

## **Lived Reflection, Embodied Memory: The Echo of Narcissus**

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I sense the soles of my feet on the floor, the coolness of the black emptiness. As I walk, not yet able to see where I am going, a warm glow of light becomes apparent to me just as I step through its beam—and I know I have been glimpsed. I continue stepping, releasing my weight through my body and sensing my weight increase, my presence grow. I push into the space and simultaneously I feel the space itself, surrounding me, touching me—along my neck, around my arms. A surge runs through me, almost a tingle, more of a rush—a connection—a flowing between space and me. Cold space and my warm presence mixing like ink and water.

I stand and am overcome by the force of the rhythm surging forth; releasing it—and myself—to it. The power of the rhythm, the pulsing breath and blood, space and self pushing, pulling, reaching, yielding, stirring, mixing, blurring. Buoyed by the flow—co-present self and space. Extending my body into vastness, blackness. I am lit; it is not. I move—mixing the two—blurring between.

I feel calm—buoyed by a new rhythm; it is cyclic—round—inhaling, exhaling. I feel the relation between my breath and blood rhythms. It feels like a waltz. I fall off centre and catch myself, my heart dancing off centre and on, weight playing with gravity. My attention is toward/within my body, my form, my mass, the flow and change of my inner body contained by my skin. My fluid self is sloshing back and forth within me, moving me and supporting me. Free to flow easily, playing with balance and off-balance, experiencing the change, negotiating. The freedom of fluid centre: rhythmic, pulsing, waltzing, playful, buoyant. I begin to skip-hop-fall, catch-turn-step.

My experience of my dancing is not visual but rather kinaesthetic, somatic, sensory, energetic—material and physical, here and now. My experience of my dancing is also imaginative, metaphoric, situational, sometimes full of character and context—perhaps mythic?

In 2006, I made the 20-minute, solo, structured improvisation *Stone* (recorded on DVD by my colleague: filmmaker Angela Jooisse). I wanted to engage the audience through a bodily, experiential, somatic mode. A series of questions guided my process: What is the substance of my dancing experience? Can I share this experience of my dancing with an audience through my dancing? Is it possible to capture this experience in some other way? Can I reflect upon it further in order to deepen my understanding of my dancing experience—and of my dance?

Thinking through moving, and writing my dancing experience from the inside, I am working toward a theoretical articulation of the expanded body in experimental contemporary dance. This term, “expanded body”, is a recent articulation, and I will discuss it briefly at the end of my paper. I describe my method as “auto-ethno-phenomenology”, somewhere between phenomenology and poetics and influenced by Laban Movement Analysis, a method of movement observation and description in which I am also trained. Because I am investigating embodiment through my own experience, my work is necessarily self-analytical, situated in unstable, thick and shifting material. It can be challenging and personally revealing to navigate, and I continue to be in process with it.

I began creating *Stone* by developing material that explored somatic experience, sense perception, and energetic states. Breath is a core aspect in my process and offers the potential for attunement in audience members. The extended vocalizations in the work evolve from breath and contribute to an auditory space. Other sounded rhythms arise in stepping, stomping, and beating the floor and my body. In choosing to perform a structured improvisation rather than a completely codified and set choreography, I aimed to enter an embodied experience of agency in the live performance: while dancing, I was actively making decisions and following spontaneous impulses. I chose this form as a way to foreground myself as an experiencing subject-in-action. Dancing as the subject-of-my-experience, I use the stones as objects of my attention, as a foil for my subjectivity.

During and after the performances I engaged in several different kinds of writing, which deepened both my experiential, interpretive, and theoretical relationship with the work.

First, I wrote during my studio sessions. This experiential writing tracks sensation, perception, and stream-of-consciousness experience. Second, following the performance run, and after a period of time away from the work, I wrote a lived reflection of the performance from embodied memory. I entered into a somato-sensory state, tuning in to my breathing, my sensory experience, and my body awareness, as though preparing for the dance performance. This writing, through an attention to my bodily experiences and impulses, became a kind of performative text. Finally, I completed a theoretical analysis of the dance score itself, as well as the entire process of creating, performing and writing my dancing experience within the work. I applied a psychoanalytic framework to my examination and interpretation of the textual and visual

material. In this process I wrote about the dance from observation of the DVD, while also referencing the performative text and still images.

Throughout this iterative process, moving from dancing to writing to viewing, I was attempting to reflect upon my subjective dancing experience. Indeed, in this quest, I faced the mythic conundrum played out in Ovid's tale of *Echo and Narcissus*. In wanting to know "myself", to access my subjective experience, I became locked in a self-embrace, which, for Narcissus, is a dead end.

After the performances, I wondered if my dancing experience was merely a figment of my imagination, if anything was in fact there. I "called out" to the dance. It echoed back from the page. My performative writing arose as I remembered/relived my experience of performing. It is a translation of my dancing experience into a modality separate from myself. I am able to "hear my dancing" in these words. However, I cannot access my original subjective experience through this text: the pages on which it is written are veils that conceal it. My subjective dancing experience remains hidden, *per se*, but this disembodied echo in language remains—along with the stones themselves in a basket in my study. Quoting from Ovid: "For the bones are turned to stone. She hides in the woods/And no one sees her now along the mountains,/But all may hear her, for her voice is living" (69).

After I had written the performative text, I reviewed the series of still images and the footage from Angela's three-camera shoot of the work. The photos and DVD footage came close to my "felt experience" of my dancing: blurry, translucent, ghostly at times, transitional, fragmentary, physical, dynamic, energetic, specific, balanced and off-balance, aggressive, playful, anxious, fluid. This was it—and not it. I could almost "see"

my experience before me—but not quite. These images are merely another translation in another modality. Once again, I cannot access or know the original experience. The surfaces on which these images appear are veils that conceal it. My subjective dancing experience does not “exist” in them, only these simulacra remain—along with the white gauze of my costume folded on a shelf in my study. Quoting from Ovid: “But when they sought his body, they found nothing,/Only a flower with a yellow center/Surrounded with white petals” (73).

As a possible way out of the conundrum of reflecting on myself, I began to look at the text and DVD translations of the dance as “not me”. What was this dance itself? Using Laban Movement Analysis I described the dancer/dance in movement terms, from a third-person perspective. In this reading, the use of the third person rather than the first person enables a kind of “turning away” from myself in order to turn toward the dance.

The dance carries strong references to birth, which can be simultaneously read as references to death. This is most evident during the section in which the dancer takes a stone into her mouth, convulses, undulates, and thrusts her way across the space, labouring to eventually expel the stone, which is, in fact, an inert, lifeless material. In expelling the stone, she too seems about to expire. She creates a stone cairn part way through the dance that can be interpreted as both a human figure and also as a grave marker. As she enters, she tumbles a handful of stones as she walks. They echo the sound of her body-in-motion. The sound stops when she stops. They can be understood as a metaphor for her body. When the stones are strewn across the stage at the end of the dance, they can be interpreted as the body everywhere, or alternately as a field of gravestones, the body nowhere. Dressed in a white gauze costume she is swaddled, and also shrouded. Her body is veiled, there and not there. The fragmented lighting

accentuates this and her body is sometimes visible, sometimes invisible. Her breath and voice are at times audible and at times not. A heartbeat recurs and dissipates throughout the dance as she strikes the floor with her heel or beats her chest with her fist.

I was initially drawn to the myth of *Echo and Narcissus* because of the use of stones and voice in my dance (perhaps I was Echo?). This connection occurred well after I had completed the performances and the performative writing. Intrigued by this potential, I subsequently read my own writing and others' visual translations of my dancing, the act of performing, the improvisational dance score itself, and my creative process through the myth, and through psychoanalytic turnings of the myth. I eventually came to understand each translation and reflection as a repetition, reiteration, or re-turning of the unknowable moment of subjectivity.

Freud's turning of the myth can be understood as proposing a kind of "birth" of the subject. Freud proposes that the ego develops from a part of the id, which comes in "contact" with the outside world, and which thus deals with sense perceptions and external forces, expectations and cultural norms. As we begin to develop a sense of our body as a differentiated entity and come to see it as an object, we develop this bodily ego. This marks the beginning of a sense of self, a subjectivity or "I". Primary narcissism is described by Freud as a stage of ego development in which the body becomes an object of one's perception and attention.

By contrast, in Claire Nouvet's turning of the myth, she un-reads Ovid's tale as a narrative of the "death" of the subject. In doing this, Nouvet problematizes the notion of subjectivity and of a speaking consciousness. Noting Narcissus's inability to recognize his own speech in the speech that returns to him through Echo, Nouvet proposes that:

“As soon as ‘I’ speaks, ‘I’ loses a consciousness which it never had, and becomes the figure that we posit in place of a consciousness which is, from the moment we speak, lost. In that sense, the speaking ‘I’ marks the absence, the original disappearance of the subject” (108).

For Charles Shepherdson, the psychological trauma of coming into subjectivity is destined ever to repeat, to be relived, because it can never be experienced. He writes about, “the moment of a subject who is not a subject before he sees himself, and who is already lost the moment reflection begins ... The time of the subject is thus an impossible time, the time of an instant of transition ... a moment that gives and takes away, in a movement of constitution that is equally the destitution of the subject” (103).

In reference to Freud: as I dance I re-enact the formation of the bodily ego and the process of differentiation through which the “self” is born. I am focused on my body through both internal and external perception in the moment of my dancing. I am in the process of experiencing my subjectivity coming into being. It is perhaps in this dancing act that I come closest to experiencing my “self”. As Shepherdson writes: “the moment of representation [is] the moment of the subject” (103). However, I am perhaps also furthest from my “self” while dancing if this moment is at once a birth *and* a death.

For Claire Nouvet: “The story of Narcissus’s self-recognition is also the story of the impossibility of any ‘self’-recognition: ‘I’ can only fail to recognize ‘itself’ since there is no recognizable ‘self,’ since there is precisely no self” (132). And this is precisely the problem I face in watching the DVD of my dance or in reading the text of my performance. Having danced or written, I have danced or written myself out, and when I reflect on or read about that which I have made, I am faced with merely a simulacrum

that contains no life or consciousness. As I try to find myself in these reflections and echoes, the veils of page and screen obscure my view. I cannot recognize myself as “I” but only as a figure in which “I” am absent.

In the myth of Echo and Narcissus, there is no other, nor is there a self: Echo can only come into being when the subject calls, but as the subject calls he also dissolves. Echo, therefore, cannot have a body or a subjectivity, because she is, in fact, he who is not, in the moment of calling. Narcissus can only come into being when the subject looks, but as the subject looks he also dissolves. Narcissus, therefore, cannot have a body or a subjectivity because he is, in fact, he who is not, in the moment of looking. And, thus, we have only images and voices, (and flowers and stones), marking both the birth and the death of the subject. Narcissus, flower, birth. Echo, stone, death. When we call to or look for our subjectivity in our own expressions, we find only Echo and Narcissus, disembodied voices and images that are simultaneously everywhere and nowhere, living and dying in a transitional moment that we can never truly know or reflect upon.

In this dance, I am both voice and image, Echo and Narcissus, everywhere and nowhere. The mythic structure returns again as I read and watch translations of this experience that echo from page and reflect from screen. Here too, I am both voice and image, Echo and Narcissus, everywhere and nowhere.

In reading myself as other, using the third person, I turn away from myself in order to turn toward my dance and find a way, however imperfect, to know my dance.

But I cannot know my “self”. In order to re-locate my subjectivity, I must turn away again from these echoes and reflections and re-turn to my dancing, experiencing my subjectivity in the presence of others, manifesting the rhythms and pulsions of my bodily being, always and only ever a subject-in-process.

Quoting one last time from Ovid: “What you seek is nowhere,/And if you turn away, you will take with you/The [one] you love. The vision is only shadow,/Only reflection, lacking any substance./It comes with you, it stays with you, it goes/Away with you, if you can go away” (71).

And so I return to my dancing experience with a reference to Julia Kristeva’s theory of the subject-in-process: her notion of a labile, dynamic, heterogeneous subjectivity that is constantly forming and dissolving through a dialectical signifying process involving the bodily rhythms and pulsions of the semiotic chora and the socio-cultural realm of the symbolic. It is this productive/destructive fluid intermingling of these two modalities (the semiotic and the symbolic) that resonates in my experience of my dancing and of my writing my dancing—and I’m not alone.

In her book *My Body, The Buddha*, American postmodern dancer/choreographer Deborah Hay titles a chapter, “my body is limited by my physical presence.” She goes on to discuss her own experience of dancing and of writing dancing noting that after having written a particular dance, she recognized the simultaneous multiplicity of her dancing experience. Commenting on a libretto of a dance, she notes: “In the second sentence, I realized that horse, rider, woman, playing, dancing, human, being, and galloping, could all happen at once. I was no longer limited to the body of the artist” (28). Hay discusses this as an experience of expansion. I relate to this description and employ the term

“expanded body”—as I noted at the beginning of this paper—to articulate not only the physical/visceral experience of the dancing body, but also a metaphorical, mythic, poetic experience: the semiotic and the symbolic? In the dancing moment, these layers or modalities (the physical/visceral and the metaphorical/mythic) are fluid, liquid, heterogeneous, melting into one another, simultaneous, and transforming—never fixed. The rhythms and pulsions of my dancing body seem to fleetingly crystallize into constellations of meanings that shift and dissolve. This expanded body is an energetic body—aligned with what movement theorist Rudolf Laban calls the dynamosphere: efforts or *antrieb* (also Freud’s word for drives)... And from this, more questions arise ...

I close with the dancingwords of Deborah Hay:

“She Began

Galloping in Circles

Horse

Rider

Woman

Playing

Dancing

A Human

Being

Galloping Off” (29).

### Sources

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Narcissus stares at his reflection, while his rejected suitor, Echo, looks on. The son of the river god Cephissus and the naiad, or nymph, Liriope, it was said that Narcissus would live to old age, if he never looked at himself. He had gained many female admirers, entranced by his beauty, but he rejected them all. One of them, Echo, was so upset by his rejection that she withdrew from the world to waste away. All that was left of her was a whisper. It was heard by the goddess Nemesis, who, in response, made Narcissus fall in love with his own reflection, at which he stared until he died. A nar... Narcissus and Echo were tragic Greek characters in a story told by the Roman poet Ovid in *Metamorphoses*. This poignant myth crystallizes the tragic problem of relationships with narcissists. Sadly, both partners are locked into a painful drama, where neither feel satisfied or sufficiently loved. Echo spotted Narcissus and became infatuated. She longed for his attention, but he was fixated on himself. She tried to call out to him, yet couldn't. When Narcissus next noticed his reflection in a pool of water, love overtook him. He believed that he finally found someone worthy of his love and became entirely absorbed with his own beautiful image, not realizing it was actually himself. Unable to get Narcissus's attention, Echo's obsession and depression grew. Ovid's most famous Echo and Narcissus comes to life in John Waterhouse's famous painting by the same name. But do we really know the story of Narcissus? Then, a blind prophet Teiresias predicted that Narcissus would live to a ripe old age if only he does not encounter his own reflection. Contrary to the title of the story and even to this very composition, in Ovid's story Echo is really a tertiary character, one who has no effect on the causality of Narcissus's fate. She is just a nymph, in love with a beautiful boy. How then does Narcissus find himself at the fateful pond mesmerized by his reflection? Ovid tells us that Ameinias, a boy who was hopelessly in love with Narcissus begged the Gods to avenge his unanswered love. Echo was an Oread or Orestiad, meaning a type of nymph that lived in mountains, valleys, and ravines. The Oreads were associated with Artemis, the goddess of hunting. Zeus used to love consorting with Goddess and nymphs. Narcissus came upon a clear spring at Donacon in Thespia, Narcissus stooped down to drink, and saw his own image in the water; he thought it was some beautiful water-spirit living in the fountain. The spell of Artemis had totally mesmerized him, and for hours he sprawled by the spring, until at last he recognized himself. Echo is, in the aural scope, the equivalent of the reflection that captivates Narcissus's eyes.