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Narcissus and Echo

A Political Reading of
George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda*

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Preface

Their role in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* has made them one of the most influential mythical pairs in the cultural history of the western world: Narcissus and Echo have left well-recognisable traces in virtually innumerable pieces of visual art, in literary texts and theoretical thinking. Narcissus and Echo form a rather odd pair: they are neither a couple nor siblings. Are they lovers? Well, Echo would have hoped so, Narcissus denied it. It is not love, nor familial bonds, but Ovid's intricate two-stranded narrative that constitutes this odd pair. An odd pair, because Ovid's story aims at the two figures' deadly contrast rather than their loving conciliation.

Narcissus is beautiful – and he is unloving. He is a man of the surface and of visibility, who is not receptive for the love with which others approach him. He rejects many beautiful nymphs, and flies from Echo, who has artistically chatted him up, despite her inability to speak first. His unlovingness is turned into a just punishment, when he encounters his own reflection in the water: he falls in love, but cannot reach the beloved behind the beautiful surface. Narcissus's visual love cannot transcend the unloving distance that is inherent in the notion of the gaze. The source of this love, the fact that it is not love for others, but love for the own, beautiful self, makes its realisation impossible. The trap of the auto-reference and Narcissus's lack of love for the other turn out to be the same: his slow, self-consuming death mirrors the vanishing of Echo's body as a result of her unfulfilled love to him.

Echo is a representative of voice. Ovid has reasons to name her “vocalis nymphe” (III, 357): her sermons are powerful enough to repeatedly distract a goddess, Juno, from catching her husband Jupiter red-handed: he is notoriously making love to nymphs in the mountains. Juno punishes Echo for these deceits by robbing her of her extraordinary vocal faculties: from that moment on, Echo cannot speak by herself, but just repeat what has been said. This does not prevent her from flirting with the beautiful Narcissus, with whom she is terribly in love. Being rejected, her loving sorrows make her shrink, her body vanishes and is said to be transformed into stone. She has lost her body, however, her reverberating voice is still alive.

Ovid's story is tragic: it centres on Narcissus's fatal self-love that proves disastrous not only for himself, but also for Echo. However, by focusing on Narcissus, Ovid's story almost covers up the characteristic asymmetry that the encounter of its central pair Narcissus and Echo brings forth: whereas Narcis-

sus's self-referential, superficial, visual love is not only shown to be sterile, but capitably punished in the end, Echo's loving voice survives. Ovid's story does not make this survival fruitful. Echo's defining characteristic, her love for the other that is not mediated by vision but by her voice, asserts itself only negatively through Narcissus's tragic fate. The loss of her body and her metamorphosis into stone render her love for the other that is still present in her voice a mere potential – a potential, however, that stays alive.

In contrast to large parts of the reception of Ovid's story in literature, visual arts and theoretical thinking, George Eliot's novel *Daniel Deronda* shows interest in Echo's living potential. *Daniel Deronda* can be read as a rewriting and sequel of Ovid's story that attempts to realise Echo's love by restoring her body and her full powerful voice. As the following chapters attempt to show, George Eliot's novel associates two societal models with Ovid's mythical pair: English capitalistic society shares characteristic, fatal traits with Narcissus; the counter-model of the Jewish Nation has, like Echo, lost its body and has only stayed alive in loving voices reverberating a sublime past and calling for a fulfilled future. The novel's title hero, Daniel Deronda, is posed right in between these two models. He encounters Gwendolen, the novel's main representative of the English, narcissistic society, and accompanies her through the difficulties of her cold, unloving life as a moral mentor. However, despite his unchallenged, supreme authority over her, he cannot liberate her from her tragic life. It is not her moral corruption, but the narcissistic societal mechanism in which she is caught that confines her to a neutral and quiet life without a future. Daniel Deronda finds himself in the heroic role of a Messiah of the future, when his saving a Jewish girl from drowning herself leads him to meet her brother Mordecai. Through this deeply believing Jewish brother he does not only make the acquaintance with Judaism and the proto-Zionist plan to found a Jewish Nation, but also with his own Jewish birth that had been concealed from him. His being raised as an English gentleman, his wealth and strong stature in combination with being born a Jew make him the perfect executor of the frail, hoarse and deathly consumptive Mordecai's plan. Their spiritual marriage is to give birth to the Jewish Nation – to restore Echo's body and her powerful voice among the nations. To realise this future, Gwendolen and the narcissistic English society have to be left behind, a decision that George Eliot's novel takes without hesitation. A decision that is not only interesting from a political, philosophical and sociological point of view, but that is also a poetological decision: it is, as the following study attempts to show, also the decision for the novel as the narration of a full, meaningful story.