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Echo and Narcissism

'When I read a poem or narrative with feeling, surely something goes on in me which does not go on when I merely skim the lines for information.' - What process am I alluding to ? - The sentences have a different ring.

*Wittgenstein,
Philosophical Investigations*

The fable of Echo and Narcissus, read as a parable of repetition and source, is a fable of poetry-inadequate, but as complete as any we have. Our tendency in thinking about Ovid's tale is to oppose the episodes, to take them as linked but contrasting studies. Yet the two figures are expressly bound together, and they seem not only to complement, but to define one another. Narcissus, admiring himself in the pool repeats the emotional fixation of Echo. In reflecting (on) himself, he unknowingly echoes her ; even as Echo would be compelled to repeat not the words of her beloved so much as her own fantasmatic construction of those words. What happens when Echo looks at herself in the pool ? Are there echoes of echo ? allusive chains whose tenor or lemma is precisely some vision of what the act of allusive thinking must imply ? What else can there be ?

All poetry is echoic, in the sense that echoic resonance best defines the elusive quality that marks off certain experiences of reading as poetic. Attention to poetic echo forces one to go beyond the Jakobsonian notion

that "poeticity" (as distinguished from the historically conditioned contents of the poem) is always self-determined and independent, manifesting itself most clearly when reference recedes, when words "acquire a weight and value of their own instead of referring indifferently to reality."¹ Although such a definition clears the way for the linguist or phonetician to work with poems, those who "read for the lustres", as Emerson advised, will find that the "weight and value" of words composed or read poetically are by no means "their own", but are rather a direct function of their allusive resonance. To the author, similarly, a poem is a machine for evoking apparitions, a *medium* of echo. In major poetry the echoes become volleys and continue knocking about in complex and escalating patterns.

Poets like to trope this effect as a response of nature ("The woods shall to me answer and my Eccho ring"), as if the "floating witchery of sound" could survive its own severance from the human. An alternative myth, which I want to focus on here, assumes a deep analogy between the echoes of poetry and the recessions of language as such. When Vico and Emerson speak of language as inherently, or originally poetic, they have in mind the same kind of echoic returns that define the more narrowly mediated structures of literary history. Words too have their specific histories, their etymologies, fictive or real, which, precisely because the stages of their history seem more disenchanting, more anonymous and diffuse, provide a valuable model for understanding the ways echo affects us. Etymology allows one to look critically at the whole metaphor of echoic allusion, which generally stresses the element of conscious control – the poet's manipulation of tradition and the reader's complementary powers of discrimination and tact. But words are not always so serviceable or accommodating. They tend to take on a life of their own, and I want to propose that the figure of echo as allusion is, at its most interesting, a mythic defense against these more ghostly effects – the invasiveness or daemonic potential of *involuntary* echoes.

1 "What Is Poetry ? ["Co je poezie ?" (1933)], trans. Michael Heim, in *Language and Literature*, ed. Krystyna Pomorska and Stephen Rudy (Cambridge : Harvard University Press, 1987) 378.

To the poet or close reader of poetry, sensitive to what Hopkins called the "prepossession" of words, language itself is haunted, by past meanings no less than by past uses (specific echoes). An etymon is a kind of linguistic phantom. It may be conjured but not constrained, for at whatever stage one seizes it, it is always dissolving into an ever more primitive or ghostly form. Conversely, etymological nuances can rise unsolicited. Perhaps it is the pliancy of the temporal factor that gives to instances of etymological motivation, as to literary echoes, their parabolic resonance, that allows them not only to work as tropes but to stand allegorically as figures for certain aspects of mental process, for the regressive structures of psychoanalysis and for the recursive structures of theology.

The zero point of echo is inherently theological. One encounters it in primitive form in those blind beggars described by Elias Canetti, who repeat without pause or variation the one name of Allah, reduced or elevated to "saints of repetition."² One encounters it no less in the biblical gloss on the name of God in Exodus, a text which introduces some of the more sophisticated interrelations of echo and etymology. The gloss itself ("I am who I am") achieves what Kant might have called the tautological sublime, but the framing narrative already represents the structure of echo in dramatic form :

Then Moses said to God, "If I come to the people of Israel and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?" God said to Moses, "I am who I am." And he said, "Say this to the people of Israel, 'I am has sent me to you.' " And he said, "Say this to the people of Israel, 'I am has sent me to you.' " (Ex 3:13-14, RSV).

Moses imagines himself performing, on behalf of "the God of your fathers," his commission to the Israelites, who require him, paradoxically, to identify that God by name. Assuming with Moses that the Israelites already know the name (it is, after all, the God of *their* fathers), what Moses

2 Elias Canetti, *Die Stimmen von Marrakesch* (Munich : Carl Hanser Verlag, 1967) ch. 3.

anxiously requests is a shibboleth or pass word allowing him to establish his ambassadorial credentials. The Israelites, for their part, are asking Moses to replicate their own knowledge (even as they are echoing his question to YHWH). But a less novelistic reading might affirm that both questions are genuine, that this name, presumed confirmable as soon as it is uttered, is in fact *not* known *until* it is uttered. As with literary echo, meaning would then be created after the fact, by the deferred action of the secondary occurrence. Identity, necessarily established with reference to some prior term, is thus caught in a kind of endless recession, while the name itself, as a point of origin, remains essentially inaccessible or alien.

The recession is reinforced by God's response, a poetic (though not necessarily false) etymology of the divine name Yahweh, which is at once a dismantling of etymology, since what it offers as its original term is an uninflected repetition. The tautology seems to confute the very possibility of moving backward from name to meaning, word to origin, begotten to begetter, echo to source. 'Aye^h 'asher 'aye^h, "I am who I am," might be translated, more literally, "I will be what I will be." The fact that the etymon chosen, the Hebrew verb "to be", is deployed in the imperfect or future mode repeats once more the binding of backward and forward movements. In this shackling of temporal orientation, the actual etymology and its narrative frame mirror one another – yet another repetitive moment in what can be seen as a vertiginous application of the principle of analogy. In the end, Yahweh is as much the matrix of 'aye^h as the verb *hyh* (to be) is the "root" of *yhw^h*. The text attempts to project a term from which other echoes and recessions can be measured, a ground for poetry outside poetry.

The Demon of Analogy

The uncertainty of tense in the etymology of YHWH corresponds to an ambiguity in the echoic structure itself: which is prior? the words we first encounter or the words that underlie them? The most astute exploration of this problem that I know is Mallarmé's prose poem, "Le Démon de l'Analogie", a meditation on the structure of verbal echo in its

connection to what might be called poetic narcissism – the suspension of poetic language within the circle of self-reference. Composed in Tournon in 1864 some months before the beginning of *Hérodiade*, the poem was first published ten years later under the title "La Pénultième", the ultimate suppression of which was in keeping with the thrust of the text itself. It begins appropriately in the interrogative mode to which it will commit us irrevocably, the vague gesture of personal address relying more on affective intimacy than on any pretense of authorial presence :

*Des paroles inconnues chantèrent-elles sur vos lèvres, lambeaux
maudits d'une phrase absurde ?*

*[Unknown words have they sung on your lips, cursed shreds of an
absurd phrase ?]³*

In its indeterminacy, this voice addressing the reader is both echo and prototype of the voice that arrests the speaker himself as he issues from the shelter of his lodging :

*Je sortis de mon appartement avec la sensation propre d'une aile
glissant sur les cordes d'un instrument, traînante et légère, que
remplça une voix prononçant les mots sur un ton descendant : "La
Pénultième est morte", de façon que*

La Pénultième

finit le vers et

Est morte

*se détacha de
la suspension fatidique plus inutilement en le vide de signification.
Je fis des pas dans la rue et reconnus en le son nul la corde tendue
de l'instrument de musique, qui était oublié et que le glorieux Souve-
nir certainement venait de visiter de son aile ou d'une palme et, le*

3 Stéphane Mallarmé, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. G. Jean-Aubry, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade (Paris : Gallimard, 1945) 272-73. My translation.

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doigt sur l'artifice du mystère, je souris et implorai de vœux intellectuels une spéculation différente.

[I stepped out of my apartment with the distinct sensation of a wing gliding, pendent and light, over the strings of an instrument, replaced by a voice pronouncing in descending tones the words : "La Pénultième est morte", in such a way that

La Pénultième

ended the line, and

Est morte

*stood out
uselessly from that suspended prophecy in a space devoid of meaning. I walked a little way down the street and heard in the sound not the taut string of the forgotten instrument, which glorious Memory had surely just visited with its wing or with a palm leaf, and, grasping the design of the mystery, I smiled and silently besought a different speculation.]*

The properties are, for readers of Mallarmé's poetry, familiar : the wing, symbol of flight and the vertical traffic of mediation between realms ; the palm, instinct with aspiration and the invisible fruit of purer victories ; and the stringed instrument with its *creux néant* inviting us to consult initially a literary or artistic register as we recompose the poem's meanings. (Thus, *suspension fatidique* is, among other things, a shrewd characterization of poetic enjambment – the one scheme categorically excluded from a poem in prose – while the graphic icon in the center of the page is a "suspended prophecy" of the spatial poetics realized years later in *Un Coup de dés*).

As in many of the poems of this period of first maturity (one thinks especially of "L'Azur" and "Brise Marine"), the translation of literary clichés bespeaks an urgent concern with literary influence. The phrase itself is designed to elude translation. One could read it as illustrating the consciousness of temporality – the inherent transience of the present moment. (This would make it a tautology, like the divine name in reverse :

that which is no longer current or last [*la Pénultième*] would no longer be [*est morte*].) Or it could be taken, antithetically, as suggesting that temporal succession, represented by the ordinal "pénultième", has been abrogated or suspended, perhaps by virtue of the phrase itself, which will resonate undiminished throughout the poem.

The echoic recessions that derive from the phrase have their counterpart in those, external to it, from which it derives. The most suggestive is perhaps the mysterious logion "Great Pan is dead" from *The Obsolescence of the Oracles* by Plutarch (*Moralia* 419). Both Plutarch and Mallarmé build on the same basic plot: a strange voice suddenly manifests itself to an errant auditor and announces the death of something or someone whose existence was hitherto unsuspected. Although the meaning of the announcement is obscure, the mere act of reiteration provokes lamentation or irrational mourning. In Plutarch the actors are more numerous: a company rather than a solitary wanderer hears the voice, and a second, invisible company, to which the message is transported by command, provides the response. But the collapsing of public vocation into solipsistic riddle is one of the deep strategies of Mallarmé's revision. Pan according to the mythographers was the sometime consort of Echo, and apparently one effect of his death is to open the field to Narcissus.

Mallarmé could have known Plutarch's story from Rabelais, who translates it verbatim in *Le Quart Livre* (ch. 28) – another kind of extended echo, offered perhaps in parody of the story's principal "moral": that vocation is repetition, an obligation to echo back for a different audience the words one has heard. But given Mallarmé's penchant for etymological play, one may also hear a direct echo from the Greek, "*Pan ho megas tethneke*". Here Pan's etymologically motivated birth from Penelope (Doricized Penelopa) provides the model for the translation back of Pan to Pen, and *ho megas*, heard paronomastically, completes the conjugation (with a nod to Pan's father Hermes) via *omega*, the *ultimus* or last letter of the alphabet.

The speaker's initial impression is that the voice giving him the phrase ("La Pénultième est morte") is the voice of another, that it comes from the outside and is somehow both successive and supplementary to a musical line. In presuming to pass beyond the "artifice" or contrivance that reduces the oracular to the aural, the speaker eschews the reifica-

tions of language. But "spéculation" (from *speculum*, 'mirror'), which sounds the Narcissus theme, hints at the futility of any effort to escape a dependence that is ultimately circular. Thus, the speaker's smile following the audition expresses not so much pleasure at his perspicacity as aloof disdain for his own interpretation. Yet his next move is no less self-deluding. Perhaps the speculation sought is the Cratylan illusion, a phantom of self-origination which Mallarmé's text might be said to conjure among the echoes of pure sound with an ironically deferred success :

La phrase revint, virtuelle, dégagée d'une chute antérieure de plume ou de rameau, dorénavant à travers la voix entendue, jusqu'à ce qu'enfin elle s'articula seule, vivant de sa personnalité. J'allais (ne me contentant plus d'une perception) la lisant en fin de vers, et, une fois, comme un essai, l'adaptant à mon parler ; bientôt la prononçant avec un silence après "Pénultième" dans lequel je trouvais une pénible jouissance : "La Pénultième" puis la corde de l'instrument, stendue en l'oubli sur le son nul, cassait sans doute et j'ajoutais en manière d'oraison : "Est morte".

[The phrase returned, disembodied, released from prior stroke of quill or frond, to be heard henceforth from beyond the voice, until it came finally to utter itself unaided, instinct with its own personality. I walked on (no longer content with a mere perception) parsing it mentally as a metrical ending, and once, by way of experiment, speaking it aloud ; soon I was pronouncing it with a pause after "Pénultième", in which I took a painful pleasure : "La Pénultième", then the string of the instrument, stretched in oblivion over the sound nul, would invariably break, and I would add as a sort of litany : "Est morte".]

The speaker (we may now call him the poet) takes the phrase up, first relishing the sounds, then, involuntarily, making sense of them, though as yet without attending to their semantic weight : or as yet only construing the final words ("est morte"), which are allowed to translate the experience of attending to the passage of pure sound, the rise and distension, which accompanies the pronunciation of "pénultième".

The intrusion of the semantic meaning of "pénultième" into the revery, which follows, is accompanied by bitter reflections on the intrusion of linguistic labors into the poet's purer work in the course of his daily life :

Je ne discontinuai pas de tenter un retour à des pensées de prédilection, alléguant, pour me calmer, que, certes, pénultième est le terme du lexique qui signifie l'avant-dernière syllabe des vocables, et son apparition, le reste mal abjuré d'un labeur de linguistique par lequel quotidiennement sanglote de s'interrompre ma noble faculté poétique : la sonorité même et l'air de mensonge assumé par la hâte de la facile affirmation étaient une cause de tourment.

[I did not stop trying to return to more congenial thoughts, arguing, to calm myself, that, of course, penultima was the lexical term for the next to last syllable of a word, and its apparition, therefore, the unexorcised effect of the philological work that each day woefully dissipates my noble gift for poetry. But the sonority itself along with the factitious appeal of the too ready argument only increased my anxiety.]

The style of the protest (which rises to a kind of lyrical paroxysm : "sanglote de s'interrompre", as though the poem took voice at the thought of its own abandonment) seems to sign also covert affinity between poetry and philology, similarly informed by resonant chains of analogy. Such sonorities, no less than the superficial "allegations" designed to contain them, torment the poet, and he tries to bury his anxiety by returning to a singsong repetition of the syllables :

Harcelé, je résolu de laisser les mots de triste nature errer eux-mêmes sur ma bouche, et j'allai murmurant avec l'intonation susceptible de condoléance : "La Pénultième est morte, elle est morte, bien morte, la désespérée Pénultième", croyant par là satisfaire l'inquiétude, et non sans le secret espoir de l'ensevelir en l'amplification de la psalmodie quand, effroi ! - d'une magie aisément déductible et nerveuse - je sentis que j'avais, ma main réfléchie par un vitrage de boutique y faisant le geste d'une caresse qui descend sur quelque

chose, la voix même (la première, qui indubitablement avait été l'unique).

[Harried, I resolved to let the dismal words wander of their own accord across my lips, and I went along murmuring in a mournful tone : "The Penultima is dead, the Penultima", thinking thus to relieve my agitation, or bury it, my secret hope, in the swell of cantillation, when suddenly, to my horror – by a magical effect easily ascribed to my morbid state – I became aware, as I saw my hand reflected in a shop window sweep downward with a caressing gesture, that the voice I had first heard (undoubtedly the one and only) was indeed my own.]

His effort to simulate a dependent echo is thwarted by his sudden recognition that the original voice, initiating the obsessive repetitions that followed, was none other than his own. Are we meant to conclude then that those repetitions and interpretations were, by some logic of analogous reversal, not his own ? that upon that original manifestation of uncaused, unconditioned speech, extraneous layers of phonic and semantic organization had been subsequently imposed ? that the pure inner logos had somehow been socialized ? Apparently Mallarmé has meant us to recognize this possibility, for he takes the trouble to reject it : the original voice is "undoubtedly the one and only".

At this point, I take it, we have reached back to the heart of the poetic fantasy of omnipotence. The voice that originally spoke the word was the poet's own, as were the various attempts to reorganize the word, to assimilate the phrase which, once pronounced, appeared to be foreign and other. The poet supposes himself free from the constraints of etymology or recessive echo. He originates the utterance, its phonic variations, its lexical correlations. "La Pénultième est morte" : that is, the circuit has been rounded to a point. He is self-contained, self-sufficient : the cipher-symbol "nul". Echo has become Narcissus. Note that this climax has been reached however with the help of the very associative thinking one is about to celebrate having escaped. It is "Memory" which has visited the poet with His wing or with a palm-branch, recalling for him the fullness of meaning in the phoneme "nul".

This bodes ill for the stasis of self-sufficiency, which sure enough breaks up in its very moment of inception. What will follow, with renewal of anguish, will be a sense of "the undeniable presence of the supernatural". In terms of the poet's concern of a moment before, this would imply either a ground for language outside the self (a Word behind the poet's word) and hence the resurgence of an unreachable etymon, or at the very least, some kind of aural threat to the poet's autonomy. But the realm is now enlarged. The recognition that the original voice had been his own had been accompanied simultaneously by a vision, through the reflection in a shop window, of his own hand executing a "downward and caressing gesture" – such a gesture as would have produced, had it encountered a lyre's strings, the auditory sensation with which we began. The poem thus offers a figure of art as mimesis, emphasized by the (perhaps unnecessarily explicit) shop-window image – a satirical debasement of Narcissus's pool, which accentuates immediately the poet's contingency, recalling the world of process on which his life depends, with which it is inextricably entwined, no less than the commonplaces of literary history. And the demon will have taught us by now that mimesis, analogously let loose within the vial of language itself, raises again the whole problem of sound-sense correspondences and the part of the objective, referential world in the process of language creation.

Thus, the window, in showing the poet his own hand mimicking the gesture a lutenist would make playing his instrument, has given him a vision of his own role as principal in initiating the audition, while simultaneously alerting him to the inescapably mediated nature of an experience that can be grasped only by way of analogy – some such analogy as allows one to relate vision and sound in the first place. Moreover, just as the phrase, *La Pénultième* etc., refuses to remain a series of sounds, but eventually forces us to consider its semantic meaning, so the window will provide not only a reflection of the poet's gesture, but a display of merchandise – of extrinsic and presumably independent artifacts. Just as echo is no longer a mode of establishing contact with an external source, but another expression of a confining Narcissism, so the inescapable "self" seems no more than a site for the reclamation of received ideas.

The final twist, in which we see how inextricably bound we are within the echoes and reflexes of analogy, comes when we recognize the objects in the window as external representations (or are they paradigms ?) of the imaginary counters with which the episode originated :

Mais où s'installe l'irrécusable intervention du surnaturel, et le commencement de l'angoisse sous laquelle agonise mon esprit naguère seigneur c'est quand je vis, levant les yeux, dans la rue des antiquaires instinctivement suivie, que j'étais devant la boutique d'un luthier vendeur de vieux instruments pendus au mur, et, à terre, des palmes jaunes et les ailes enfoutées en l'ombre, d'oiseaux anciens. Je m'enfuis, bizarre, personne condamnée à porter probablement le deuil de l' inexplicable Pénultième.

[But the supernatural intruded itself ineluctably, like the anguish that still afflicts my once sovereign mind, when I saw, glancing up, in the row of antique stores down which I had instinctively turned, that I was standing in front of a violin-maker's shop with old instruments hanging from the wall and on the floor yellow palm leaves and the wings, hidden in shadow, of ancient birds. I fled, panic-stricken, condemned it seems to remain in mourning for the inexplicable Pénultième.]

As expected, the instruments hanging on the wall are old, the palm-branches yellow, and the birds' wings ancient. The poet's audition has been translated into visual terms, and these are now seen to be mimetically calqued on an already ancient set of emblems, quietly yellowing into artifacts. Even elegy, the mourning he is destined to wear, is not entirely his own – it is "of" no less than "for" the *Pénultième*. In the end, the poet flees, panic-stricken, from that oscillation of presence and precedence, echo and source, elegy and prophecy, but one wonders where else he could have sought refuge. "Panic-stricken" (my translation for the French *bizarre*) reflects the spirit in the letter : for the routing of Narcissus, defeated by the derivative status of his own self-reflection, must once make room for Pan as Echo's partner. The "Pénultième" for which, the poet surmises, he has been fated to mourn forever (repeating forever the meaningless phrase, which yet contains within itself every possibility not

only of meaning, but of the history and conditions of meaning) thus returns under its proper attribute of inexplicability. Every attempt to explain its meaning will always reveal its own limitation in the very stroke that seems to assure its triumph : it will always be penultimate.

Confusion of Tongues

To the metaphysical challenge, Why something rather than nothing ? the poet responds with the pragmatist's question, Why something rather than everything ? How can one choose to create this world, this word, to invest it with the "reality" of the etymon, when there is an infinite recession of other worlds, of other words, beneath it ? The implications of Mallarmé's meditation for what at this point may be called a psychological theory of linguistic echo are manifold. They relate to the way that phonic repetition is disrupted by semantic pressure, to the way that the discovery of contingency (here represented by the persistence of the mimetic) leads to anxiety, and even to the consternation that results when one attempts to push beyond the chain of analogy or metaphor, to terminate the penultimate, or seize the etymon. I began by considering a sound-sense model of poetic language and suggesting it be displaced by an echoic model. I would like to take this a step further now and ask. What happens when the echoic model tries to absorb the sound-sense model ? The interest of this question is psychological, and Freud's theory of the joke offers a convenient starting point.

For Freud, language is the medium in which the mind works, hence a text to be deciphered. The economy of verbal play, of which paronomasia is the exemplary case, depends on phonic echo or repetition, the return toward equilibrium effected by a recapturing of the familiar. This play is permitted to the adult on condition that it satisfies certain minimal criteria of meaningfulness, enforced by what would later be called the reality principle. For Freud, a poetic echo, like a joke, would be a compromise between meaning and the pure play of repetition. Pleasure derives from the "short circuit" that enables us to achieve meaning with less expenditure of psychic energy. The whole explanation, which belongs to the earlier period of Freud's work, is mechanistic ; jokes play a role in the psychic

economy (echoes in the poetic economy) analogous to that of condensation in the dream work.

Developmental psychology has also taken up the subject of repetition or echolalia, which, in the work of Piaget is rooted in the phase of "ego-centric speech", which marks the development of the child beyond the pleasures of autistic play. When applied from a semantic perspective, the ego-centric emphasis gives rise to the popular notion of the child as little wizard, who, convinced of his omnipotence, uses words magically to extend his control over his environment. Words so used would themselves become sacred objects, and since phonic associations had contributed to their original investment, their inherent power or "prepossession" would be released by paronomasia. The weakness of such a view is that it ignores the impact of the external world, as cultural determinists like Vygotsky have insisted, arguing on the basis of extensive evidence that the child's incentive for repeating is basically social and that meanings are never given but continue to reflect their changing contexts.

If we accept the determinist critique and go back to the dualism assumed by Freud, we have, I believe, an initial explanation of the attraction and power of echo that extends beyond the phonic component. What Mallarmé's poem discovers is true of all speech: the poet's words are always a response to some prior audition. This situation is intrinsically threatening and accounts for the daemonic power that language can have. The fabric of language is vulnerable and tentative, built up by the child on the authority of his elders – explored, construed, and misconstrued at their instigation. Thus, he not only enjoys the feelings of omnipotence that his manipulation of these "sacred objects" gives him, but also suffers from uncertainty as to just how far their power extends, whence it derives, how it is to be used. I would venture that every adult consequently suffers from some aural version of the more familiar phantom of Cartesian doubt. Cartesian doubt is primarily experienced in visual terms. That the world is an illusion, the common fantasy, is a notion generally based on the potential instability of objective phenomena (appearances): the objects in this room, for instance (though such doubt may often touch the non-phonic language of kinship as well). But it is precisely the underground or secondary status of sound vis-à-vis light, of hearing vis-à-vis vision, that marks its daemonic potential. For the poet,

the sense of verbal insecurity, which remains an inevitable, though secret, consequence of the dependent way in which language is acquired, would be particularly strong, just as the investment in words as transitional "sacred" objects must be particularly strong. Poetic etymology answers to both : it allows one to revel in an imagined omnipotence, or to fend off an imagined disaster.

The expression "transitional object" was coined by the English psychologist, D.W. Winnicott, who, on the basis of Lacan's theory of the mirror stage, developed the idea of a "potential space" between child and mother – an area of play between inner reality and external world which becomes the site of transitional activity. Winnicott wrote movingly on the consequences of premature separation from the mother, whose imago informs the potential space, making the transitional objects meaningful. But he also speaks briefly of "an alternative danger, which is that this potential space may become filled with what is injected into it from someone other than the baby. It seems that whatever is in this space that comes from someone else is persecutory material, and the baby has no means of rejecting it... Exploitation of this [intermediate] area leads to a pathological condition in which the individual is cluttered up with persecutory elements of which he has no means of ridding himself."⁴

I would liken the imposition of fixed semantic meaning to this "exploitation of the potential space" represented by the purely phonic component of language. The sounds which the child hears are – like the correspondent image which he sees looking into the mother's face – initially indistinguishable from those he creates himself. Auditory perception is, to the infant, indistinguishable from auditory apperception. In fact, the echo stage might well be a more basic category than the mirror stage. In this context, the intrusion of semantic meaning cannot help but take on certain "persecutory" associations. The undoing of externally

- 4 D.W. Winnicott, "The Location of Cultural Experience", *Playing and Reality* (London : Tavistock Publications, 1971) 101-103. Cf. Sandor Ferenczi, "Confusion of Tongues Between Adults and the Child" (1933), *Final Contributions to the Problems and Methods of Psycho-Analysis*, trans. Eric Mosbacher et al. (London : The Hogarth Press, 1955).

imposed and governed semantic denotations by paronomastic echo is thus a reclamation of that intermediate or potential space in which the child's illusion of autonomy could subsist side by side with his confident perception of the outside world.

One can see the same process functioning under pathological conditions in the autobiographical case history of Louis Wolfson, *Le Schizo et les langues*.⁵ Wolfson, a native New Yorker, immersed himself in the study of foreign languages in order, by deft acts of simultaneous translation, to defend against the incursions of English, his "mother tongue", for which he felt an uncontrollable repulsion. (A complementary series of inhibitions and anxieties surrounded the ingestion of food, confirming the sinister animation of the "mother tongue" figure). He would imagine, for instance, "ce ton de triomphe qu'elle [sa mère] aurait en pensant pénétrer son fils schizophrénique de mots anglais"; or, more vividly, her joy at "injecting" her speech into his ears, making his tympanum vibrate "en unisson presque exacte avec ses cordes vocales à elle et en dépit qu'il en eût." It was not however the mere sound of English that elicited these fantasies of invasion; nor was it the ideational content. Rather it was the semantic bond itself, the association of the phonic (or graphic) form with its specifically English meaning, that had to be broken.

To defend himself, Wolfson would try to find foreign substitutes for the threatening English word or idiom that, so far as possible, corresponded to it in both meaning *and* sound. For example, he would convert the phrase "I know", which his mother repeated mechanically in the course of long telephone conversations, into the harmless Russian equivalent *znaju*; or, to take a more complicated example, the phatic "yes" used in the same situation by the downstairs neighbor, into German *ja* plus French *si*, whence Russian *yesli* 'if', the other sense of French *si*. One glimpses here the esemplastic imagination in full career, not chaffering over a difference in sense, but rather allowing that the two meanings of the French word are not unrelated, since "if" or "given that" is really just "yes", "avec une certaine réservation".

5 *Le Schizo et les langues* (Esquisses d'un étudiant de langues schizophrénique) (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1970).

What one finds in Wolfson, in exaggerated form, is a kind of poetic etymology working to defend against the tyranny of an imposed order associated with the invasive all-presence of the mother, unique source of mental and physical nourishment. Wolfson's anxiety is extreme, due in part to the androgynous doubling of the mother figure, but a latent sense of language as something imposed from without would seem to be universal. A child has no way of personally approving the semantic value of the words he learns. He can only accept them on external authority. By doing so, he wins a certain measure of external approbation, but at the price of self-sufficiency. Language, therefore, is always foreign language, an alien acquisition whose enforced values elude every effort of inner confirmation. Faced with this choice between a semantic void on the one hand and passive acceptance of an imposed framework on the other, one recourse is to sound. Phonetic values, defined according to simple, bilateral oppositions, depend on nothing more than sensual recognition. They can be ordered and confirmed autonomously. Forced to choose, Wolfson would in fact always sacrifice meaning to preserve sound, much as Joyce is said to have done in helping to translate *Finnegans Wake*.

The prophylactic of defensive function of echo is illustrated again by a linguistic anecdote which reads like a comic inversion of the Wolfson case. One evening, in the course of dinner at an exclusive club in London, Ivan Turgenev, with no apparent provocation, suddenly slammed his fist on the table and burst out in a nonsensical string of Russian words, culminating in the repeated cry "kasha ! kasha !" ⁶ All the words in the string were common feminine nouns with domestic and arguably sexual associations (names of vegetables, the words for "mare" and "peasant woman"), and together they manifested a high degree of phonetic patterning : *Red'ka ! Tykva ! Kobyla ! Repa ! Baba ! Kasha ! Kasha ! To*

6 Turgenev recounted this story himself to V.A. Sologub, who published it in his memoirs (ed S.P. Shesterikov [Moscow-Leningrad, 1931] 445-48). I have relied on the discussion by Roman Jakobson, "Supraconscious [or "Transrational" : *zaumnyj*] Turgenev," [1979] trans. Stephen Rudy in *Language and Literature*, 262-66.

begin to understand their full meaning, however, one needs also to know that Turgenev's host was confined, on his doctor's orders, to an unusually strict diet, which the club's butlers had puntilliously observed, announcing with a solemn and invariable flourish a succession of three identical dishes : "First Cutlet ! Second Cutlet ! Third Cutlet !" By Turgenev's own account, this ceremony prompted a sense of suffocation and gave rise to the explosive tirade composed of Russian nouns, which, phonetically and accentually, correspond to the daunting announcement : "Cutlet !" Turgenev's exclamation was thus a defensive echo, elicited by the haughty environment of the all-male club, by the alien sound of the English language, and most particularly by the butlers' repetitive words. Their threat was twofold : they were unassimilably foreign ; and, being themselves echoic, they appeared already to occupy both positions in the recapitulatory scheme, thereby obviating all confirmatory or canonizing response and so rendering the listener superfluous. His reversion to, rather than adversion from, the mother tongue was the saving delusion unavailable to Wolfson. In an odd way, this act of revindication resembles the Bible's revocation of the ominous theophany that accompanies the giving of the ten commandments. In the principal version of the tradition in Exodus, YHWH twice manifests himself as lightning and thunder (*golot*), before and after the promulgation of the law, to the consternation of the Israelites gathered at the foot of the mountain (Ex 19:16, 20:18). When the theophany story is retold in Deuteronomy, however, the theophanic "thunder" (*golot*) is converted to the "voice of the words" (*gol debartm*, Deut 4:12 – another meaning of the Hebrew word). Within the narrative context of the Sinai episode, the conversion is a reduction : the alien thunder, too awesome for the people to withstand, is humanized into the still numinous and forbidding but a least comprehensible "voice."⁷ In both examples, an uncanny and so threatening repetition yields to a domestication. Deuteronomy is the "kasha !" to the "cutlet !" of Exodus.

7 In the Vulgate, the same trope on the echo, or what the thunder said, is intruded into the Exodus version itself : *golot* is rendered *tonitrua* before the declaration of the commandments (Ex. 19:16) ; in the echoic passage that follows the declaration of the law, the "thunder" is converted to "voices" (*vores*, Ex. 20:18).

A similar, though subtler, domestication is at work in a text that brings us back to our starting point. Valéry's *Poésie et pensée abstraite*, with its grand defense of poetry as a "language within a language."⁸ Originally a lecture at Oxford (where Mallarmé himself had lectured forty-five years before), the essay goes to great lengths to establish a view of the autonomy of poetic language, at the same time allowing one to glimpse – in part through its own echoing – a more psychological alternative. Its explicit emphasis on concrete phonic or formal values as opposed to semantic meaning makes it one of the few aestheticizing essays which Jakobson would have endorsed. What is curious is that Valéry elsewhere in his critical writing is extremely sensitive to the echoic structure of poetry, particularly as it expresses itself through lexical resonance or etymology. Why then in this most important critical manifesto does he persistently adhere to a narrowly formalistic theory of poetic language?

Ostensibly, the essay develops the distinction between poetic discourse, characterized by an "oscillation" or equality of sound and sense, and normal discourse, in which the principal aim of comprehension leads to the negation of form:

Je vous parle, et si vous avez compris mes paroles, ces paroles mêmes sont abolies... Dans les emplois pratiques ou abstraits du langage, la forme... ne se conserve pas ; elle ne survit pas à la compréhension... Mais au contraire, aussitôt que cette forme sensible prend par son propre effet une importance telle qu'elle s'impose, et se fasse... détruire, et donc reprendre – alors quelque chose de nouveau se déclare : nous sommes insensiblement transformés, et disposés à vivre... (1325-26)

Although the passage relies on tropes of death and afterlife, Valéry refrains from recognizing that it is the reanimation of language itself, the pressure of "paroles abolies", textual or linguistic phantoms, that effects

8 Paul Valéry, *Œuvres*, ed. Jean Hytier, 2 vols., Bibliothèque de la Pléiade (Paris : Gallimard, 1957) 1.1314-39 ; here page 1324. English translation by Denise Folliot in *The Art of Poetry*, vol. 7 of the Bollingen Collected Works of Paul Valéry (Princeton : Princeton University Press, 1958) 52-81).

our transformation, preferring to assert, like Jakobson, the autonomy of concrete form ("par son propre effet"). If one listens carefully to the text, however, one hears a rather different story. The thematic passage just quoted is preceded by an autobiographical anecdote, which Valéry opens and closes with a curiously strained protest of candor : "Je veux... vous raconter une histoire vraie... Je vous demande pardon de cette longue histoire vraie" (1322, 1323). The author had stepped out of his apartment to escape from a tedious piece of work. Walking down the street, he was suddenly "saisi" by strange rhythmic impulses, which seemed to combine his own movements with "Je ne sais quel chant que je murmurais, ou plutôt qui se murmurait *au moyen de moi*." The distressing experience came to an end, following some speculations about its cause, at the edge (sur le bord) of the Seine, where, amid images of birds (here ducks and swans), "ma surprise se changea en réflexion."

This "true" story will have a familiar ring ; for it is, step by step, a repetition of Mallarmé's parabolic hymn to the inescapability of echo. Whereas Mallarmé's narrator was possessed by unknown words, Valéry is seized by strange rhythms ; but this minor swerve is atoned on the following page when Valéry once more evokes the language of "Le Démon" in describing how a "petite phrase" (the simple request for a light) can assume in the mind of the person addressed a life of its own, independent of its normal signification. Freed from its meaning, the little phrase echoes within the auditor, creating "le besoin d'être encore entendue" which is "le bord même de l'état de poésie" – a reversion to that river of poetic tradition (replacing Mallarmé's antique shop window) before which reflection occurs or is balked. Perhaps this explains why in the short interlude between the two echoing passages the name Mallarmé itself suddenly emerges, repeated four times – an appearance all the odder in that no other passage in the essay, save the conventional peroration, contains a single proper name.

Such echoes give a kind of double meaning to Valéry's definition of poetry as "ces discours si différents des discours ordinaires... qui ne parlent jamais que de choses absentes... ; étranges discours, qui semblent faits par un *autre* personnage que celui qui les dit, et s'adresser à un *autre* que celui qui les écoute... un langage dans un langage" (1324). Rather than a formal counterpart to prose, distinguished from it by the oscillation

of sound and sense, poetry becomes a ghostly discourse analogous to the endless recessions of linguistic echo. Where Mallarmé focuses teleologically on the decreative or dialectical power of poetry ("poetic, consequently absent"), Valéry transforms this into a theory of derivation ("poetic *because* absent"). There is something disconcertingly specular about all this : Valéry deploying (or being possessed by) echo to make a point about the originality of echo. The essay seems to repeat the defensive gestures of a Wolfson or a Turgenev, but at a higher level of abstraction. Wolfson, trapped by the demon of analogy in a vicious oscillation of internal and external speech, appealed to echoic sounds to defend him from a sense that was not his. Valéry appeals to a sound-sense *theory* to defend against the ambiguous echo which his own text enacts. At a metacritical level, such an appeal is also a self-reflection. The movement to theory thus reflects once more the mutual absorption of Echo and Narcissus.

I have been suggesting that the temporal recessions and oscillations of echo, verbal and literary, provide a more resonant response to the question, what is poetry ? than the formalist emphasis on sound and sense ; further, that the temporal structure of echo is inherently ambiguous, that echo and source, following Mallarmé's covertly Ovidian fable, tend to absorb one another ; and finally, that this circularity, which is flexible enough to incorporate the apparently atemporal antithesis of sound and sense, is as much a part of the theory of poetry as of poetry itself. But if vocation is always ghostly, a repetition whose source is only animated by its own dependent echo, how can poetry ever do more than "lick the mirror of Narcissus", as Dante put it ? How, likewise, can a criticism that looks ironically at the self-reflective tendencies of language escape predictability ? The question requires a different fable, biblical rather than Ovidian.

The Demon of Anomaly

Every reader attentive to the sleights of language will have noticed with Karl Kraus that "the closer the look one takes at a word, the greater the distance from which it looks back". That words have histories in fact

helps account for the ease with which we animate them, seeing in the slippage of meaning a figure for our own mutability, or, if we hold to a myth of "right naming", for our own decadence. Graeco-Roman grammarians distinguished two principal ways of rationalizing the recession of meaning that besets the scrutinized word. The analogists, for whom language was based in convention, appealed to sets and paradigms to plot the movements of sound ; their opponents, the anomalists, espousing the naturalist view of language favored by the Stoics, eschewed paradigms in the belief that all words, like the things to which they corresponded, were unique. Where the one emphasized form, the other stressed meaning ; where the analogist, charting recurrences, thought to elaborate ideas of order, the anomalist, postulating origins, thought to elicit elements of truth. Both are ahistorical ; but analogy actively neutralized temporal concerns, while anomaly, in its attempt to anchor words individually to something prior, acknowledges the implicit force of diachronic flow. Allowing for changes in emphasis, the debate is still a public matter. When Angus Fletcher conceives of a "structuralism through archaeology" and proposes that "the main aim of etymology is to give temporal form to the endless becoming of linguistic units", one recognizes the concern of the ancient school of analogy. By contrast, when Thomas Greene insists that "the word carries with it a story of its development, its evolution... Out of [the] interplay between drift and evolution, between *dérive* and *dérivation*, each word acquires its unique itinerary", one hears unmistakable echoes of the anomalist position.⁹

It is easy enough to see – as did the Roman linguist Varro from whom we have the fullest account of the original controversy – that the two positions imply one another and that if anomaly is the demon of analogy, the reverse is also true. But the emphases are different, inclining respectively toward the two poles of logos and pathos around which most forms of echoic reading tend to cluster. In terms of our linguistic parable,

9 Angus Fletcher, *The Prophetic Moment : An Essay on Spencer* (Chicago : The University of Chicago Press, 1971) 103-104 ; Thomas M. Greene, *The Light in Troy : Imitation and Discovery in Renaissance Poetry* (New Haven : Yale University Press, 1982) 16.

they correspond to the paronomastic and the etiological sides of poetic etymology. Both are antiessentialistic, refusing to take words as imitations of some paradigmatic truth. But whereas paronomasia skeptically scrambles the terms of the hierarchy, etymology proper, in its etiological or historical mode, realigns them horizontally in an irreversible sequence. Paronomastic echo is a form of negation, a way of projecting alien meaning; etymological echo is a mode of assimilation, a way of appropriating the power in words, whereby the fact of their being prior to us is atoned by their being prior to themselves.

Kenneth Burke, always alert to "the temporizing of essence", distinguished, following Coleridge, between the "Greek philosopheme" and "Hebrew archaeology".¹⁰ His intended target was the contrast between theology and narrative, particularly the narrative style of Genesis with its "'mythic' language of temporal firsts," but the terms fit the two approaches to echo as well. The "anomalist" posits, no longer naively, but willfully, arbitrarily, by virtue of the knowledge Nietzsche calls "aktive Ver-ges-zlich-keit", a point of beginning, from which everything henceforth may be measured. If the reversion to sound (a narcissistic regression) is a defense of individual autonomy, the assertion of temporal position is a defense against the threat of mutability, including the endless slippage of sound. Both are obviously fictive, but the latter, harnessing the force of linearity, touches us more deeply".¹¹

10 *The Rhetoric of Religion: Studies in Logology* [1961] (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970) 210; his essay "The Temporizing of Essence" (on Peer Gynt) appears in *A Grammar of Motives* [1945] (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969) 430-40.

11 Etymological, no less than paronomastic echo, invites its psychological allegory. Looking again to developmental psychology, one might trace the need for beginnings to our inability as young children to think back beyond a fixed point in a chain of origination. The Russian children's poet Kornei Chukovsky cites a statement from a little boy recently initiated into the rudiments of evolution: "I know: my grandfather used to be a monkey; he began to work and then became a man. After that he gave birth to my father, and my father gave birth to me". Surveys confirm that the view was widespread. Chukovsky comments: "For any child 'from two to five', life of all humanity begins, at best, with

Like mental life itself, echo seems to have a double organization : on the one hand, as a superposition of levels, on the other, as a succession of inscriptions – a hierarchy and a history, which between them impel its spectral returns. One can thus say that it humanizes language, even as it illustrates its power and vulnerability. The contrast, going beyond philology, is between a mythical vision of a timeless source and a "historical" insistence on particular, temporal origins – on a unique founding or authorizing event. The alternatives can be illustrated within the classical sphere by a famous opposition in the *Iliad* : the descriptions of the staffs of Achilles and Agamemnon in Books One and Two, which complement one another and underline the distance between hero and king. As Lessing points out in the *Laokoön*, Homer does not describe the staffs themselves ; rather he gives in each case a brief account of their origin. The staff that Agamemnon holds as he rises to address the Achaeans at the beginning of Book Two was fashioned by Hephaestus for Zeus himself. He gave it to Hermes, who passed it onto Pelops and so, from father to son, each named with his epithet, to "Agememnon, king and lord of many islands, of all Argos" (Fitzgerald trans.). By contrast, the great staff by which Achilles swears defiance to Agamemnon in Book One was lopped from its log by an anonymous workman in the native mountains of Achaea, and no further history is given. Lessing writes of the two kinds of power symbolized by the staffs :

One the work of Hephaestus ; the other cut in the mountains by an unknown hand. One the old possession of a noble house ; the other merely destined for the first fist that seizes it. The one extended by a monarch over many islands and over all Argos ; the other borne by a man from among the Greeks, who, together with others, had been entrusted with the duty of upholding the laws. (ch. 16)

In context, the contrast is rather more complicated : Agamemnon's archaic staff assists his effort to persuade the restive army by an appeal to their natural feelings ; the staff of Achilles, never again to flower,

grandfather" (Kornei Chukovsky, *From Two to Five*, trans. Miriam Morton, rev. ed. [Berkeley : University of California Press, 1968 (1925)] 42).

supports his immutable resolve never again to fight for the Greeks (though his forecast, like Agamemnon's, will prove false). Thus, on the one hand, a legend of divine origination, unique, historical, sanctioned by human memory, introduces an appeal to man's common nature ; on the other, a figure of natural origin, anonymous, repeatable, sanctioned by experience, points toward the unique encounter of a hero with his private destiny. Perhaps because of these ironies, the impression persists that the stylus of Homer was cut from Achilles' staff, not Agamemnon's.

One may read this oscillation – like Mallarmé's in confounding chronology – as one allegory of the poetic genius. The strongest alternative is what Blake called paradoxically the "original derivation" of the biblical writings, where the inaugural *bereshit* ("in the beginning") governs all that follows it with a power never displaced by the succession of subsequent ironies. The command to Abraham to cross over, *lek leka*, and begin the sacred history comes unmotivated and unexplained. It echoes nothing but itself, and once it is obeyed all subsequent history is judged only for how it accords with that founding event. That something might have happened before that, that Terah too might have heard a call and started out for the land, is not ignored, but willfully dismissed. Perhaps even the grammatical obscurity of *bereshit*, the decision to give punctual force to the dependent construct form ("at the beginning of..."), is willful, an appeal to the fiction of limit. The tyranny of such willful founding extends well beyond the world of the Bible. Confronted with the prospect of linguistic chaos, the poet, like the biblical cosmologist, must likewise come up against some limit if he is to generate his world, his own creation. Even psychoanalysis, despite appeals to repetition and the fiction of a timeless unconscious, insists finally on the historicity of the original crime, on the priority of deed over word.

In literary poesis, that deed itself takes the form of an epochal word. Thus "the Man" returns from his debauch in New Orleans ; the newly Gallicized form of his title (de l'Homme) is corrupted to "Doom" ; and the saga of Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County has its beginning. What happened before is idle speculation. One hundred-thirty years and over a dozen volumes of imaginative history are rooted in the verbal corruption that turns a timeless title into a proper name with its unique destiny. Etymology repeats such acts of foundation at every stage ; for no matter

how ironic or tentative the gloss, its authority is always based on its etiological claim. What distinguishes the etymological echo from the simple "cheat of words" is that while both raise the spectre of infidelity in a world of constant process, the former reveals, by the mere fact of its recognition (whether committed or skeptical), our adherence to the idea of order.

There is a vivid passage in an essay by Thomas Mann's daughter Monika, describing the panic that would sometimes overtake her father during seashore walks with his family, forcing him to flee from the beach to firmer ground and traces of human life. These attacks of anxiety were prompted, she tells us, by the vastness of the scene itself: the sea, and, set against it, the silent whiteness of the dunes, monotonous beyond their undulations, extending unbroken to a horizon which no progress, no hard won perspective, could ever diminish. *Küstenkulissen, Dünenkulissen*, those endless recessions of shore and dune with their burden of blank horror, return in the Prelude to *Joseph and His Brothers*, Mann's rewriting of the Genesis stories as archetypal representations of a timeless mystery, whose source lies hidden in the "well of the past". Source of limitless echoes, this well is at the same time the mirror of Narcissus, in which the peering fabulist, trapped by the demon of analogy, regards all history through his own puzzled reflection.

Perhaps we should say that the unique virtue of the Bible and of the most powerful literature in the biblical tradition is to remain defiantly on the shore – a seashore which is also the river shore or threshold of poetry – not blind to the fearsome prospect, but armed against it by some obsessive commitment to an arbitrary beginning, to a personal mark or idiosyncrasy, whose intensity overcomes any abstract relativity or origins. It is the virtue of Milton insisting on the creation of the Son in time, or grounding his genesis in a retraction theory of creation *ex se*; it is the virtue of Dante, less heterodox, dating his *vita nuova* obstinately "from this day", or founding the great vision of the *Commedia* on a temporally grounded prologue. In our time, it is, to return to the shore, the song that Stevens overhears, the birdcage that Ashbery preserves, the dog that Dickinson takes with her on her seaside outing, and which makes her retreat before the "Mighty look", unlike Mann's, a measured and temporary one. Dickinson's dog, we know, was named Carlo. But I like to think

Echo and Narcissism

of him as answering too to the name Yahweh – or perhaps even YHWH. He and dogs like him seem invariably to descend from the one that accompanied Abraham in the course of his wanderings. Mann somehow missed that detail, which is recorded so prominently in the Scriptures ; *his* Abraham journeys dogless among the *Küstenkultissen* of the Judean desert, his ears filled with mocking echoes, unable to count or to name.

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