ECHO IN THE DARKNESS

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I’m certain almost all of my readers remember seeing the wonderful Cecil B. DeMille spectacular “Samson and Delilah” starring Hedy Lamar and Victor Mature. I had the occasion to revisit the film recently and it precipitated my finally writing this paper that I had been planning for some time.

The epic’s biblical account of Samson and Delilah immortalized Samson’s heroic service to God and his rejection of the beautiful and lyrical Delilah, which eventually proved to be their undoing. Delilah, so very much in love with the handsome and powerful Samson, could not accept his rejection. She cunningly learned the secret of Samson’s strength, his great mane of hair. Then, in a pact with the evil Roman, Saran, she promised to deliver the fugitive Samson, so long as not a drop of his blood would be shed. Beguiling Samson into drinking drugged wine, Delilah sheared his hair, thereby depriving him of his extraordinary strength. But Delilah had been double-crossed. Samson was captured, blinded, and imprisoned under forced-labor for life. Still, Delilah continued to visit the hapless Samson in his prison where Samson, in a prayer of contrition, was redeemed and his strength restored.

In the final scene, Samson was taken to the coliseum to be publicly ridiculed. Delilah tauntingly whipped him and lead him to the great columns supporting the huge structure. Samson positioned himself to push the columns down. He called out to be sure Delilah had gotten away. But Delilah was hiding behind him, not fleeing as planned. Samson pushed the columns off their bases and they were then all destroyed.

The story of Samson and Delilah is reminiscent of the enduring story of Narcissus and Echo. A man and a woman locked
in a hopelessly sterile embrace, doomed to agony unto death by his prideful self-absorption and her frustrated fascination with it.

In their story, Narcissus is gifted at birth by incredible beauty. The prophet Tiresius foresees his fate and predicts that should Narcissus ever see his reflection, it would prove to be his undoing.

Echo's fate was sealed by Hera, who, angered by Echo's lying about Zeus cavorting with the wood nymphs, sentenced her with a compulsion to verbalize exactly what she heard. It was only a question of time before Echo met Narcissus and was thereafter helplessly magnetized by her compulsion to reflect his self-love. Thus transfixed, his fate was also hers. He would stare in a pool at his fading beauty calling out, "Alas, alas." In the darkness of the woods could be heard "Alas, alas."

I wish that Mr. Demille had put an echo in the great hall when Samson called out to Delilah. Then the story would have been more artistic because this story seems to me to be a retelling of the myth of Narcissus and Echo. The larger-than-life male imago; the rejection of a beautiful, lyrical woman; and the eventual demise of both in a Narcissus-Echo folie a deux.

Many analysands report the same plight as Echo. They have a relationship with a narcissistic man that they can only maintain by echoing his interests. Yet they do not seem to be able to give up hope that they will become a fuller object of his caring. These are not isolated cases. It is a far too common situation. Furthermore, by the time the condition has resulted in enough anxiety and confusion to compel the individual to psychoanalysis, abusiveness has frequently entered the relationship. Particularly, if the wife attempts to break into the husband's transfiguration, angry consequences can follow. Frequently, we find a disturbing degree of depressed resignation. The wife seems to have given up trying to be heard. Accepting subordination has become a better option when the contingency is disharmony or no relationship at all. Still, the husband is seen as the afflicted party, a victim of his own narcissistic introversion. The wife is seen only as playing a foolishly passive neurotic witness. Oddly, social forces all seem to have conspired to generate an amnesia regarding the fundamental psychopathology of the wife.
A search of the PsychINFO database revealed 2,269 hits on “narcissism not echo”; 14 hits on “narcissus and echo”; but only one hit on “echoism”. The 2,269 hits on “narcissism” reveals an extensive use of the concept in the literature. Indeed, virtually all mental health professionals are familiar with the concept.

The 14 publications we found on “narcissus and echo” consist of one from Singapore that explores the roles of Narcissus and Echo in the literary analysis of Dorian Gray (Dawson, 1990). From Albany, there is a reference to the role of the myth in the novel (Berman, 1990). From Princeton, Narcissus and Echo form a psychological element in the poetry of Paul Valéry (Simmons, 1993). From San Francisco, the use of the myth in a family systems therapy framework is explored (Donaldson-Pressman & Pressman, 1997). From Zagreb, the use of the myth is employed in family systems therapy (Nikolic, 1996). From Northvale, psychotherapy with the elderly uses Echo as therapist with the techniques of joining, mirroring and reflecting (Boukolas, 1997). From Sao Paulo, two dreams of a female analysand involving mirrors are seen as her search for identity (de Assis Pereira & Beatriz, 1993). From Denmark, the gender role of women is an aspect similar to Echo in the voyage from the unconscious to the unknown (Donan, 1983). From Berlin, in the psychotherapy of a six-year-old schizophrenic girl, the therapist begins as listener, then becomes more than an echo (Ekstein & Nelson, 1981). From New York City, the paradigm of Echo is used in listening to survivors suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (Greenberg, 1998). From Berlin, Echo is seen as a narcissistic personality (Zwettler-Otte, 1990). From New York City, the rejection of Echo is viewed as resulting in a narcissistic injury to Narcissus (Hannan, 1992). From Paris, child analysands are said to reflect Echo’s plight when their only subjectifying responses are their parents narcissistic needs (Lafond, 1991). From Chicago, an Echo phase in language development is postulated to begin at around 3 months of age that is an intermediate, intersubjective auditory and linguistic development toward subjectification (Barklay, 1993).

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 (Cermak, 1991). An additional search of the PubMed database on “co-
dependence and alcoholism” did not reveal any reference to Echo or echoism.

Echo’s scarcity is remarkable given the proposition that echoism could have emerged as an equally useful concept in psychoanalytic theory, especially since the meaningfulness of the concept of narcissism seems diminished without its counterpart echoism. The masculine without the feminine flounders in the doldrums, like a ship without sail. Bringing the concept of echoism into the community and consulting room breathes life into psychodynamics and adds an exciting new area of psychoanalytic theoretical exploration.

The article on language development captures our interest. We will be certain to refer to it later on in this article. First, there is the classic paper on narcissism written by Sigmund Freud. In the paper, Freud did not consider Echo at all, even though he discussed women and gender differences.

On Narcissism (Freud, 1914) has a complex agenda. It is fairly transparent as a vehicle for giving Jung and Adler a drubbing for disagreements they had expressed with Freud. But the article is most interesting to us for the theoretical constructs and opinions Freud reveals about object-relations and gender. As a theoretic framework for his discussion, Freud outlines his thinking about libido.

First, there is a primary narcissism consisting of libido directed to the ego in the interest of self-preservation. This then becomes directed to objects, initially the primary caretaker, and later, other objects. Freud calls this the anaclytic type. However, this normal development can go badly and object libido can be turned back upon the self as the object-choice. In the case of psychotics, this introversion of libido has become primarily focused on the ego. In less extreme cases, the results of this libidinal introversion are the neuroses, perversions and homosexuality. Freud regards this as a secondary narcissism and a narcissistic type.

We consider that thus far Freud’s reasoning has gone well. However, he then embarks on an examination of gender differences that we think is a hasty generalization.
About men: “Complete object-love of the anaclytic type is, properly speaking, characteristic of the man.”

About women: “A different type is followed in the type most frequently met with in women, which is probably the truest feminine type. With the development of puberty the maturing of the female sexual organs, which up till then have been in a condition of latency, seem to bring about an intensification of the original narcissism, and this is unfavorable to the development of a true object-love.... Strictly speaking, such women love only themselves with an intensity comparable to that of the man’s love for them.”

Freud seems to be saying that a normally developed male is going to become capable of object-love according to the anaclytic type. But the normally developed female is going to be a narcissistic type. Falling on the heels of his previous discussion, the female type joins company with neurosis, perversion and homosexuality. Caught in this dilemma, Freud then tries to beg the question in order to give women a way out. They can form object-love by having children who reflect their earlier primary narcissism, and thereby capture their libidinal interest. Or they can see their earlier masculine nature before sexual maturity, reflected in the male, likewise capturing their libidinal interest. We find this to be only partially satisfactory as a way out. It leaves women without a true psychological gender and still not fully anaclytic. This is not an unexpected outcome given the premise that Freud is attempting to explain female libidinal vicissitudes utilizing the male-oriented concept of narcissism.

Later in his article, Freud enters into another discussion of the vicissitudes of the male libido the ego-ideal, the standards constituting an image of the ideal self: “To this ego ideal is now directed the self love which the real ego enjoyed in childhood. The narcissism seems to be now displaced on to this new ideal ego, which, like the infantile ego, deems itself the possessor of all perfections. As always where the libido is concerned, here again man has shown himself incapable of giving up a gratification he has once enjoyed. He is not willing to forego his narcissistic perfection in his childhood; and if, as he develops, he is disturbed by the admonitions of others and his own critical judgement is awakened, he seeks to recover the early perfection,
thus wrested from him, in the new form of an ego ideal. That which he projects ahead of him is merely his substitute for the lost narcissism of his childhood—the time when he was his own ideal.”

It is Freud’s position that this particular formation, driven by castration anxiety, is the way in which male character is developed. But, it seems to us that men have a difficult time distinguishing between that which is their ego ideal and that which is their real self. In our present day we call this the narcissistic character type, and in the more extreme, a narcissistic character disorder insofar as the man is not willing to entertain any inference that he is not his ego ideal. This is the personality development that we would call typically male in our times.

We now live in a far different culture than Freud’s. Sexual prohibitions are relaxed and our times are not as difficult. Child-rearing practices are improved. Gender roles are not so distinctively defined. The present day is not producing as much neurosis as Freud must have seen. What we tend to see more of are disorders of character, perhaps on account of a current tendency toward spoiling. In keeping with Freud, the character disorders all seem to have a narcissistic quality.

Further, the narcissistic character is not particularly anaclitic. Objects who are not syntonic with the ego ideal are seen as antagonistic to the ego ideal and are summarily discounted or even attacked. Herein lies the problem. Everyone, regardless of gender, is melting into the same pot of some form of pathological narcissism and, with it, any reasonable notion of being able to discern the actual difference between the genders, or any motive towards object-relatedness. Perhaps our observations about echoism can shed a little light on this dilemma.

Evidence exists favoring the assumption of another primary mechanism we are calling echoism. This mechanism can be observed very early in the language development of infants. In keeping with the article we cited earlier that describes an Echo Phase at around 3 months of age, it would seem that the primary narcissism represented linguistically by babbling gets superseded by a verbal echoing behavior concurrently with neurological development. The acquisition of language seems dependent on echoing. This can be observed as first words like “mama” or
“dada,” which are often the first words the infant echoes, are spoken, much to the delight of the primary caretaker. Over time, the child remembers these words and acquires a vocabulary. As this set of memories grows and becomes more complex, the child generates a grammar. The child can then put together novel linguistic constructions resulting in a verbal discourse with the child’s developing objects. We use the term “novel” loosely here since it does not seem possible that the child could produce any verbal emanations that are not the result of echoing words that the child has once heard. This is a most significant observation. There is very little that is more important to the development of personality than the development of language. In fact, some researchers would say that all memory and rational thought are dependent on language acquisition. There is a very strong current of research in the area of linguistics supporting this theory.

The linguistic research shows that people possess an inherited structural echoism and are quite familiar with it. It does not seem deniable that the psychic mechanism of echoing is genetically determined. Echoism is therefore abiding and available for instinctual use. Given these observations, echoism would seem to be essential to the development of libidinal cathexis to objects. One has only to observe the behavior of profound autistic children, who do not seem to echo at all, to confirm the necessity of echoing in the normal maturation of the child. In the therapy of these unfortunate children, much attention is paid to the acquisition of language. The thinking here is, the more and the sooner, the better the therapeutic outcomes (see Paulson et al., 1991). Having been so informed, we want to look at echoing in terms of libido theory.

In the beginning there exists a primary narcissism when all libido is cathected, according to the ego instincts, to the self. The baby’s parents then begin to shower the baby with their own libidinal cathexes. The parent speaks lovingly, sings to, and otherwise cares for the baby. At an early point in time, the mechanism of a primary echoism responds by repeating back the parental contacts. As the child becomes familiar with these feelings, the child develops the ability to initiate them. When the parent returns these feelings, a libidinal dialogue has begun and
the seeds of the object-relatedness of the child are sown. By regard-
ning the instincts as operating under the two mechanisms, na-
cissism and echoism, we can more clearly understand the di-

tinctions of the self and the other. We are in agreement with
Freud about his observations on narcissism as the bridge for li-
bido to the self. But there needs to be the additional observa-
tions on echoism to round out the theory of libido.

Narcissism alone leaves us unclear about why or, more im-
portantly, how libido would make the transition from the self to
the object. Echoing provides the bridge to object-relatedness in
the theory of libido: the means to engage the object alongside
the means to engage the self. Narcissism is good for the self and
echoism is good for the other. Without a bridge to the other, we
cannot imagine why people would not simply remain libidinally
autistic.

Echo also changes certain inferences Freud made about
gender. With echoism, there need not be the attempt to explain
gender differences in terms of narcissism versus anaclytic object-
relatedness. We can simply say about people that, in each to var-
ying degrees, narcissism predominates the anaclytic, or echoism
predominates the anaclytic, or the anaclytic predominates both
narcissism and echoism.

This leads directly to the inference that gender differences
are not a matter of differences in psychic mechanisms tending
toward gender at all. There is no psychic difference between
male and female. Men and women are only adapting to different
physical and environmental conditions as well as they can. Our
construction would say, because of the current nature of these
external forces, the truly masculine is usually the narcissistic type;
the truly feminine is usually the echoistic type, although both exist
side by side in persons in varying degrees and both are capable
of more pathological formations. From this vantage point, psy-
choanalysis is better able to explain the actual differences be-
tween the genders. The explanation is dependent on a large set
of variables that determine the vicissitudes of libidinal instinct.
Further, these variables change over time and developmental
stages. The physical and enviornmental variables that influence
gender outcome are so large and sometimes so subtle that we
can only undertake the task of observing a few of the more im-
portant ones within the scope of this article.
It has been said many times about myths that their enduring presence in the culture is because they represent a deep and abiding truth about human nature. This is true of Echo and Narcissus. They capture the attention of psychoanalysis because they represent a morbidly pathological relationship between a man and a woman.

Narcissus is well studied, but upon further review, it is difficult to see where in the myth Narcissus is injured. He has not been cursed or punished in any way. He is merely beautiful and in love with himself. He appears to us to be spoiled. Everyone is so struck by his beauty that his echo objects are reflecting only the love of his beauty. It would seem to make sense then that he would internalize his objects as self-love. This indulgence would have to result in an introversion of libido that would become morbidly autistic. Tiresius was correct in his prophecy that the boy was so beautiful that if he encountered his reflection it would prove to be his ruination.

Echo is the opposite case. She was indeed badly injured. When Hera punished Echo, she placed upon her a narcissistic blockade. She was only allowed to echo. But no representation of her self could be uttered. She was then, in effect, totally deprived of self-directed libido. Her fate then was inevitable. She could not go beyond echoing the other’s narcissism in order to put herself forward as an object of love. She was doomed by Hera’s narcissistic blockade to cathect her libido into the black hole of the other’s narcissism.

The relationship between Echo and Narcissus can be seen as a relationship between the spoiled and the deprived which, in its extreme, must wither on the vine. Unfortunately, this is a condition that we see to varying degrees every day. It seems imbedded in our culture. And in the individual, it begins very early. Boys and girls are treated differently. Role expectations adopted by the family from their social milieu are directly imparted to the child. Metaphorically speaking, boys play cowboys and Indians, girls play house with dolls. These influences continue up until the Oedipus complex. It is here that we can observe a major shift in libidinal dynamics.

Freud was, early on, clear about his thinking on the male Oedipus complex. When it came to his thinking on what he regarded as the female Oedipus complex, he was admittedly uncer-
tain. In the article *Female Sexuality* (Freud, 1931), he states: “We have long realized that in women the development of sexuality is complicated by the task of renouncing that genital zone which was originally the principal one, namely, the clitoris, in favor of a new zone—the vagina. But there is a second change which appears to us no less characteristic and important for feminine development: the original mother-object has to be exchanged for the father. We cannot as yet see clearly how these two tasks are linked up.” However, he goes on to speculate: “I have not indeed succeeded in completely unraveling any of the cases in point and will therefore confine myself to communicating my most general conclusions and giving only a few examples of the new ideas which have suggested themselves to me.”

The discussion then leads to the conclusion that it is indeed the differences in the Oedipus and castration complexes that leads to the differences in social roles: “It is thereupon this discovery of the possibility of castration, as evidenced by the sight of the female genital, which necessitates the transformation of the boy’s Oedipus complex, leads to the creation of the super-ego and thus initiates all the processes that culminate in enrolling the individual in civilized society.” About women: they can turn away from sexuality altogether; or refuse to give up the masculine activity of clitoral masturbation resulting in homosexuality; or “Only if her development follows the third, very circuitous path does she arrive at the ultimate normal feminine attitude in which she takes her father as love-object, and thus arrives at the Oedipus complex in its feminine form. Thus, in women, that complex represents the final result of a lengthy process of development; castration does not destroy but rather creates it, and it escapes the strong hostile influences which, in men, tend to its destruction—in fact, only too often a woman never surmounts it at all. Hence too the cultural effects of the break-up of this complex are slighter and less important in women than in men. We should probably not err in saying that it is this difference in the inter-relation of the Oedipus and the castration complexes which gives its special stamp to the character of woman as a member of society.”

Freud then encounters another uncertainty having to do with his conviction that women turn out to be libidinally passive.
He first observes: “The turning away from the mother is a most important step in the little girl’s development: it is more than a mere change of object. We have already described what takes place and what a number of motives are alleged for it; we must now add that we observe, hand in hand with it, a marked diminution in the active and an augmentation of the passive sexual impulses. . . . The transition to the father-object is accomplished with the assistance of the passive tendencies so far as these have escaped overthrow.”

Freud then speculates that biochemistry may someday answer the problem of active and passive libido but does not like it. He states: “Psychoanalysis teaches us to manage with a single libido, though its aims, i.e., its modes of gratification, are both active and passive. In this antithesis, above all in the existence of libidinal impulses whose aims are passive, the rest of our problem is contained.”

Freud never came to understand female sexuality. His thinking remained speculative about the female Oedipus complex. He rejected the term “Electra Complex” on the basis that he could not accept that the situation of the two genders were analogous. Freud seems to have been caught on the horns of a dilemma: he appears to want to make a case for a psychic gender difference, but his compelling evidence is all to the contrary. His biological assertion that the woman’s vaginal zone matures and replaces her clitoral zone, irrespective of the truth of the assertion, cannot be convincingly translated into evidence of a psychic difference. Freud then asserts that there is both an active and a passive libido. Extending this thinking by postulating that clitoral masturbation was an expression of active libido, therefore masculine in character, whereas vaginal erotism was an expression of passive libido, therefore feminine in character, employs a faulty parallelism. It is on this equivocation that Freud winds up riding down a blind alley. Consequently, there was never a satisfactory solution to the thorny problem of passive libido. In fact, we question the possible existence of such a thing as passive libido. The entire concept of males being creatures of active libido and females being creatures of passive libido seems to be an example of an arbitrary assumption of psychic gender difference.

However, we do not think that, if he had followed his origi-
nal instincts, he was ever very far from solving his riddle of female sexuality. He was quick to assert the psychic bisexuality of people and would have agreed with our conclusion that there is no psychic difference between the genders. We have to like Freud’s later observation in his article on female sexuality: “If we survey the phases of feminine sexual development I have described, there is a definite conclusion about femininity as a whole which we cannot resist: the same libidinal forces, we have found, are at work in female and male children, and we have been able to convince ourselves that for a certain period these forces take the same course and produce the same results.”

Had Freud followed down the trail marked by the myth of Echo and developed the mechanism of echoism in the theory of libido, he might have reached a more satisfactory explanation of his questioning about why and how the girl rejects the active libidinal cathexis to the mother and then develops an apparently passive libidinal cathexis to the father. He may have even discovered an Echo complex to accompany the Oedipus complex.

Freud’s observations in his article on female sexuality about the pre-Oedipal experiences of girls being more complex and important ring true to our observations about echoism: “If we survey the whole range of motives brought to light by analysis for turning away from the mother; that she neglected to provide the little girl with the only proper genital organ, that she did not feed her enough, compelled her to share her mother’s love with others, never fulfilled all the expectations of the child’s love and, finally, that she first excited and then forbade her daughter’s own sexual activity—all these seem adequate as a justification of the hostility finally felt.”

Our observations are that, indeed, the development of females is more complicated and protracted and may, as Freud observed, never be resolved. We would say that the girl turns away from the mother because the mother, like Hera, institutes a narcissistic blockade. The factors of this blockade are more multitudinous than Freud observed. It includes all the many things that girls are not supposed to do that would be an overtly active expression of libido. Still, the girl does not become invested in passive libido as claimed. The concept of passive libido is not relevant when one considers the mechanism of echoism.
Having been injured by the narcissistic blockade, the girl then turns her active attention to the father and begins to echo in a secondary attempt to re-establish a libidinal object-cathexis. Alas, this is also doomed to disappointment. But, rather than a castration complex in the girl, it is the prohibition of incest in the father that causes him to ignore, like Narcissus, the girl’s striving. She is thereupon locked in the grip of a secondary echoism. Having no other libidinal avenue, the girl then becomes repressed and enters, as Freud noted, into a period of latency.

It is during this period that the girl is taught the roles that are socially expected of her. Only with the efflorescence of adult sexuality is she libidinally reinvigorated and then attempts to establish an object relationship with another male, not her father. However, as has been previously determined, the approach she will use to develop an object-relatedness will be echoing. Metaphorically speaking, he becomes her hero and she becomes his fan. This, in and of itself, creates the impression of passivity, but it is not at all passive. She has merely been forced back into an earlier, intermediate way of actively pursuing object-relatedness: echoism.

Often the woman is successful in subsequently establishing an anaclitic object-relationship with a man. This would seem to be dependent on echoing a man who is not terribly narcissistic who can provide an appreciation of her strivings. The selection of a man who is narcissistic can only result in the vicious circle of echoism/narcissism. We have observed that women’s concerns largely reside in this inequality. Women have tired of being the maids in the Kings’ castle, the secretary who gets the bosses coffee, or the graceful subjects of the husbands’ will. Married couples who come into the consulting room are frequently floundering in this condition. He complains that she is negative and uncooperative; she complains that he is arrogant and domineering.

Obviously, 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 echoism 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. Our present intention has been to provide a sound theoretical basis for a better understanding of object-relatedness, gender, and therapeutic technique. For now, in the morning as I am awakening, I enjoy listening to the birds who also inhabit our niche. They are calling in their language to the other birds. I’ve become accustomed to this and can often distinguish between the different families of birds. They have the same call. I hear a song and soon after, I hear the same song echoing from another tree in the woods. In my romantic notion, the serenade of the day begins.

REFERENCES


