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Metamorphoses

A New Verse Translation

*Translated by DAVID RAEBURN
with an Introduction by DENIS FEENEY*

PENGUIN BOOKS

TEIRESIAS

While these events, in accordance with fate, were occurring on earth and the infant Bacchus, now twice-born, was cradled in safety, the story goes that Jupiter once, well-flushed with nectar,

320 laid his worries aside and, as Juno was none too busy, he casually cracked a joke. 'Now listen,' he said, 'I bet you women enjoy more pleasure in bed than ever we men do.'

When Juno disputed the point, they agreed to ask the opinion of wise Teiresias, since he'd experienced love from both angles.

How so? When a pair of enormous snakes in the leafy forest were coupling together, a blow from his staff disrupted their congress.

325 Teiresias then was somewhat amazingly changed from a man to a woman for seven years. In the eighth, however, he saw

the very same snakes again and said, 'If cudgelling you has the power to alter the sex of the person who deals you the wallop, here is a second one for you!' With that, he struck at the snakes

330 and promptly recovered the figure and bodily parts he was born with. That was why he was chosen to settle this playful argument.

Jupiter won his bet, but Juno unfairly resented Teiresias' verdict. They say that in disproportionate fury,

she sentenced her judge and condemned her to perpetual blindness.

335 What of almighty Jove? As the gods are never allowed to undo each other's work, for the loss of Teiresias' sight he awarded the gift of clairvoyance and high prestige to console him.

NARCISSUS AND ECHO

Soon the prophet's fame was rumoured throughout Boeotia.

Folk consulted, and none could fault, his oracular powers. 340 The first to put his trusted authority under test was sea-green Liriope, * whom once Cephissus the river-god caught in the folds of his sinuous stream and then proceeded

to rape. The nymph's womb swelled and, now at her very loveliest, Liriope gave birth to a child, already adorable, 345 called Narcissus. In course of time she consulted the seer; 'Tell me,' she asked, 'will my baby live to a ripe old age?'

Yes, he replied, 'so long as he never knows himself! * - empty words, as they long appeared, but the prophet was proved right.

350 In the event, Narcissus died of a curious passion. Sixteen years went by and already the son of Cephissus was changing each day from beautiful youth to comely manhood.

Legions of lusty men and beavies of girls desired him; but the heart was so hard and proud in that soft and slender body,

that none of the lusty men or languishing girls could approach him. 355 One day he was sighted, blithely chasing the scampering roebuck into the huntsman's nets, by a nymph whose babbling voice

was singing again

would always answer a call but never speak first. It was Echo.

Echo still was a body, not a mere voice, but her chattering

360 tongue could only do what it does today, that is to parrot the last few words of the many spoken by others

Juno had done this to her. The goddess would be all ready

to catch her husband Jupiter making love to some nymph

in a mountain dell, when crafty Echo would keep her engaged

in a long conversation, until the nymph could scurry to safety.

365 When Saturn's daughter perceived what Echo was doing, she said to her,

'I've been cheated enough by your prattling tongue. From now on

your words will be short and sweet!' Her curse took effect at once.

Echo could only repeat the words she heard at the end of a sentence and never reply for herself. So when

370 she saw Narcissus wandering over the country fields, she burned with desire and stealthily followed along his tracks.

The closer she followed, the flames of her passion grew nearer and nearer,

as sulphur smeared on the tip of a pine-torch quickly catches

fire when another flame is brought into close proximity.

Oh, how often she longed, poor creature, to say sweet

375 and beg him softly to stay! But her nature imposed a block

and would not allow her to make a start. She was merely permitted

and ready to wait for the sounds which her voice could return to the speaker.

Narcissus once took a different path from his trusty companions.

'Is anyone there?' he said. '... one there?' came Echo's answer.

Startled, he searched with his eyes all round the glade and loudly

380 shouted, 'Come here!' 'Come here!' the voice threw back to the caller.

He looks behind him and, once again, when no one emerges, 'Why are you running away?' he cries. His words come

ringing back. His body freezes. Deceived by his voice's reflection, the youth calls out yet again, 'This way! We must come together.'

Echo with rapturous joy responds, 'We must come together!'

to prove her words, she burst in excitement out of the forest,

arms outstretched to fling them around the shoulders she yearned for.

Shrinking in horror, he yelled, 'Hands off! May I die before

390 you enjoy my body.' Her only reply was '... enjoy my body.'

Scorned and rejected, with burning cheeks, she fled to the forest

to hide her shame and live thenceforward in lonely caves. But her love persisted and steadily grew with the pain of rejection.

Wretched and sleepless with anguish, she started to waste away.

395 Her skin grew dry and shrivelled, the lovely bloom of her flesh

lost all its moisture; nothing remained but voice and bones; then only voice, for her bones (so they say) were transformed to stone.

COELANUS

embance of the image

400 Buried away in the forest, seen no more on the
mountains,
heard all over the world, she survives in the sound of
the echo.

Not only Echo, the other nymphs of the waves and
mountains
incurred Narcissus' mockery; so did his male
companions.

405 Finally one of his scorned admirers lifted his hands
to the heavens: 'I pray Narcissus may fall in love and
never
obtain his desire!' His prayer was just and Nemesis
heard it.

Picture a clear, unclouded pool of silvery,
shimmering
water. The shepherds have not been near it; the
mountain-goats
and cattle have not come down to drink there; its
surface has never
been ruffled by bird or beast or branch from a roting
cypress.

410 Imagine a ring of grass, well-watered and lush, and a
circle
of trees for cooling shade in the burning summer
sunshine.

*look
ambiguously*

Here Narcissus arrived, all hot and exhausted from
hunting,
and sank to the ground. The place looked pleasant,
and here was a spring!
Thirsty for water, he started to drink, but soon grew
thirsty
for something else. His being was suddenly
overwhelmed

415 by a vision of beauty. He fell in love with an empty
hope
a shadow mistaken for substance. He gazed at himself
in amazement,

limbs and expression as still as a statue of ~~Panion~~
Stretched on the grass, he saw twin stars, his own two
eyes,

420 rippling curls like the locks of a god, Apollo or Bacchus,
cheeks as smooth as silk, an ivory neck and a glorious
face with a mixture of blushing red and a creamy whiteness.
All that his lovers adored he worshipped in self-adoration.
Blindly rapt with desire for himself, he was votary and
idol,

425 mirror and sweetheart, taper and fire - at one and the same
time.
Those beautiful lips would implore a kiss, but as he bent
forward
the pool would always betray him. He plunges his arms in
the water

to clasp that ivory neck and finds himself clutching at no one.
He knows not what he is seeing; the sight still fires him with
passion.

430 His eyes are deceived, but the strange illusion excites his
senses.
Trusting fool, how futile to woo a fleeting phantom!
You'll never grasp it. Turn away and your love will have
vanished.

The shape now haunting your sight is only a wraith, a
reflection
consisting of nothing; there with you when you arrived,
here now,
and there with you when you decide to go - if ever you can
go!

435 Nothing could drag him away from the place, not hunger
for food
nor need for sleep. As he lay stretched out in the grassy
shade,
he never could gaze his fill on that fraudulent image of
beauty;
and gazing proved his demise. He raised his body a little,
then stretching his arms in grief to the witnessing trees all
round him,

Luc

'Wise old trees,' he exclaimed, 'has anyone loved more cruelly?

Lovers have often kissed in secret under your branches. Here you have stood for hundreds of years. In all that

time

has anyone suffered for love like me? Whom can you remember?

I've looked and have longed. But looking and longing is far from enough.

I still have to find! (His lover's delusion was overpowering.)

'My pain is the more since we're not divided by stretches of ocean, unending roads, by mountains or walls with impassable gates.

450 All that keeps us apart is a thin line of water. He wants to be held in my arms. Whenever I move to kiss

the clear bright surface, his upturned face strains closer to mine.

We all but touch! The paltriest barrier thwarts our pleasure.

Come out to me here, wherever you are! Why keep eluding me,

peerless boy? When I seek you, where do you steal away?

455 It can't be my looks or my age which makes you want to avoid me;

even the nymphs have longed to possess me! . . . Your looks of affection

offer a grain of hope. When my arms reach out to embrace you,

you reach out too. I smile at you, and you smile at me back.

460 I weep and your tears flow fast. You nod when I show my approval.

When I read those exquisite lips, I can watch them gently repeating

my words - but I never can hear you repeat them!

I know you now and I know myself! Yes, I am the cause of the fire inside me, the fuel that burns and the flame that

lights it.

What can I do? Must I woo or be wooed? What else can I plead for?

465 All I desire I have. My wealth has left me a pauper.

Oh, how I wish that I and my body could now be parted, I wish my love were not here! - a curious prayer for a lover.

Now my sorrow is sapping my strength. My life is almost over. Its candle is guttering out in the prime of my

manhood.

Death will be easy to bear, since dying will cure my headache.

Better indeed if the one I love could have lived for longer, but now, two soulmates in one, we shall face our ending

together!

With that he turned distractedly back to his own reflection;

his tears were troubling the limpid waters and blurring the picture

that showed in the ruffled pool. When he saw it fast disappearing,

475 Don't hurry away, please stay! You cannot desert me so cruelly.

I love you! he shouted. 'Please, if I'm not able to touch you, I must be allowed to see you, to feed my unhappy passion!'

in wild distress he ripped the top of his tunic aside and bared his breast to the blows he rained with his

milk-white hand.

His fist brought up a crimson weal on his naked torso, like apples tinted both white and red, or a multi-coloured

cluster of grapes just ripening into a blushing purple.

485 Once the water had cleared again and he saw what his hand

had done, the boy could bear it no longer. As yellow wax melts in a gentle flame, or the frost on a winter morning thaws in the rays of the sunshine, so Narcissus faded

*Sto ego sum **

1 know you now my eyes

*paper
Dna*

*The
hand
People*

*the
one*

*the
one*

away and melted, slowly consumed by the fire inside
him.

490 His face had lost that wonderful blend of red and
whiteness,
gone was the physical vigour and all he had looked at
and longed for,
broken the godlike frame which once poor Echo had
worshipped.

Echo had watched his decline, still filled with angry
resentment

495 but moved to pity. Whenever the poor unhappy youth
uttered a pitiful sigh, her own voice uttered a pitiful
sigh in return. When he beat with his hand on his
shoulders, she also
mimicked the sound of the blows. His final words, as
he gazed

once more in the pool, rang back from the rocks: 'Oh
marvellous boy,

I loved you in vain! Then he said, 'Farewell.'
'Farewell,' said Echo.

He rested his weary head in the fresh green grass, till
Death's hand
gently closed his eyes still rapt with their master's
beauty.

Even then, as he crossed the Stryx to ghostly Hades,
he gazed at himself in the river. At once his sister
naiads

505 beat their breasts and cut their tresses in mourning
tribute;
the dryads wailed their lament; and Echo re-echoed
their wailing.

A pyre was raised, the bier made ready, the funeral
torches
brandished on high. The body, however, was not to be
found -

510 only a flower with a trumpet of gold and pale white
petals.

PENTHEUS AND BACCHUS (1)

Once this story was bruited abroad, Teiresias' credit
spread through the townships of Greece, as a prophet of
high reputation.

One single person, however, was found to reject him -
Pentheus,*

son of Echion, who treated the gods with contempt and
scuffed at
the seer's forewarnings. 'You blind old fool,' he cruelly
taunted,

515 'lost in the dark!' Then, shaking his frost-white locks,
Teiresias
answered the king, 'How lucky you'd be if you were
deprived

like me of your sight and could never set eyes on the
mysteries of Bacchus!

The day will dawn, which I can foretell is not far off,
when a new god comes, the son of your kinswoman
Semele, Liber.*

520 Unless you pay him his rightful tribute of shrine and temple,
your mangled corpse will be strewn in a thousand places,
polluting
the woods with your blood, polluting your mother and her
two sisters.

So it shall be. You will surely deny that godhead his
worship

and surely complain that my darkened eyes saw only too
well!

525 The words were spoken and Pentheus rudely flung the man
out.

But the words proved true and Teiresias' prophecies came
to fulfillment.

Bacchus arrived and the countryside rang with ecstatic
cries.

The crowds poured in; there were mothers and wives with
their sons and husbands,