

*Analogical Relations*

The most striking correspondences between Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus* and Ovid's Narcissus episode involve the plot structure of their dramas. Both writers construct plots that conform to the highest Aristotelian standards for tragic quality. In each case, the moment of recognition, that is, the change from ignorance to knowledge, coincides with the plot's *peripeteia*, the reversal of the protagonist's fortune.<sup>17</sup> As Jebb points out, it is crucial that this climactic moment of discovery be "naturally prepared, approached by a process of rising interest, and attended in the moment of fulfillment with the most astounding reversal of a previous situation."<sup>18</sup> Ovid's narrative technique displays precisely these qualities, as he restages *in nuce* the dramatic movement for which Sophocles is universally admired. Narcissus' encounter with Echo (3.356–401), the fatal curse of a rejected lover (3.402–6), and an elaborate ephrasis of the fateful pond (3.407–12) set the stage for Narcissus' drama of self-recognition played out from 3.415 to 3.505. When Narcissus reaches the silent water and lies down to refresh himself, he is captivated by his own reflection and slowly overwhelmed by a new desire (3.415–17).

Silent fascination, gazing, and fruitless attempts at embracing his mirror image, narrated in the third person (3.418–31), give way to an authorial address, in which Ovid lectures his character on the phenomenon of reflection: *Credule, quid frustra simulacra fugacia captas? . . .* (3.432–36). This is followed by a long soliloquy (3.442–73) in which Narcissus works out his delusions. His initial puzzlement at the matching gestures and apparent indications of reciprocal desire of his mirror image yields climactically to the crucial insight: *iste ego sum* (3.463). This realization arises when Narcissus observes that no sounds reach his ears although his illusive double seems to utter words in return to his own: there is no sound, no echo, and the hoped-for other collapses into himself. Oedipus' change from blindness to insight is a constituent feature of the myth as such, but it was probably Ovid who first dramatized the transition from an unconscious to a conscious Narcissus, producing a version which inserts his protagonist firmly within the tragic imagination.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>17</sup>Cf. Arist. *Poet.* 1452a22–33.

<sup>18</sup>Jebb 1883, xvii.

<sup>19</sup>Cf. Zanker 1966; Hardie 1988, 86: "Ovid, perhaps for the first time, combines two versions of the Narcissus story, one in which the boy does not realize that it is him-

The reversals of fortune which Oedipus and Narcissus experience in the course of their myths are quite dramatic. At the beginning of the Sophoclean play, the audience encounters Oedipus at the height of his powers, the heroic king and savior of Thebes; after his self-identification he realizes that he is in fact the lowliest of humans, an incestuous parricide. Narcissus is initially presented as the cynosure of erotic attention, equal to the gods in beauty (cf. 3.421), and yet ensconced within a haughty aloofness which seems to remove him from the sphere of ordinary human passion. But at the end we leave him in piteous self-absorption, as he vainly and eternally gazes upon himself in the waters of Styx.<sup>20</sup>

It is the trope of paradox, a figure of speech based on the unity of contradictions, which lies at the heart of Oedipus' as well as Narcissus' fate and thus serves as a further analogic structure by which Ovid aligns his episode with the Sophoclean tragedy. The reversal Oedipus undergoes from king to scapegoat, "from citizen to exile; from dispenser of justice to criminal; from clairvoyant and savior of the city to blind riddle, bringer of plague to the city; from best, most powerful, wealthy and famous to most unfortunate, worst of men, a defilement and horror,"<sup>21</sup> is ultimately rooted in the paradoxical nature of his social position: Oedipus is husband and son to his father's wife as well as father and brother to his mother's children. At *OT* 1213–15 the chorus articulates the paradoxical disaster of Oedipus' life through poignant polyptotic wordplay which emphasizes his paradoxical status: ἐφηῦρέ σ' ἄκονθ' ὁ πάνθ' ὀρώων χρόνος, / δικάζει τὸν ἄγαμον γάμον πάλαι / τεκνοῦντα καὶ τεκνοῦμενον. In turn, the Narcissistic version of the Oedipal paradox translates Oedipus' collapse of social distinctions into the inverse dilemma of trying to proliferate the self as other. Narcissus' reversal of fortune is thus based on the paradoxical fact that he is both lover and beloved at the same time, desperately and vainly calling for a split in his

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self he loves, and another in which the self-infatuation is fully conscious. There is thus engineered an ἀναγνώρισις of a tragic kind; knowledge of the ἀμαρτία leads to self-destruction."

<sup>20</sup>Henderson (1993, 158, following Zeitlin) conceives of Thebes as "a system entropically closed, folded up from articulation and locked into self-absorption." What better substitute could Ovid have chosen for Oedipus, the paradigmatic representative of tragic Thebes, than the narcissistic youth?

<sup>21</sup>Goldhill 1986, 210.

identity: *o utinam a nostro secedere corpore possem! / votum in amante novum: vellem, quod amamus, abesset!* (3.467–68).

In fact, paradox serves as something of a “mastertrope” in both *Oedipus Tyrannus* and Ovid’s Narcissus episode. Before their paradoxical essence becomes apparent to the two protagonists themselves, they “resolve” the contradictions inherent in their social position and character by projecting them onto an illusory other, a strategy that sustains and enriches the respective plot of the two texts until the final *anagnōri-seis*. As soon as Oedipus receives the news from the Delphic oracle that in order to vanquish the plague which oppresses Thebes, the murderer of Laius needs to be banished from the land, he commits himself to a relentless search. In effect, of course, this means that Oedipus throughout the play hunts himself, pursuing the same specter of otherness that Narcissus does when he falls in love with his mirror image, trying in vain to embrace his spectral double through the surface of the water. As Zeitlin notes, “In his search for the murderer, Oedipus at first can also be said to see double: he imagines that there is an other, a stranger, but discovers that the other was only a fugitive phantom of the self.”<sup>22</sup> In other words, Oedipus and Narcissus unwittingly suffer from an active–passive schizophrenia that results from their envisioning the self as other. They are both subject and object of their quests, hunter and hunted at the same time. Ovid captures the ensuing paradoxical constellations through a play with verb form in describing the enraptured Narcissus: *se cupit imprudens et, qui probat, ipse probatur, / dumque petit, petitur pariterque accendit et ardet* (3.425–26).

The creation of an illusionary double who is assumed by the protagonists to be real situates the paradoxical nature of Oedipus and Narcissus within a broader metaphysics of seeming and being. Until the characters themselves acquire insight into their delusions, the joint presence of an authentic and inauthentic “reality” not only organizes the thematics of the plot but also engenders dramatic irony. This figurative structure can best be defined as an imbalance in knowledge between either actor and audience or character and (omniscient) narrator,<sup>23</sup> and in both texts such an epistemological rupture runs through

<sup>22</sup>Zeitlin 1990, 139.

<sup>23</sup>Cf. the definition in *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Literary Criticism (PELC)* 635: “Dramatic irony is a plot device according to which (a) the spectators know more than the protagonists; (b) the character reacts in a way contrary to that which is appropriate or wise; (c) characters of situations are compared or contrasted for ironic effects, such

the central part of the drama. The trope enters into Sophocles' play the moment Oedipus begins to pursue the answer to the question "Who killed Laius?" In Ovid, it arises as soon as Narcissus unwittingly falls in love with his own mirror image.<sup>24</sup> In both cases, dramatic irony accompanies and sustains the development of the plot, which takes the protagonists from blindness to insight, blindness being a necessary precondition for this particular figure of speech, insight its proper resolution.<sup>25</sup>

This figurative mode is crucial for both Sophocles' and Ovid's composition and is found throughout their narratives. Again and again, Oedipus unconsciously engages with his true identity, as his words manifest an implicit self-reflexivity.<sup>26</sup> The ambiguous referentiality of his discourse opens up the two levels of meaning which will ultimately collapse in the shocking disclosure of the truth. Vernant captures the essence of Oedipus-speak: "The only authentic truth in Oedipus' words is what he says without meaning to and without understanding it. In this way the twofold dimension of Oedipus' speech is an inverted reflection of the language of the gods as expressed in the enigmatic pronouncement of the oracle."<sup>27</sup> Narcissus' own outbursts of unwitting self-admiration while gazing into the pond ingeniously reenact the linguistic conflicts and the dramatic irony of Oedipus' doublespeak. As with Oedipus, every one of Narcissus' exclamations in this initial state of ignorance contains an implicit, self-referential irony:

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as parody; or (d) there is a marked contrast between what the character understands about his acts and what the play demonstrates about them."

<sup>24</sup>Ovid recreates the knowledge differential between (ignorant) actor and (knowing) audience as an epistemological hierarchy of authorial voice and character by assuming a didactic stance toward the unwitting Narcissus that is modeled on Lucretius. Cf. esp. 3.432–36 and the discussion in Hardie 1988, *passim*.

<sup>25</sup>Dramatic irony cast into cosmic dimensions turns into tragic irony: "The contrast of the individual and his hopes, wishes, and actions, on the one hand, and the workings of the dark and unyielding power of fate, on the other, is the proper sphere of tragic irony" (*PELC* 635). Oedipus' vain struggle to escape the terms of existence laid down by the divine oracle is a paradigmatic example of this trope. In Ovid, the goddess Nemesis introduces the inevitability of fate and a shadow of tragic irony into the text (see below).

<sup>26</sup>Cf., e.g., the examples listed in Vernant 1988, 429–30.

<sup>27</sup>Vernant 1988, 116. Oedipus' confrontation with the seer Tiresias pinpoints the clash of these two realities, one human, the other divine, in Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus*. In this long scene (316–462) Oedipus, who mocks Tiresias for his handicap (cf. 368–72), ironically reveals his own ethical and intellectual blindness.

exigua prohibemur aqua! cupit ipse teneri!  
 nam quotiens liquidis porreximus oscula lymphis,  
 hic totiens ad me resupino nititur ore;  
 posse putes tangi: minimum est, quod amantibus obstat.  
 quisquis es, huc exi! quid me, puer unice, fallis  
 quoque petitus abis? certe nec forma nec aetas  
 est mea, quam fugias, et amarunt me quoque nymphae. (3.450–56)

Through the linguistic presence of two realities in their respective narratives, both heroes are ultimately confronted with the implications of their own language. “It is the gods who send Oedipus’ own speech back at him, deformed or twisted around, *like an echo* to some of his own words.”<sup>28</sup> Likewise Narcissus, who at 3.390–91 haughtily rejects Echo (“*manus complexibus aufer! / ante*” ait “*emoriar, quam sit tibi copia nostri*”), laments his own fate with a mocking echo of his previous arrogance: *quod cupio, mecum est: inopem me copia fecit* (3.466). As Vernant suggests, the irony of tragedy “may consist in showing how, in the course of the action, the hero finds himself literally ‘taken at his word,’ a word that recoils against him, bringing him bitter experience of the meaning he was determined not to recognize.”<sup>29</sup> Oedipus and Narcissus are thus both at the center of two worlds: one which they construct for themselves and which turns out to be illusory; the other, real, which will annihilate their existence once they enter it.<sup>30</sup>

Finally, Sophocles and Ovid explain and justify the miserable destiny of their protagonists in analogous terms. In a choral ode that is crucial for the meaning and message of the drama (*OT* 863–910) the chorus associates Oedipus with that fatal character trait in a tragic universe, overweening arrogance. At the beginning of their first antistrophe, the chorus proclaims an axiom that informs the nomological knowledge of Athenian democracy: ὕβρις φυτεύει τύραννον (873). It then proceeds

<sup>28</sup>Vernant 1988, 116 (emphasis ours).

<sup>29</sup>Vernant 1988, 114.

<sup>30</sup>One might add that both authors reproduce the inherent duality of their characters on the level of language. Their respective texts are full of double entendres, puns, and chiasmic reversals which underpin the dramatic situation linguistically. As Vernant points out (1988, 113): “no literary genre of antiquity made such full use of the double entendre as did tragedy, and *Oedipus Rex* contains more than twice as many ambiguous expressions as Sophocles’ other plays.” In like manner, arguably no other episode in the *Metamorphoses* is quite as richly textured with linguistic play as Echo and Narcissus (cf. Rosati 1983).

to utter an ominous prayer in the strophe, wishing *κακά . . . μοῖρα* upon anyone who behaves haughtily, has no regard for justice, and shows no reverence for the images of the gods (883–87). These pronouncements are a harsh critique of Oedipus, whose tyrannical demeanor is demonstrated throughout the play. He behaves unjustly toward fellow humans such as Tiresias and Creon and shows an appalling lack of piety toward the gods (especially Apollo).<sup>31</sup>

In the *Metamorphoses* Narcissus displays similar arrogance, a point which Ovid illustrates through an allusion to Catullus 62. Compare the following:<sup>32</sup>

multi illum iuvenes, multae cupiere puellae;  
sed (fuit in tenera tam dura superbia forma)  
nulli illum iuvenes, nullae tetigere puellae. (3.353–55)

ut flos in saeptis secretus nascitur hortis,  
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multi illum pueri, multae optavere puellae.  
idem cum tenui carptus defloruit ungui,  
nulli illum pueri, nullae optavere puellae:  
sic virgo, dum intacta manet, dum cara suis est;  
cum castum amisit polluto corpore florem,  
nec pueris iucunda manet nec cara puellis. (Cat. 62.39–47)

The immediate context and generic affiliation of the Catullan passage are intricately related to the thematic concerns of the Narcissus episode, providing a highly resonant frame for Ovid's introduction of the crucial concept of *superbia*, the Latin equivalent of *hybris*. In Catullus the stanza is sung by a chorus of girls who use the flower simile to illustrate the importance they attach to chastity and, by implication, the devaluation of the female that results from the first sexual experience—even on the wedding night. They claim that a girl who preserves her

<sup>31</sup>For a recent discussion of Oedipus' *hybris* (with further bibliography) see Lefèvre 1987, 44–47, and in particular 46–47: “So schwierig die sachliche Aussage des viel zitierten Verses 873 auch ist, scheint doch festzustehen, dass Oidipous der *τύραννος* ist und demzufolge die dort genannte *Hybris* auf ihn bezogen werden muss.”

<sup>32</sup>For a discussion of this intertext, one of the most famous and elaborate in Latin poetry, see Dörrie 1967, 65–67; Rosati 1983, 28 (“i vv. 353 e 355 . . . introducono un motivo che, semanticamente e formalmente, costituisce la chiave di lettura dell'intero episodio”); Loewenstein 1984, 34; Farrell 1991, 12; and, most recently, Hinds 1998, 5–8, 16.

virginity will continue to receive honor and attention from boys and girls alike, whereas the same girl will be ignored like a plucked and withered flower, whatever her former beauty and attraction, once she is no longer a virgin. This stance is challenged by a rival male chorus, and the ideological dispute is resolved in favor of marital intercourse at the close of the poem (62.59–65).

While Ovid retains the compact three-line arrangement of his model passage, he omits the final reconciliation of the Catullan wedding hymn. Indeed, he actualizes the image of chastity by altering the middle verse: Narcissus' refusal to commit himself to any suitor, male or female, is an ongoing state of affairs. Because of his arrogance, he rejects all erotic advances and is unable to maintain a healthy balance between chastity and erotic experience. The intertext to Catullus underscores precisely this point. In sharp contrast to the wedding hymn, which ultimately reconciles two opposing positions and celebrates the prospect of lawful and timely sexual intercourse, Ovid's Narcissus scornfully rejects any interpersonal relationships and withdraws into haughty isolation. As Loewenstein observes, "Ovid's tale of Narcissus is an anti-epithalamium, for it resolves ambivalent human sexuality by restoring that original, floral sexlessness."<sup>33</sup> Narcissus' arrogant resistance to love is broken when a rejected lover utters a prayer for disaster (3.402–6), triggering a Catullan finale of sorts as Narcissus withers away into a flower. The downfall of Narcissus is caused by the goddess Nemesis (*adsensit precibus Rhamnesia iustis*, 3.406), who parallels the *κακά . . . μούρα* of Sophocles, invoked by the chorus as punishment for ὑβρισταί.

### *Dialogical Inversions*

The analogies in plot structure, figurative texture, and motivation through which Ovid develops his tale of Narcissus along the lines of

<sup>33</sup>Loewenstein 1984, 34. Cf. Zeitlin 1990, 148: "Once we grasp the import of autochthony and incest as the underlying patterns at Thebes, we can diagnose the malaise of the city, which has no means of establishing a viable system of relations and differences, either within the city or without, or between the self and the other." As it turns out, Oedipus, that paradigm of the Theban tragic man, is not only incestuous, he is also etymologically rooted in autochthony. As Edmunds has shown (1984, 234–36), his name suggests floral genealogy. It is perhaps worth pointing out that in Sophocles' *Oedipus Coloneus* Oedipus comes to rest in a grove, sacred to Dionysus, in which the narcissus blooms (cf. *OC* 683).

*Oedipus Tyrannus* are complemented by a consistent program of inverse variations through which Oedipus and Narcissus emerge as thematic mirror reflections of each other. Sophocles tells the story of a king who rules over a powerful and famous polis; Ovid narrates an idyllic tale of youth and privacy in the woods and glens of a bucolic landscape. Oedipus is tormented by a conflict within the wider structures of his family; Ovid focuses instead on the introspective anguish of a lonely youth. The problematic sexuality which engages with a forbidden other is displaced by a sexual perversion rooted in fascination with the self. While Oedipus transgresses and perverts boundaries within a socio-political setting, Narcissus withdraws into the wild, refusing to engage in any social relation whatsoever. Sophocles' tragedy features a hero who is godlike in council and power; the *Metamorphoses* puts on display a protagonist who is godlike in beauty.<sup>34</sup> Oedipus' personal catastrophe is embedded within a wider network of political implications; Narcissus and Echo represent various facets of the drama of self-absorbing love. Thus, Oedipus and Narcissus are related through inverse mimetic correlation, as Narcissus reenacts an Oedipal destiny and experiences the thematic concerns and plot structures of his tragic alter ego within the codes of erotic–elegiac discourse and a pastoral environment.<sup>35</sup> The script written for a tragic performance on the stage of a Greek theater, an occasion highly charged with civic relevance, has become an epyllic inset within a peculiar Roman epic arguably written primarily for pleasure and entertainment.

## REFLECTING ON THE INTERTEXTUALITY

Ovid captures the semantic operations enacted by the intertextual dialectic of identity and difference, contrast and assimilation, in the figure of Echo and the pond in which Narcissus mirrors himself, thereby providing an allegorical commentary on his engagement of Sophocles' tragedy. The use of the figure of Echo as a symbol for intertextual play is an old practice, starting no later than Aristophanes' *Thesmophoriazousae*, where Euripides plays the role of Echo, calling attention to the parodic imitations of his tragedies which Aristophanes has sprinkled through-

<sup>34</sup>Cf. 3.420–21: *spectat humi positus geminum, sua lumina, sidus / et dignos Baccho, dignos et Apolline crines . . .*

<sup>35</sup>Cf. Knox 1986, 19–21, on the elegiac elements in the Narcissus episode.

out the play.<sup>36</sup> In the *Metamorphoses* Echo's verbal exchange with Narcissus pinpoints a crucial feature of intertextual transposition: the consistency of the signifier and the semantic slippage of the signified. The stability of the signifier (which can range, as we have seen, from plot structure to verbal texture to conceptual patterns) ensures that the intertextual gesture is recognizable, while the recontextualization of signifiers within a new (con)text alters their semantics. As Perri points out: "We know from acoustics that the echo is never the exact phonic equivalent of the original sound; just so, even a direct quotation, by appearing in a new context, is a 'distortion' of the marked text."<sup>37</sup>

Consider now the dramatic dialogue between Echo and Narcissus, a "stichomythia" played out at 3.380–92:<sup>38</sup>

NARCISSUS.	ecquis adest?	Is someone there?
ECHO.	adest!	Right here!
NARCISSUS.	veni!	Come!
ECHO.	veni! [ <i>cf. vocat illa vocantem</i> ]	Come!
NARCISSUS.	quid me fugis?	Why do you flee me?
ECHO.	quid me fugis?	Why do you flee me?
NARCISSUS.	huc coeamus!	Let us meet right here!
ECHO.	coeamus!	Let's have sex!
NARCISSUS.	ante emoriar, quam sit tibi copia nostri.	I will die before I give you power over me.
ECHO.	sit tibi copia nostri.	May you be granted power over me.

By reproducing the final sounds of her partner in dialogue, Echo prefigures the intertextual design of the Narcissus episode. Her ardent verbal exchange with her beloved covers the entire gamut of the intertextual phenomenon, ranging from an exact reproduction of the original meaning, a clear parallelism in signification, to its radical inversion into the total opposite. The verbal interplay between Echo and Narcissus, with its curious doubling and refracting, thus illustrates Ovid's deft recalling and rewriting of Sophocles, representing as it does the mutual presence of two textual worlds, their interrelation, their reciprocal interdepend-

<sup>36</sup>Cf. Zeitlin 1981, 181–94, in particular 191–92. For a history of the figure of Echo (in the double sense of person and trope) into modern times see Hollander 1981.

<sup>37</sup>Perri 1978, 303–4.

<sup>38</sup>This dialogic rendering of Ovid's text is taken from Knoespel 1985, 7–8.

dence, their strong attraction and repulsion—in short: the entire thematic of Ovid's intertextual composition. As Zeitlin has pointed out in her discussion of Aristophanes' *Thesmophoriazousae*, "Echo, in fact, might stand as the mediating figure between tragedy and comedy, divided between them and yet bringing the genres together, as the artful device of the original model and the slapstick cliché of the comic theater."<sup>39</sup> In the *Metamorphoses* we again find Echo cast into the role of generic mediator, as she signposts Ovid's witty rendition of the genuinely tragic Oedipus in the guise of a Narcissus whose melodramatic affliction of pathological self-love abounds with comic as well as tragic nuances.

The mirroring pond complements Echo's metapoetic function, providing a second instance of the encoding in Ovid's text of a commentary on the intertextual strategy of the episode. As McCarty points out: "Like metaphor itself, mirroring both identifies and separates. . . . Indeed, the mirroring vision is precisely something that is *there* yet also *not there*, hence it challenges the mentality that thinks in terms of here and there or self and not-self."<sup>40</sup> On a thematic level, the coexistence of affirmation and negation of reality that is present in mirroring constitutes a peculiarly apposite metaphor for the pathological reflexivity of Oedipus and Narcissus, who, as we have seen, double their selves as others. On a metapoetic level, however, mirroring also raises the same ontological and epistemological issues of presence and absence with respect to Ovid's intertextual construction of Narcissus as an Oedipal figure. For Oedipus both is and is not in Ovid's text. By making Narcissus the mirror image of Sophocles' Oedipus, Ovid instantiates an intertextual "catoptrics" of identity and inversion between the two heroes: just as a mirror "establishes a paradoxical relationship of correspondence and opposition between beholder and external things,"<sup>41</sup> Ovid establishes an inverse dialectic of identity and difference, contrast and assimilation, between his own protagonist and that of his pre-text.

In antiquity the mirror was seen as "a means of access and a bridge to other worlds."<sup>42</sup> In the *Metamorphoses* we find this belief textualized. Sophocles' tragedy serves as a dramatic prism through which

<sup>39</sup>Zeitlin 1981, 192.

<sup>40</sup>McCarty 1989, 162.

<sup>41</sup>McCarty 1989, 165.

<sup>42</sup>McCarty 1989, 169.

we can illuminate the intertextual depth of the Narcissus narrative. Ovid's text, in turn, affords insights into the poetics and the imagination of his model, whose fictional world Ovid enables us to reexperience in disguise across boundaries of culture, space, and time. The high degree of reflexivity—which is so emblematic of “Echo and Narcissus” and which underscores the essential features present in any intertextual operation—turns this episode into an allegorical commentary on allusivity, or, put differently, into a narrative phenomenology of intertextuality.<sup>43</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Ovid's “Echo and Narcissus” can be and often has been read as a self-sufficient and independent textual unit, sealed off from the concerns of the wider narrative context. Yet such a reading misses the intertextual fabric of Ovid's narrative and its sophisticated artistic design. As polished and self-contained as Ovid's epyllic gems might seem at first sight, their texture is almost always multilayered, addressing larger generic concerns, referring back to previous poetry, or thematizing other issues in Ovid's self-reflexive and continuous engagement with the possibilities of an imaginative poetics. Loewenstein nicely captures the dialectic between the autonomy of the individual episode and its integration into the evolving patterns of the *carmen perpetuum*: “At its fullest, the tale of Echo and Narcissus is an erotic allegory of tensions at work in the poem as a whole, tensions between the mute introversions of narrative episode and the passionate glossolalia of *perpetuitas*.”<sup>44</sup> In a sense, then, the Narcissus and Echo episodes recapitulate an issue raised by the proem, namely, how a work can be both continuous and well polished, epic and epyllion, at the same time.<sup>45</sup>

Considered from this wider narratological perspective, the substitution of Narcissus for Oedipus fits in well with Ovid's overall poetic agenda. While the tales he narrates over the course of books 3 and 4

<sup>43</sup>Cf. the fine discussion by Hardie (1989, 4), who sees Narcissus and Echo as an episode “where a narrative about physical phenomena of echo and reflection functions as a metaphor for the twin techniques of intratextual allusion (the story of Narcissus runs closely parallel to that of Echo) and intertextual allusion (the whole narrative is largely constructed out of ‘echoes,’ ‘reflections’ of earlier authors, particularly Lucretius).”

<sup>44</sup>Loewenstein 1984, 35–36.

<sup>45</sup>On the relation of the proem to the rest of the *Metamorphoses* see Coleman 1971; Kenney 1976; Hofmann 1985; Hinds 1987; Heyworth 1995.

nominally constitute his “Theban history,” the narrative focus is not on the fate of the city as such but rather on individual members of Cadmus’ family, more specifically his four daughters and their respective sons. Ovid starts his Theban tales with the fate of Actaeon, child of Autonoe, then proceeds to Semele (and her son Dionysus) before focusing on Pentheus, son of Agave, and concludes with Ino, Cadmus’ fourth daughter, and her son Melicertes. Neither Oedipus nor any other figure associated with the house of Laius would have lent itself easily to inclusion within the tight-knit patterning of Cadmus’ daughters and nephews. The Narcissus interlude thus smoothly integrates the prime member of the Labdacid family, such a vital dimension of Theban mythology, through intertextual analogy into the narrative, without infringing upon Ovid’s general concern with the house of Cadmus.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>46</sup>The other obvious interruption of the Cadmus story is the sequence of tales told by the Minyeides, which displays its own poetic logic. We hope to treat this series of narratives elsewhere in due course.

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