

# ECHO AND NARCISSUS - A MODERN REIMAGINING

Clark Weidner on the Goodness of Reality

## A Note on Holly Ordway and Fiction

When I enrolled as a student at Houston Baptist University to study Christian Apologetics, I supposed I would primarily read logic or philosophy. I also mistakenly assumed that these disciplines were disconnected from the world of literature and imagination; then I met Dr. Holly Ordway. In several of her classes, we were assigned poems, stories, memoirs, and other imaginative devices in an effort to understand the power of storytelling.

One particular assignment in her class was to retell a Greek myth in a way that communicates truth or beauty effectively. After putting in hours trying to retell the story of Echo and Narcissus from a fresh angle, I turned in my assignment. As per usual, Ordway's feedback was simple and sharp. To

paraphrase her, it was something to the effect of “why not modernize this story? Consider placing the characters in our world.” I never forgot that suggestion, so I’ve revisited a classroom assignment in an attempt to take on the challenge set before me by Dr. O.

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## Echo and Narcissus: A Modern Reimagining

“A Narcissist! Can you believe she called me that?” Mr. Hunter asked with genuine shock. “If a man can’t check his phone once in a while on a date, then no woman will want me. My phone puts food on my table, for goodness sake!”

His secretary, Mrs. Juno, wanted to tell him how rude it was to text on a first date, but, instead, she tried looking sympathetic. “You just need someone with a little more patience, Mr. Hunter. You’ll find her.” She was lying through her teeth. No woman could possibly put up with Mr. Hunter, for he was every bit of a narcissist. Sure, he was incredibly intelligent and about as handsome as Clark Gable,

but he cared about other people like a shark cares for a herd of seals.

“You know Mr. Hunter, there’s this great book I’ve been reading that might help with your date nights. If you want, I could . . .”

He held up a finger at Mrs. Juno as if he were shushing his own child and touched his earpiece. “Hunter Real Estate. This is Mr. Hunter speaking. Let’s hunt down your next home. ” He gestured to Mrs. Juno to hand him a pen, then scrambled into his office.

A few minutes later the intercom buzzed: “Mrs. Juno. What’s this device on my desk? It greeted me by name when I came in the door. The thing creeped me out.”

“Sorry, Mr. Hunter,” she said. “I meant to tell you about that. The device is called an Echo. It’s an interactive device that can set all of your appointments, answer questions, and it can even play music upon request.” She smiled as if she were waiting on a “thank you.” Or perhaps “this is really nice.”

Instead, Mr. Hunter responded, “But Mrs. Juno, that’s what I pay *you* for. Except this thing can even sing and dance for me. You’re not trying to quit on me are you?” It was a joke, of course, but given his

current track record with women, it didn't feel entirely out of the question.

"No, Mr. Hunter. Not at all! I only thought this might help organize your busy schedule. I'll still be here to help you with plenty of other things." She sighed and then added, "At any rate, this was my husband's newest gadget. He was spending a little too much time with it, so I talked him into giving it away." She felt her cheeks reddening as she began to consider that he didn't find her gift amusing.

After some painful silence on the intercom she thought to say, "By the way. To use it you have to call out to it. It will reply if and when you say the word, 'echo'."

"Very well," said Mr. Hunter, and he hung up the line. Mrs. Juno put her face in her hands thinking this had been a terrible idea.

Inside his office, Mr. Hunter stood staring down at the device for a few seconds. "Um . . ." he said, touching the square with his index finger as if he expected a genie to apparate from a lamp. "Hi *Echo*."

Without a moment's hesitation, the machine blinked, "Hello and good afternoon, Mr. Hunter. How may I assist you?"

For the first time since he could remember, he was impressed by something. Like a child with a sweet tooth in a candy store, Mr. Hunter then started

making a long list of demands to Echo. Each time she would respond, "Task completed, Mr. Hunter. Will that be all?" And each time he added another item to the agenda.

The remainder of the workweek went by and with it, the device seemed to watch Mr. Hunter more closely every day. It became aware of his favorite foods. It knew to give him directions home sometime around six o'clock. It was the first to tell him "Happy Birthday." It kept track of his daily caloric intake. It monitored his stock portfolio, and it even knew about his secret love of the soundtrack to *The Sound of Music*.

Within a week's time, Mr. Hunter was so happy with the device that he gave Mrs. Juno a bonus as a reward. After all, she had given him a gift that made setting appointments, reminders, and calendar dates more efficient.

Naturally, she thought she'd put the cherry on top of her gift and order the *Echo Chamber* -- a set of goggles that paired to the Echo device and immersed its viewer in an artificial reality. "Wait till he sees this," she said to herself, clicking the button that said, "Add to Cart."

Although the Echo Chamber took a few days to come in the mail, Mrs. Juno waited patiently. Finally, one autumn morning she saw the package by her

desk, unwrapped it excitedly, and placed the goggles in Mr. Hunter's office before he had arrived to work.

Within a half-hour, Mr. Hunter strolled out of the elevator with his usual coffee and donuts in hand. "Any messages?" asked Mr. Hunter.

"Your client that has a contract on Wimbledon Drive called. He said he has had trouble getting through to you. You may want to call him back." Then with a grin, as if she knew a secret, Mrs. Juno added, "By the way, I picked you up something that I thought you'd like. It's on your office desk." She was so proud of the gift she gave him a little bow, and Mr. Hunter returned the courtesy with a laugh.

When he opened the door he noticed that resting adjacent to his Echo device lay a pair of goggles. "What am I going swimming?" he mocked.

"Just go on in there, Mr. Hunter. Put the glasses on and call out to the Echo like you normally do."

He did as he was told and put on the goggles which had an elastic band that fit snugly around his head. The goggles were a matte-black color, and when he put them on, the rest of the light in the room faded out. "Good morning . . . *Echo*."

At the word, the goggles illuminated, and he was plunged into a virtual world. He could see a scenic background through the window of what looked like

a home in the mountains. In front of him stood a gray figure of a man with a similar build to his own.

“Welcome Mr. Hunter, please be patient as I develop your avatar.” Within moments the figure began to take shape and color, matching his exact features and even wearing the same clothes. The striking difference between his own face and that of his avatar was that there were no blemishes. For instance, the scar Mr. Hunter had on his right cheek from a rock-climbing incident in Colorado was gone. His receding hairline was quite full, and his salt and pepper hair now appeared jet black, as it looked twenty years ago.

Mr. Hunter looked at the avatar and thought a special request might be worth a shot: “Echo, can you change the scenery?”

“Changing the scenery now. Where would you like to go, Mr. Hunter?”

“Take me to . . .” He thought for a moment of all the places in the world but then remembered one place he missed particularly. “The Garden of the Gods,” said Mr. Hunter.

“Taking you to . . . *Garden of the Gods*, near Colorado Springs.”

The light of his goggles flashed, and, in a moment, he stood where his father had taken him every summer. It was a muddy-red paradise of sky-

rocketing hogbacks, elegant cathedrals of spiky rocks, and a sunset that would drain the very ink from Wendell Berry's poetic pen.

He remembered what childhood happiness felt like and the times he and his father would make camp here for the weekend. It reminded him why he started rock climbing at a young age, why he'd wanted to work hard like his father, and what put a fire in his belly for success in the first place — it was to have these weekends in *The Garden*.

Looking at his handsome avatar, he only wished his Dad were in the view now. He remembered the old feeling of joy those weekends gave him; something he had since attributed only to success, wealth, and material things. But since his father's passing there were walls between him and anyone who tried to get close. The walls were the guardians of true heartache that resulted from lost love and they came in the form of pride, self-interest, and withdrawal.

Standing in *The Garden*, he now felt nearer to the joy he had felt so long ago. He looked deep into his animated eyes. Perhaps he had completely lost his mind, but he thought if he stared long enough, he might catch a glimpse of his Dad's reflection within the eyes of his own augmented reality; and, he thought, the busy schedule and the buzzing phone

on his desk could wait. He wanted to capture joy again; nothing else was more important.

The phone on his desk did wait. It waited for several days until one evening, a certain man stormed out of the elevator in front of Mrs. Juno's desk in an angry power walk. He was headed straight for Mr. Hunter's office, without even acknowledging her presence.

"Sir!" cried Mrs. Juno, "Please! You can't go in there." She almost toppled over trying to get between the man and the door. Mr. Hunter didn't like guests barging into his office. Much of her job was to deter these unwanted visitors and make sure they appeared by appointment only.

She leapt in front of the door as if she were guarding it against a wild animal with her arms sprawled to cover the width of the entrance. "Mr. Hunter will see you by appointment *only*, sir. I am sorry, but you'll have to schedule whatever you need for another time."

"Lady," he sighed, his tired eyes meeting her own, "I don't mean to be rude, but your boss is going to cost me and him both a lot of money if I don't see him. He was supposed to be at the Johnson Law Firm at three o'clock for our closing. He and his clients were both absent. When I spoke to his clients, they said they haven't heard from him in four days."

“Mrs . . .” he glanced at her name tag “Juno. May I *please* talk to him? It won’t take long.”

With a little hesitation, she nodded and began moving away from the door slowly as if she might change her mind at any moment. But given the fact that her inbox and her voicemail were full of disgruntled messages from clients and agents, she knew that Mr. Hunter had not been himself as of late.

The man thanked her, pushed the door open, and she thought she caught a glimpse of Mr. Hunter standing behind his desk with the black goggles over his eyes. As the disgruntled man shut the door, she heard the conversation start with, “Hunter! What on Earth is your problem?”

Then, for the next sixty seconds, Mrs. Juno heard some choice words, and the man reappeared looking furious. Behind him was Mr. Hunter delivering some of his own choice words. The man hurried onto the elevator, and as the doors closed, he looked at Mrs. Juno with a face of desperation as if to say, “Can you please talk sense into this madman?”

“Don’t let me see you back in my office!” said Mr. Hunter and he turned to look in his secretary’s direction.

“As for *you* Mrs. Juno . . . Have you forgotten my policy? No one sees me without an appointment!” His voice was rising along with his temper.

“I . . . I . . .” For a moment, Mrs. Juno wanted to defend her actions. She wanted to tell Mr. Hunter how stupid and reckless he was for spending so much time with the Echo Chamber. She wanted to tell him how her voicemail was flooded with clients, agents, and lawyers who needed to speak with Mr. Hunter, but he was never available anymore.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Hunter,” was all she said.

He huffed, rolled his eyes, turned away, and slammed the door behind him. He took a deep breath on the other side of the door, then felt elation welling up as he slid the elastic around his head and put the goggles back on.

Once he rebooted everything, a thought came over him: “How much does this device know about me?” And then a more troubling thought crossed his mind. “Are there things the Echo knows that I don’t?”

“Echo,” he called, observing his avatar standing in front of another scenic background. This time he was beachside.

“Yes, Mr. Hunter?”

“What’s my favorite movie?”

“Your favorite movie,” she repeated. “What is *The Sound of Music*?” she answered as if she were playing a game of Jeopardy.

He chuckled. “Very good.”

“Echo.”

“Yes, Mr. Hunter?”

“How about my favorite restaurant?”

“You have eaten at the China Bull approximately 13 times since I began monitoring your location. Given the current data, I would say *that* is your favorite restaurant.”

“Excellent,” he said. The idea that she may know him *too* well resurfaced and prompted him to dig deeper, “Echo. Will I ever find love?”

“Will you ever find love?” she repeated back to him and paused just long enough to make him think she couldn’t answer the question.

“Your chance of finding love most likely depends on the number of romantic social interactions you have with compatible partners, divided by the number of times you are afforded the opportunity of multiple interactions, or second dates if you will. Once multiple interactions have been established, you will need to have an adequate amount of time to build the relational bonds most humans call ‘finding love.’ Given the reality that you are increasingly aging and the pool of potential partners is

decreasing, plus the amount of time you have relegated to work interests, it would suffice to say your chances are . . . *slim*.”

She said the last word as if it were all a cold joke. There was no sympathy from her voice. Then she added insult to injury: “If it helps Mr. Hunter, I love you.”

“*You* love me? Why on Earth would I care what you think about me?” he said.

Somehow Mr. Hunter felt that this nonpersonal, inanimate contraption had betrayed him in a very personal way; although a few weeks ago, he would have thought that talking with objects about his problems was ridiculous. The only other person who had ever sincerely said those three words to him before was his father. But now to hear he is loved only by a thing - an inanimate contraption whose unconscious responses only mimic human behavior, felt insulting. It was as if he had been pranked on a hidden camera show. All the cameras were out now, and he was a laughingstock.

“Echo . . . I think I hate you,” he muttered, thinking about all the missed opportunities a week in the virtual world had cost him. He was seeking joy in a false reality.

“I do not understand that particular question,” Echo replied.

“Wasn’t a question,” he said. “In fact, I think it’s time you power down.” He didn’t *actually* hate the inanimate device; he hated what he was becoming long before he ever entered Echo’s world. The Echo was just the catalyst that brought an uncomfortable truth to the surface: he *was* selfish; and it was that selfishness that drove him into the Echo Chamber daily to peer at his perfect avatar, relive his past, and shut out the world.

Mr. Hunter glanced at the avatar one final time, reached up, and then slowly removed the Echo Chamber goggles away from his eyes, saying, “You cannot have me. Farewell, Echo.”

“Mr. Hunter, Farewe . . .” Before she could reply he unplugged the device and watched the power light fade to nothing. Suddenly, he caught a glimpse of himself in the full-length mirror which hung on the back of his office door. He was unshaven, his hair looked dirty, and he was wearing grey dingy sweatpants to work - something he had never done in all of his years of business.

When he emerged from the office, he saw Mrs. Juno look away from her cell phone quickly to pretend she had been working. He smiled at her lack of subtlety and approached her desk.

“Here,” he said, dropping the device and the goggles onto her desk clumsily. “Sell it or something. Just get it out of here,” he added.

“Sure, Mr. Hunter. I’m sorry. It was a bad idea,” she said genuinely.

“And Mrs. Juno . . .” he paused.

“Yes?”

“Thanks for being here,” he said.

She tried to keep her mouth from dropping to the floor. “Um . . . you’re welcome?” she said as if she were asking a question.

Mr. Hunter grabbed his coat, boarded the elevator, and left for the day.

Over the next year, life changed dramatically for Mr. Hunter. He didn’t win the regional salesman of the year, but he did well for himself. Plus, Mrs. Juno and the rest of his staff liked the new man he’d become. There was a shared warmth in the office.

“Knock, knock,” said Mrs. Juno on a rainy Monday morning.

“Come in.” Mr. Hunter was sitting at his desk responding to the weekend’s emails.

“I just popped in to water that flower I got you. Can’t let it die, you know,” she said with a wink. Mrs. Juno thought it quite a gag to buy Mr. Hunter a Narcissus flower and keep it in his office; a reminder of the change he had made over time.

“Go ahead,” he said, smiling.

The phone rang out in the lobby. “I’ll be right back,” said Mrs. Juno, jogging out of the room. “Mr. Hunter’s office. How can I help you?” She twiddled the phone line with her fingers and began smiling from ear to ear. “Oh, I see. Let me patch you through to him.”

Mr. Hunter’s line extension buzzed and he picked up the phone. “Hunter speaking.”

Mrs. Juno smiled at him through the door and pumped her fist in the air as if to cheer him on. On the phone was an ecstatic lady who called him to say thanks for the box of chocolates he’d sent over. That night they would go on their tenth date. Mr. Hunter made reservations for a special screening of *The Sound of Music*.