

POEM



Denise Riley

“AFFECTIONS OF THE EAR”

Here's the original Narcissus story: The blue nymph Leiriope,
called the lily-faced,
clear blue as any Cretan iris, got the river-god, summer
Cephissus, so on the boil
that lapped by his skeins of water, soused in them, spun round,
twirled, interlaced
until made pregnant, she had Narcissus. Stupefied well before he
was pulped to oil
what future did he ever really have, with that slight azure mother
of his embraced
by slippery Cephissus, insinuating himself everywhere to flatter,
linger and coil?
Leiriope chased Teiresias to set him his very first poser: would
her boy be effaced
by a rapid death? The seer said No—just as long as he didn't
know himself. Recoil
from the goal of self-knowledge! That maxim, chiselled in tem-
ple rock, gets erased
by the case of Narcissus who came to know himself to be loved
water. Philosophy
recommends a severe self-scrutiny to us while a blithe self-indif-
ference is disgraced:
yet for gorgeous Narcissus to know himself was sheer torment,
and his catastrophe.

He did know he was beautiful before he ever caught sight of
himself in the water.
One youth he'd not have died cursing “Let him love, too, yet not
get what he'll love”.
(I should explain myself, I sound derivative? Because I am, I'm
Echo, your reporter.
I'll pick up any sound to flick it back if it's pitched louder than
the muttering of a dove.

I am mere derivation, and doomed by Mrs Zeus to hang out in
this thespian backwater.)
He pushed into the surface of the lake; when push had come, as
come it will, to shove
Narcissus had to know. Then deathly recognition drew him,
lamb-like, to his slaughter.
His object was no wavering boy beneath the water, he was far
more than hand in glove
with what he saw. I know his problem, though at least I do have
lynx my bird daughter.
To love himself was pain precisely when he came to understand
that truth, most bitterly.
I got hurt too, by ox-eyed Hera as they call her although I'd say
cow, recumbent above.
For me, Echo, to forcibly repeat others' words is my ear torment,
my own catastrophe.

I told stories so Zeus' lovers escaped, as under cover of my chat-
ter they'd slip past Hera.
I did things with words until she caught me, to rage "False fluen-
cy, your gossip's untrue
you've always wanted the last word—see what good it'll do you".
I was right to fear her
for now I *have* got it. So exiled, I fell for Narcissus. I had no
voice to plead so I'd pursue.
He called "I'd die before I'd give myself to you!" I shrilled "Give
myself to you!" ran nearer.
If he'd cried "I'd die before I'd fuck you", at least I could have
echoed back that "Fuck you".
Sorry—I have to bounce back each last phrase. Half-petrified, I
voice dead gorges. Dearer
my daughter lynx, a wryneck, torticollis, twisted neck, barred
and secretive as any cuckoo
a writher in the woods—as a mother I am, and am merely,
responsive; still, I keep near her.
My body goes rocky when I hang round Narcissus. Numbed to a
trace of ruined articulacy
I mouth words I can't voice; half-turned to stone, am rigid with
memory of what I could do.
So for lonely Narcissus fruitlessly knowing himself as his object
was torture, a catastrophe.

He saw truth in fluidity, was an offshoot of water; he dreamily
propped himself prone

beside his reflection; the image that shone yet broke at his touch
 he did not misconstrue.
 He lay dumb in the daze of himself by the glaze of the lake with
 his face set like stone.
 If your mother was blue and your father was water, then mightn't
 you try to be true?
 "Only the thinnest liquid film parts us; which is why, unlike
 most lovers", I heard him groan,
 "I long for more distance between us; only then could I start to
 get near him". Narcissus knew.
 In the end, he was not misled by vanity. He saw it was himself
 he loved, and not his clone:
 in just that lay his torture. I said that as a bulb he got pulped
 down to oil, mashed to a stew.
 Narcissus oil's a narcotic, both stem from the same root *narcos*,
 numb; the bulb was known
 as the botanical root to cure "affections of the ear". (I'll need that
 oil on my tympanum, too,
 if thought is truly a bone). His becoming a herbal remedy con-
 cludes Narcissus' biography.
 Dying by water in knowing misery, he's recycled as unguent to
 drop on the sounding tissue
 of sore ears to heal their affections. Affections of the ear not of
 the heart, familiar catastrophe.

"Ears are the only orifices that can't be closed" though force may
 get some others to succumb.
 My inward ears will jam wide open to internal words that overly-
 ing verbiage can't smother.
 Boated over the Styx, Narcissus' shade peered in its black waters
 just in case his image swum.
 Numbed by affection of his heart, now dried he'll cure the ear
 affections. Son of his lily mother
 his beauty drove me deeper into repetition as a sounding-board,
 a ringing rock, a mere eardrum.
 A rhyme rears up before me to insist on how I should repeat a
 stanza's formal utterance—other
 than this I cannot do, unless my hearers find a way of speaking
 to me so I don't stay semi-dumb
 or pirouette, a languid Sugarplum. Echo's a trope for lyric poetry's
 endemic barely-hidden bother;
 as I am made to parrot others' words so I am forced to form
 ideas by rhymes, the most humdrum.

All I may say is through constraint, dictation straight from
sounds doggedly at work in a strophe.
“To make yourself seen reflects back to you, but to make yourself
heard goes out toward another”.
That’s all I, Echo, ever do. Occasionally diverting, it stays my
passive hell and small catastrophe.

NOTE

All details here are taken straight from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, Book III, and from Robert Graves’ first volume of *The Greek Myths*. Graves claims that narcissus oil was used as a cure for “affections of the ears”. Here the word “affection” is an archaism for “disease” (an example from the OED—in 1853 “an affection of the heart” was a heart disease). Lacan’s *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* (p. 195) has the line “In the field of the unconscious the ears are the only orifice that cannot be closed” while “Making oneself seen comes back to the subject, but making oneself heard goes towards the other” repeats his extension of Freud there.

GOOSING



Caitriona O'Reilly

ANDREW MCALLISTER (ED.), *The Objectivists, Bloodaxe, stg £8.95*

"An idiosyncratic band of wanderers and individuals" is how Andrew McAllister describes the seven poets represented in his anthology *The Objectivists*. His stated intention for his selection is "to make available an important and very particular body of work by American authors from the 1930s". Unlike many seemingly comparable movements, Objectivism never really evolved into a lasting dogma; despite the establishment of an Objectivist press and the appearance of an anthology in 1932 it scarcely outlived the decade. McAllister's commendably balanced introduction to this volume is approving of the integrity that such a procedural looseness would seem to imply. Louis Zukovsky, in many ways the Objectivists' primum mobile, deplored "the degradation of the power of the individual word in a culture which hardly seems to know that each word is in itself an arrangement". His statement highlights a central unifying element in this collection, the often explicit left-wing political affiliations of most of these seven writers. The Objectivists had solid reasons for their emphasis on diversity and on the givenness or immanence of poetry inside language in general (visible in their taste for "found" poems); their predominantly immigrant, Jewish and occasionally working-class backgrounds afforded them a very specific political perspective. Indeed for two central figures, George Oppen and Carl Rakosi, political activism seems to have led directly to a disillusionment with and temporary abandonment of their poetic project. Such concerns necessarily saturate their work, most eloquently perhaps in Rakosi's hortatory "To the non-Political Citizen": "But you spend too much time goosing. / You choose your words too carefully / and are afraid of being called agitator. / When will you become indignant / and declare yourself / Against the wrongs of the people?" McAllister sees the Objectivist political conscience as "an important historical benchmark for later generations. It is an early example of politically committed poetry which is staked out entirely in domestic American terms." In view of the subsequent development of the politically aware Beat, L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E, and feminist poetic movements, *The Objectivists* performs a valuable function in its location of an early example of home-grown experimental poetics.

As an instructive counterweight to the social, documentary orientation in much of the work selected, the editor is at pains to stress a correspondingly serious preoccupation with aesthetic concerns, particularly in the work of Zukovsky, friend of Ezra Pound and compiler of the original Objectivists anthology. This volume included such modernist notables as T. S. Eliot and William Carlos Williams, but McAllister is careful to emphasize the particularity of the Objectivist project by a subtle but insistent contrast of their critical prescriptions with the dominant mode of 1930s Modernism. This stemmed mainly from their abovementioned absorption in left-wing politics; eschewing the grandiloquent classicism or sophisticated despair of a Pound or an Eliot, the Objectivists were in favour of a plainer, more homiletic form of utterance. Interesting too, is their frequently greater optimism in the face of a mostly urban, industrial landscape. Charles Reznikoff's "For an Inscription over the Entrance to a Subway Station" is a defiant, tongue-in-cheek affirmation of urban mobility and progress: "This is the gift of Hephaestus, the artificer, / the god men say is lame". From this perspective, the work of the two women poets represented in this volume, Muriel Rukeyser and the minimalist Lorine Niedecker (neither included in Zukovsky's original selection, although the latter a lifelong friend and correspondent) is recuperated by McAllister as bona fide Objectivist material. Of Rukeyser, McAllister writes: "her work has been championed for reasons other than its literary merit: all well and good, it was doubtless part of her project. But as with the other authors in this anthology it is a necessary validation to gather the work together and present it with examples from her peers, to give the lines a chance to breathe in an original context". As reasonable a justification as any for the compilation of an anthology, and there can be no doubt of the benefits accrued from the timely recollection of this unjustly neglected body of work.