

The Echo Injury: Narcissus and Echo on Line and the Loss of Body Cues in Electronic Communication

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Narcissus and Echo are primordial objects representing the catastrophic failure to make contact. Each being loses its human body in the failed attempt, trapped in a primal depersonalization. Daniel Paul Schreber’s catastrophic end of the world ‘my worst fear turned to flesh’ takes an additional step; the fear flesh is destroyed. Narcissus turns his back to Echo, He loses his human form, and becomes a plant. Echo’s survives her vaporized flesh for as long, and dies a bit later. Each of these split self halves are traumatized by the loss of the Voice and Gaze of the Subject. The gaze and voice they see and hear are misrecognized love objects, phantasms, thought-word presentations. To see the object gaze, hear the object voice is to be mad. (Freud, 1915, Lacan, 1959, Zizek, 1990).

There is abundant psychoanalytic discourse about the nature of Narcissus in the myth and the disorder. Echo and Narcissus are both representations and affective realities of the self in a dance of reversal. Without Echo, the role of reversal in the myth and syndrome is missed. True to the archetype, Echo passes largely unheard in

psychoanalytic literature. Bromberg called the analysis of Narcissus and Echo the first recorded instance of premature termination due to unresolved mirror transference. I further posit the analysis of Narcissus without the analysis of Echo as a reversing subject/object is incomplete.

I am going to play with my own experience as a participant in list serve dialogue to flesh out an idea I call the Echo Injury, the assault of the void, of the no-thing and the hallucinatory effort to create a binding something. My ideas are exaggerations, but sometimes not, of external reality. I present the truth of the Real, of experiencing madness when I post a message that receives no affirming contact. I also will explore the loss of body contact in electronic communication, most notably the face, the source of voice and gaze.

I gaze at my computer. At least one of the four psychoanalytic list serves on which I regularly participate is active. Something in a discussion catches my attention. A germ of an idea is activated as is a desire to participate. The thinking and the wish to join in inform each other. A nourishing dialectic between self and self in preparation for a self-other encounter buds in embryonic form, and grows to fruition. I write my post, the electronic voice, and experience a small anxious thrill as I touch the send function. The moment is real; invigorating. Maybe a human subject hears my voice-thought and a dialogue feeding mind and soul is born. Maybe no one hears, or lets me know that I've been heard. No matter; the writing and thinking are still warming. My post may even touch a subject unknown to me; a post-pebble emanating thought ripples in a pond whose shores I cannot see. The discourse between the ineffable Thought Creator and

thought container are alive, experiencing one another. I continue my comfortable gaze, reading, writing, responding, cogitating until interest wanes, the discussion goes moribund, or life demands move me on to other parts of the day. Those are the good days.

Then, there are those other days. I read the discussion, and can neither engage in nor disengage from the discourse. The rather lengthy, sometimes scholarly posts which are beyond my education and/or intellect become magical objects, unbearably desirable objects I cannot reach nor bear to lose. These magnificent posts sometimes transform into dialogues between others who are more experienced, more celebrated, just more than I. Envy. I see intimacies between desired others on-line which do not include me. Jealousy. I fall into a paranoid-schizoid hole, a black hole. My germ of an idea loses meaning as I frantically try to make that idea bigger, better, more interesting, more exciting, just more. I yank it out of the ground before it is ready to be harvested. It is not ripe, inedible and undigestible. I become Narcissus, falling into a state of abjection, as I stare at my post which has become the cloud between me and my idealized reflection. The post stares back at me, it's awful, I'm awful as its writer. It becomes the subject and I its object. I am the super-ego's abject, a cancelled subject. The post has become a dumb thing, *das ding*, a ringing bell, ding ding ding sounding an annihilation alarm. It is dumb despite a hallucinatory vocalized ring-a-*ding*, and cannot speak to the other list reader. I send it out into the on-line discussion; nothing. An answer, an electronic typed voice, even a critical or dismissive one, is a rope to hang on to as the magnetic force in the black hole of primal repression pulls me into it. Failing the life rope, my sense of injury, my grudge, serves as a negative anchor. Primal

fantasies return from the seething cauldron: Mom doesn't hear my screams, Mom and Dad are doing it in the bedroom and I'm locked out, the older, bigger siblings won't play with me, God has cast me out of Paradise to the lake of fire because I can't accept being second in heaven. If a tree falls in the forest and no one is there to hear it, does it make a sound? If my post falls in the list serve and no one answers, did I write it? Silence is an aural abject cloud, a no-thing. On those other days before the self exists to experience the traumatic void, the answer is a silent, screaming, 'no'. I am Echo, a hysterical nymph, a cancelled subject, fading away without the fuel of the Desire of the Other to feed the hallucinosis of the mimetic voice (Bion, 1965; Freud, 1915; Grotstein, 1990; Kahn, 1983; Klein, 1946; Kristeva, 1982; Lacan, 1977).

My colleague and I exchange back channel notes, saying hello and recognizing each other's posts. I know his face, and experience his voice and gaze as I read, like the Freudian baby hallucinating the breast. Memory traces of the soothing body contact is made, my drives and senses return from disembodied madness to their often uncomfortable but inevitable home base within my body. All better. It is similar to the experience of panic in an MRI machine, and the instantaneous relief when the technician strokes my foot a few times. After a while, I can remember the relief and recall the experience, even take it with me to the dentist's office, where no one strokes my foot or holds my hand. The gaze and voice, as the memory of the touch are not symbolized, signified or even represented in rudimentary form. They are embodied.

I attend a live conference and make eye contact with a friend, a colleague, or a stranger. We exchange smiles, frowns, smirks, rolled-eyes. We perhaps indulge in a forbidden whisper during the panel and chat at intermission. Maybe even a handshake or kiss on the cheek. Body to body contact cancels out a driving pressure to grab the microphone at Q&A., manufacturing some idea to use as a conduit out of the void. I am able to think clearly, creatively, maybe even come up with a thought that has some genuine interest or relevance to the panel, and I find myself comfortably engaged in a dialogue. Face to face.

Temple Grandin (1995) wrote that people with autism find talking to people on the telephone easier than face to face because they cannot easily read facial cues. She also wrote of her compassion for her mother, who cannot experience her daughter's love for her. Grandin longs for contact with her mother, but the contact is excruciating for her and her cry is silent. She builds a squeeze machine, a mechanical second skin, (Bick, 1968), to hug herself and keep her psyche in her body in the absence of her own mental representation of a skin surface. She cannot bear the hug of another subject. When the Echo part of my personality comes into the foreground I can no more tolerate the longed for response than can Grandin endure a maternal hug. Autism, as conceived by Tustin (1990), and hysteria, as conceived by Green (1980), are defenses against breakdown, the baby's breakdown in the void before there was a self to experience the breakdown (Winnicott, 1974). The presence of the face catalyzes breakdown in autism; its absence triggers the breakdown in hysteria. These hysterical and autistic self-states fuse and reverse endlessly in Echo.

Duino Elegies
First Elegy

*If I cried out
who would hear me up there
among the angelic orders?*

*And suppose one suddenly
took me to his heart
I would shrivel*

*I couldn't survive
next to his
greater existence.*

(Rainier Maria Rilke)

Voice and gaze as part objects (Zizek,1996) are sensual emanations from components of the face. The senses can only make sense within the common sense of clear thinking, the presence of the thinker who thinks the thought (Bion, 1969). The amorphous blob that Lewin (1946) posits as the representation of a traumatic breast experience in blank psychosis might also be the traumatic face, the source of the Medusa and Siren gaze and voice. Many of the Winnicott squiggles look like face-breasts. As the skin is both the source and object of excitement and relief, so is the face. Voice and gaze are penetrators, the eyes are both creators and receptors, the mouth a creator, the ears the receptors. The life giving maternal gaze turns into the death gaze of the Medusa and the soothing lullaby of the Muses turns into the

maddening song of the Sirens in the absence of the common sense thinking container who metabolizes the sense impressions (Bion, 1969).

A patient is furious with his wife. He reads aloud the text message she sent. The message is filled with rage and injury. The message is closed with a smiley face; the emoticon, a canned gaze semiotic. My patient looks at the smiley face as the mirror of the Imaginary, and his face mirrors the mechanical face. Students are taught to read their written work out loud; the ego self-corrects through negative and positive hallucination. The addition of another sense to the self-editing process, voice added to sight, seeks to defeat the ego's work of positive and negative hallucination to maintain its delusion of narcissistic perfection. The presence of voice, the patients and mine, any mirroring from me about the venom in the message is undone by the wire monkey mother face. My patient also lost the relief of experiencing what seemed to be_ very reasonable anger. I am glad that emoticons have not yet made it into list serve discourse. I think.

I have fewer and fewer patients who can tolerate lying on the couch, and I often have the fantasy that my face is being eaten in session. I imagine my face as a nipple in an infant's mouth, receiving a gummy, rhythmic, squishy face massage. With the BlackBerries and iPhones turned off, some of my patients surrender to the experience of face deprivation, sometimes painful, sometimes wonderful. I wonder about increasing facial plastic surgeries as a frantic search for an idealized face in the mirror to compensate as the day's intercourse becomes more and more faceless and soundless.

Extreme facial starvation may be creating face junkies who are willing to accept an emoticon or a dehumanized surgical face when needing a fix.

The Echo part of self is often represented as female; Echo, Euridicye, Mozart's Pamina crying out for voice and gaze. Echo dissipates to the winds, Euridicye is returned to Hades, Pamina is driven to suicidal despair. Voice and gaze are phallic, in that they are penetrating part objects. Echo the archetype is passive, wholly dependent on the breast/face for survival. Yet, men were babies too.

Cinderella's Life at the Castle

After Cinderella married the prince she turned her attention to minutiae, using her glass slipper as a magnifying lens.

When at court she would wear orange peels and fish tins, and other decorous rubbish as found in the back of the castle.

You are making me very nervous, said the prince.

But Cinderella continued to look at something through her glass slipper.

Did you hear me? Said the prince.

Cinderella's mouth hung open as she continued to look at something through her glass slipper.

Did you hear me, did you hear me, did you hear me? Screamed the prince.

Russell Edson

The baby, male and female, experiences a breakdown when the void extends past a point wherein the baby can maintain the experience of maternal presence.

There is no such thing as a baby. Woman does not exist except as the object of the Primal Father, His Majesty the Baby, Narcissus. She only can be signified as the object of the phallus, the primal signifier. Yet, the face is a primal signifier, the maternal face. I

see the archetype of the crying, pleading desperate woman as the pre-gendered, premature human baby's reversal revenge for being left for dead by the absent primal face (Eigen, 1980; Freud, 1914; Lacan, 1977; Winnicott, 1974).

Reversals. Narcissus and Echo, Cinderella and the Prince, self and other, foreground and background, hysteria and autism, mind and body, abstract and concrete, face and phallus, voice and gaze, life and death. They are primordial object representations, and expressions of affect which only can be realized in relational contact. Reversal is older than projection, introjection, projective identification and repression in the birth of personality.

*“The mechanisms of disguise that are more particularly suggestive of affect are centred around a double return (reversal into its opposite and turning upon the subject's own self), which, according to Freud, are supposed to act before the intervention of repression. One might add to them the production of affects symmetrical with those of the object or complementary to its own, even opposed, as if **echoing**, (my underline) those that are transmitted in intersubjective contact. No doubt, too, the mechanisms of introjection and projection are not conceived outside a predominant affective base, but one might also argue that they go beyond them.”*

(Andre Green, 1999)

In illness, reversal fuses and separates endlessly, confounding the drive for truth, leaving psychotic process (Eigen, 1986). Kristeva (1989) uses Holbein's Christ in the Tomb to illustrate the inescapable experience of death in the absence of live gazing faces witnessing the body, available for reversal in the drama of resurrection. The comfort of resurrection is destroyed with only the gaze of the claustrophobic tomb surrounding the corpse.



Hans Holbein. *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb*. 1521. Oil on wood. Kunstmuseum Basel, Basel, Switzerland.

Projective identification includes the fantasy of the disavowed self part entering the mother's body. A psychotic claustrophobia, enclosed in nowhere, can happen when the self cannot reclaim its lost parts from the container. (Meltzer, 1992). Reversal is a more two dimensional in and out for an emerging self not yet capable of self-retrieval from three dimensional containing spaces, yet can itself degrade to psychotic nullification of experience.

In Orlando Di Lasso's Echo song for antiphonal choirs (Ola!, O Che Buon Eco), the subject is enchanted by Echo and wants to play with her. He misrecognizes her as a subject. She is only a representation of his object voice. She can't relate, and she also can't stop until the subject bows to Echo's endless, lifeless mimicry and is silent. In the original Italian, there is a reversing word pun Ecco, Here it is, and Echo; here it isn't. Primordial objects play at Winnicott's object usage, object recognition: "hullo object, there you are", but no, there you are not. The subject cries enough! Basta! over and over again until the subject swallows his last Basta!, unscreamed, and gives up (Winnicott, 1966).

The Echo Song
(English)

Hi there! Oh, what a lovely echo!
Let's try it out.
Pleased to meet you!
Ha ha ha ha ha! Let's all laugh!
Oh my fine companion?
What do you want?

*I'd like you to sing a song.
Why? Why should I?
Why not?
Because I don't want to.
Why don't you want to?
Because it doesn't please me.
Shut up, I say!
You shut up, you big fool!
Yes, Sir!
Come now, no more!
Let's go!
Goodbye lovely echo!
Goodbye lovely echo!
Rest in peace.
Enough! Enough! Enough! Enough!*

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=99NSw8aRcDU>

(1 minute, 12 seconds).

Echo and Narcissus, archetypal objects, fail in a traumatic repetition of an abortive drive to move from object relations to object usage. In electronic exchanges, the face, perhaps the primordial background object of support is not there. A void instead of a facial holding environment. I present Narcissism as the reversal and fusion of autistic and hysterical self parts, Narcissus and Echo, defending against the fear of breakdown, striving for subjectivity. This paper, Echo herself, calls to psychoanalytic discourse to turn its gaze towards her.

They called it twilight sleep. A woman would go through her birthing labor, and was given a heavy sedation for the birth. My mother was unconscious when I was born. I began singing opera when I was very young, and made very loud noises. Echo trying to awaken the sleeping mother-lover with scream/song.

That's enough. Basta!

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