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# 'Pulse for Pulse, Breath for Breath:' Reconsidering Embodiment through the Phenomenology of Respiration

Erica Britenburg  
Clemson University, [britenburgel@gmail.com](mailto:britenburgel@gmail.com)

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“PULSE FOR PULSE, BREATH FOR BREATH:” RECONSIDERING  
EMBODIMENT THROUGH THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF RESPIRATION

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Accepted by:  
Dr. Erin M. Goss, Committee Chair  
Dr. Scot Barnett  
Dr. Catherine Paul

## ABSTRACT

A phenomenological examination of the respiratory process reveals that possessing the ability to breathe carries with it more significance than an action that solely supports life: capable of leaving the immediate confines of the body, the breath is an enigmatic extension of the self. This particular traversing capability of the active body challenges notions of what it means to be fully embodied by indicating the possibility of subjective expansion outside that which is tangible and fleshly. Due to the intertwining and exchanging characteristics implicit within respirational activity, the sensational boundaries of subject and object become conflated with one another; the sensations experienced and transferred between the two must then be considered as a critical component in the development and evaluation of an embodied being. Phenomenal embodiment extends beyond an individual's habitation solely within and for itself; it manifests within the recognition of sensation through an exchangeable respiration between bodies. Drawing from the theoretical considerations of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, this thesis will focus primarily on the treatment of respiration and sensation within Christina Rossetti's mythic poem "Echo," establishing the ways in which the intercorporeal crossing of subject and object upon the intersection of their breath is the communicative catalyst through which the phenomenal presence of one's sense of self is engendered and sustained.

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## “PULSE FOR PULSE, BREATH FOR BREATH:” RECONSIDERING EMBODIMENT THROUGH THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF RESPIRATION

Deviating slightly from its most basic biological definition,<sup>1</sup> the act of respiration is understood in the following theoretical and literary analysis as that which functions as more than an external manifestation of a life-sustaining necessity. The oscillation between inhalation and exhalation not only pumps the heart and circulates the blood, but this process also creates an opportunity to become aware of one’s own breath beyond its participation in sustaining the body. As it passes through bodily openings, the breath serves as a tangible affirmation of one’s living presence in the world. From a phenomenological perspective, an examination of the respiratory process reveals that possessing the ability to breathe carries with it more significance than an action that solely supports life: capable of leaving the immediate confines of the body, the breath is an enigmatic extension of the self. This particular traversing capability of the active body challenges notions of what it means to be fully embodied by indicating the possibility of subjective expansion outside that which is tangible and fleshly. Due to the intertwining and exchanging characteristics implicit within respirational activity, the sensational boundaries of subject and object become conflated with one another; the sensations experienced and transferred between the two must then be considered as a critical component in the development and evaluation of an embodied being. Phenomenal embodiment extends beyond an individual’s habitation solely within and for itself; it

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<sup>1</sup> Respiration is the distribution of energy through the cells and tissues of an organism. It is also the process by which Oxygen and Carbon Dioxide are exchanged between an organism and its environment. (Oxford English Dictionary Online)

manifests within the recognition of sensation through an exchangeable respiration between bodies. Drawing from the theoretical considerations of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, this thesis will focus primarily on the treatment of respiration and sensation within Christina Rossetti's mythic poem "Echo," establishing the ways in which the intercorporeal crossing of subject and object, upon the intersection of their breath, is the communicative catalyst through which the phenomenal presence of one's self is engendered and sustained.

Attention to respiratory action reveals that the process of becoming embodied is situated at the indistinct periphery between a subject and object. The air that organic beings breathe billows in and out of bodies without regard for the indicative boundaries of self and other. A simultaneous engagement with air through a shared space results in an unavoidably intimate interaction between bodies. The act of taking in another's breath suggests that the bodily boundaries that supposedly distinguish subject from object are, in fact, phenomenally much more porous than may be thought. Whereas this blurring may appear to compromise an individual's state of embodiment, it is through this phenomenal interaction between the breath of a subject and that of an object—the hazy transgression of space within and through bodies—that one exists as an embodied person. Within this intercorporeal paradigm, the individual is always already embodied as the sensations generated from and through another breathing body regenerate the self, even when a felt sense of disembodiment challenges the individual's perceived stability within the world.

## ECHOES OF THE PAST

A turn to the figure of Echo offers an opportunity to examine respiration as it has subtly accompanied a long history of literary criticism focused primarily on the tragic figure's deterioration into a disembodied voice. Though implicated in the discussion of Echo's vocal abilities as a measure of her embodiment, in Ovidian discussions the breath has never been examined independently, or as a means to calibrate her intercorporeal existence. Using the traditional narrative of Echo and Narcissus as a referential point, Echo's respiratory existence at the beginning of the Rossetti poem indicates that she might be capable of regaining sensory communication. As a result Echo would gain a level of intercorporeality with Narcissus even though they are both limited within the confines of their respective curses. Rossetti's placement of Echo as the sole speaker proves to be a substantial departure from the original Ovidian narrative which says of Echo, "She cannot choose but wait the moment when his voice may give to her an answer" (Ovid 370), which indicates that she is a figure incapable of generating her own language. By giving her an independently functioning monologue rather than limiting her to mere repetition, Rossetti's narrative transforms Echo from being reliant upon another's utterances to being capable of producing unique thought and speech. In giving Echo an independent voice, Rossetti allows her to possess some scant amount of subjectivity, enough to acknowledge her own tragic devolution into a disembodied state. Echo's ability to speak suggests that that which remains should not be interpreted as an empty non-entity but instead as a corporeal remnant, though the devastation to the body left behind is perhaps a more crushing fate. Echo's existence within the world has not been

done away with entirely but has instead cruelly withered to a disjointed husk. In this particular state, Echo's remains are similar to a fading ember, a fleck which lingers between existing, albeit quite unstable, and being extinguished. The devastation to the subjective self in this purgatorial scenario is unfathomably traumatic and yet, within Rossetti's lines is a suggestion that there is the small chance of mending that which is broken. Through a calling out, observation, simulation, and literal taking in of another's sensation and bodily action, what is left of Echo generates a type of validation and phenomenal appearance of the self, resulting in the production of the breath underlying the very words she is forced to speak.

According to the Ovidian myth from *Metamorphoses*, Echo is obligated to mimic the language of another while lacking the ability to craft her own response. Scholars have long insisted that the tragedy of Echo lies in the symbolic elements lost alongside the disintegration of voice as she progressively disintegrates from silent body to nothing more than a name and reverberation of another's call. As the corporeal ability to vocalize becomes increasingly compromised and then completely suffocated, so do the metaphorical representations of agency, power and subjectivity. The theoretical approaches by Gayatri Spivak in "Echo" and Jacques Derrida's articulations in the eponymous documentary, "Derrida," attend to Echo as a corporeal representation of the impossibility of speech and the relative struggle and inability to decipher unwavering meaning from language. While reading the dissolution of Echo is significant in that it aids in the identification of what is lost, the scholarship as a whole hesitates to explore the repercussions of Echo's direct loss of her body. Derrida ruminates on a compelling

moment where he says that Echo “speaks in such a way that the words become her own” (Derrida). Though he references the appropriation of voice, it is possible that there are alternative means, like sensation and respiration, through which Echo finds a new way to “speak” through the body.

Not attending to the loss of the palpable body and its experiences hinders the recognition of a potential revival of Echo’s embodiment. Ultimately, grasping onto Echo’s extreme devolution to take hold of larger linguistic and social stakes compromises the productivity of a discussion of Echo’s voice. Echo is consistently flagged as a representational figure but readings of Echo as a body suffering from feelings of disembodiment due to her inability to speak, to be heard and to be seen, are few and far between. Two related explanations might account for the relative absence of theoretical offerings of recovery. First, perhaps the loss is so incredibly devastating that finding ways around this disjuncting are essentially futile. Secondly, it is likely that these critical investigations strictly work within the Ovidian myth where Echo’s body has already dissolved so there is effectively no chance to become re-embodied due to the inescapable fact that there is no longer an actual body. Whereas this gap exists in critical works surrounding the myth, there is, however, a potentially productive response located in Christina Rossetti’s poem. Throughout the lines of “Echo,” she takes pause within Ovid’s story at the moment when Echo still possesses a body, though spectral, to offer phenomenal simulation as a means to craft a route back to embodiment through sensational interactivity, and thus to revive that which has been all but destroyed.

## RESUSCITATING ECHO AND REVIVING SENSATION THROUGH ROSSETTI'S RESPIRATORY INVOCATION

By crafting the poem around the Echo narrative and making her the speaker, Christina Rossetti creates an alternative space through which her character can communicate, breathe and sense. "Echo" begins with an invocation presumably for Narcissus, though it is not explicitly stated that it is to him that she beckons, to return to and recognize her as a complementary body participating in phenomenal intercorporeality. Throughout the poem, Echo pleads for this return so that their feelings of decomposition could perhaps cease or be mitigated through a harmonious union of breath. In the midst of these invitational lines are hesitations which highlight the intensity of Echo's bodily and sensational losses. Though the poem concludes without a definite moment of reestablished embodiment, it is through allusions to a shared breath and corresponding sensational exchange that Rossetti seems to suggest Echo experiences embodiment through intercorporeality.

A review of Rossetti's works in addition to "Echo" reveals a propensity to situate her female characters in a position of sensory deprivation. This absence or withholding of sensory capability is particularly evident in "Goblin Market" and "In an Artist's Studio." Many of Rossetti's characters lack the ability to see, hear, taste or feel in full capacity and are subsequently granted these bodily experiences through some type of exchange with other, mostly masculine, bodies. "Goblin Market," for example, focuses on the physical and psychological repercussions of a pair of sisters who, after the youngest has indulged in the goblins' forbidden fruit, become increasingly disembodied as a result of their

inability to participate in a balanced sensory experience. Post-consumption, the sister, “Found them no more, but dwindled and grew gray” (156). The narrative continues to show that within this withering the sister becomes deaf, blind, without the ability to taste and becomes listless all from her inability to engage with her senses, with other bodies, and with her surroundings.

Rossetti’s “In an Artist’s Studio” similarly presents a cluster of painted female characters that “look out from all [their] canvases” (1) and who are not actually capable of vision in the first place. Locating their painted bodies in a canvas, a literal boxing in, renders them immediately blind, as well as mute, immobile, and incapable of engaging in any sensational contact with the outside world. They are left to be “hidden behind those screens” (3). In each scenario, Rossetti imbues the female characters with experiences and feelings of disembodiment from the lack of sensational and emotional connectivity and absence of sensory reciprocity with another body: they are isolated from sensation and are in essence cut off from communication with others.

However, Rossetti rarely leaves her characters phenomenally destitute and isolated for long. She regularly provides a means to recover from this disjuncting by creating a dreamscape where it is possible for the female character to regain a sense of embodiment through imagined sensation. “Goblin Market” portrays sleep as a means for the youngest sister, Laura, to escape from the hysterics which accompany her inability to sense in full. It is after the other sister Lizzie sacrifices herself by eating the forbidden fruit and then giving it in return to Laura that Rossetti indicates they are both healed and “awoke as if from a dream” (537). Similarly, in “In an Artist’s Studio,” Rossetti suggests

the figures are allowed to exist as feeling bodies only within the artist's dream. Rossetti's introduction of a dream-like space into her poems provides an opportunity for the characters to reengage the body and mind by simulating sensations that make possible the creation of a lived experience that would otherwise be nearly impossible in the original and limiting setting. "Echo" continues this trope and through its dreamscape Echo is revived through sensational activities.

As a whole, Rossetti scholarship including analyses by Theo Dombrowski and Dolores Rosenblum, tends to conclude that the introduction of sensation into her poems is a means to transcend into Christian spirituality. From this perspective, the dreamscape serves to simulate a heavenly realm through which the characters abandon their supposedly "weak" flesh. However, Rossetti's simultaneous focus on the phenomenology of the earthly body seems to advocate an alternative reading. The continued interest in accessing the senses suggests that to live in isolation without experiencing the interactivity of sensation is to lose a critical part of the embodied self. Diverging from the common interpretation that the primary motive of Rossetti's works is to abandon the actual body in an effort to gain spiritual transcendence, the continual return to the senses of the body is, in fact, a means to grapple with the phenomenal body and to better understand experience and what it can ultimately offer. To regain sensational interaction through real or imaginary simulation is to revive embodied experiences that have been interrupted or completely severed for a large majority of her characters. By crafting a performative space through which sensation revives the fragmented self, if only temporarily, Rossetti establishes adaptive recovery methods by which an exchange of

sensation reinforces the body that suffers from disembodied feelings rather than abandoning it.

## SIMULATING RESPIRATION

Keeping with these repetitive tropes, it is not surprising that Echo's narrative should unfold in a similar fashion to Rossetti's other characters. Staging the poem somewhere around the middle of the Ovidian narrative, Echo is positioned as a figure that has not at this point deteriorated entirely to only a repetition, as she is still capable of creating a unique response in the form of a poetic voice. Through a reading of Rossetti's lines, it is revealed that Echo suffers from a numbing of the senses and that as a result, she is also quickly losing a grasp on her sense of self, as the surrounding world can seemingly no longer detect her deteriorating form. The poem begins at a telling moment of Echo's mounting inability to recognize her own embodiment despite seeing subjectivity present in Narcissus. In the midst of becoming a spectral figure, she looks only to him in hopes of earning his acknowledgment. Though Echo is still somewhat aware of the disintegration of her body, she almost immediately begins to forget herself as an embodied subject due to her inability to create new phenomenal experiences and to recognize the potential in the interactivity of what remains of her sensing body.

Rossetti's narrative cannot help but draw off of the traditional myth. She, however, suspends the story at a pivotal moment and offers a new reading of the situation: the poetic lines indicate that Echo clutches onto the hope of being acknowledged by Narcissus so that he will complete her and give her back to herself,

rather than suggesting Echo is looking to become only an absolute object of Narcissus's affection. Cursed to see nothing but his own self, Narcissus is an extreme representation of the subjective body Echo does not seem to know she possesses. Perhaps his phenomenal presence will transfer through her remaining body and revive that which had been lost. Though the traditional story veils Echo's appeal as a desire for a lover's requited exchange, "Oh, how she longed to make her passion known! To plead in soft entreaty! To implore his love!" (Ovid 370), the language throughout the plea by Rossetti's Echo suggests she is seeking validation for herself through sensory interaction, namely through the act of respirational exchange between Narcissus and herself. This phenomenological perspective offers an opportunity to explore how respiration functions, beyond its strict biological utility, in the construction and constitution of the self.

Within the lines of the poem is a subtle allusion to biological breath suggesting that Echo's route to becoming phenomenally embodied is not of one decidable origin but is urged along by a literal act of breathy inspiration. To breathe in union with Narcissus would be the most effective means to validate Echo's existence in the world by attending to multiple senses at once. Palpably monitoring and duplicating the still unmentioned Narcissus' "soft rounded cheeks" (3) filled with air would result in a moment where their two "souls brimfull abide and meet" (9). Traditionally limited only to repetition, it is suspected that Echo is incapable of producing the breath needed for her own independent speech. However, drawing from Narcissus' respiration, or rather having his expelled air be pushed to her, watching his cheeks billow, his breast expand and contract, hearing the air escape from between his lips and nose, and feeling the puffs of moisture rebound off

her skin allow Echo to experience the respiratory actions necessary to resuscitate her life. The respiration directly engaging what remains of her body serves as a phenomenal reminder that she is a presence affecting and being affected by other sensing, breathing bodies.

Initially, the ever-present interactivity between sensing bodies appears to limit individual subjectivity due to the continual engagement with another body. One's flesh is never actually a clearly drawn line of what is proverbially considered "mine" and "yours." However, it is through the blurring of phenomenal spaces that the self and body become somewhat delineated. Parallel to my proposal that the emergent potential of respiration acts as a catalyst for intercorporeal embodiment is Elizabeth Grosz's *Chaos, Territory, Art*. Grosz approaches an understanding of sensational interaction in the world by thinking in terms of framing, or an infinite and changing series of territories. Drawing from the theories of both Gilles Deleuze and Erwin Strauss, she posits that the framework through which the world and its resident bodies emerge is essentially a "partition" that, "constitutes the possibility of an inside and an outside... Though it [the frame] primarily divides, [it] also provides new connections, new relations, social and interpersonal relations, with those on its other side" (14). In a nuanced continuation of the frame metaphor, Grosz insists the frame exists more as a window, simultaneously allowing for a distinction between subject and object and also providing a directed space through which these subjects and objects can interact. The mediating boundary of these interactions is the perceiving body in conjunction with the universe, both of which are, "entwined in

mutual concavity/convexity, floating/falling, folding/unfolding [and] are directly touched by that outside now enframed, creating sensation from their coming together” (16).

Though respiration is not technically defined as a sensation, it is a bodily action that is detected by a perceiving body through the primary senses. In keeping with Grosz’s window/partition/frame metaphor, breath is the bodily substitution for the air that flows between these “windows” or more appropriately, lungs. If Echo and Narcissus exist within a relatively limited space, their bodies, though becoming increasingly disembodied, must become engaged with one another, sensationally speaking. As a result, the sensations created by the streaming flow of breath reposition the bodies not as the limiting absolutes of subject and object that Narcissus and Echo have respectively been cursed to be, but as intercorporeal bodies involved in a fluctuation between the two positions.

In allowing Echo to have a voice that speaks not in echo but in a unique response, Rossetti puts forth that Echo still has a body. The voice, derived from her increasingly spectral body, is sustained through a circulation of breath transformed into utterance. Echo’s voice has been similarly strained and threatens to fade and vanish entirely, yielding to become a mere repetition. Still, she is compelled to speak, perhaps in a belabored whisper, in an effort to reinstate the phenomenal communication between bodies and reconstitute her body and identity. Echo reveals that she seeks to reinstate her “very life again tho’ cold in death” (Rossetti 14) through an invocation of interactivity within sensational communication. A particularly poignant, and perhaps the most evidentiary moment in the text, is Echo’s beckoning for her love to come to her so she

may become “whole” again. She urges, “Come back to me in dreams, that I may give / Pulse for pulse, breath for breath” (15-16). This desperate yearning reveals her compulsion to use phenomenal means to constitute a synthesis of the self through multiple bodies. Echo seemingly equates a revival of embodiment with her capability to practice the most vital activities which regulate and articulate life: a pulsing heart compelled by a steady breath—all of which are monitored by the individual through sensory manifestations. Here, a prioritization of the breath is not only vital to sustaining a life but also essential in constructing a phenomenal understanding of one’s body and self as a subject situated within the sensational world.

Indicative of an entreaty for reviving sensory happenings between these interwoven and struggling bodies, the final stanza reveals that Echo invokes Narcissus’ return so that she “may live.” This is required so that she “may give” (13, 15) back tangible signs of life to the other body, signifying a reciprocal exchange and validation through sensational, specifically respiratory, phenomena. The lyrical rhyming of these small phrases does not appear to be solely for the sake of staying in scheme. The “live” and “give” dynamic initiates a cycle to supplement the deterioration that both Echo and Narcissus have endured. The similarity in sound mimics the reciprocity between the two lived bodies. If Echo achieves through sensation an ability to return to an embodied state through the reception of Narcissus’ breath, it can be presumed that he too will inevitably break out of his isolated subjectivity because he has projected something of himself onto her. Once this cycle becomes steady, their shared respiration will sustain their bodies in an intertwining phenomenal existence. In this telling intertextual moment, it seems as if

Narcissus, noticeably unnamed throughout the poem, emerges as a figure only through the respiratory invocation and presence of Echo. The “give” to “live” cycle mimics inhalation and exhalation to create intercorporeality between individual bodies, suggesting that embodied subjectivity is not determined by a constant union within the self but is instead located in the urge to sense, connect and respond to another body by phenomenal means.

An examination of the poem’s composition reveals that Rossetti’s rhythm and rhyme scheme are additional reflections of Echo’s compulsion to complete a respiratory cycle and regenerate her deteriorating body and fragmented soul. Beginning with a request, “Come to me in the silence of the night” (1), Echo offers a glimpse into her scenario which, by playing on the connotations of “silence” and “night,” is imagined as an environment devoid of sensory interaction, one filled instead with feelings of inadequacy of the self and suffocating isolation. To be aware of the silent night, Echo must still be capable of perceiving sound and sight. Though perhaps a literal setting, it is likely that the stagnant landscape is a metaphorical indication that Echo is beginning to lose her ability to use her senses in their full saturation and as such, the silent night is representative of the growing similarity between Echo’s deteriorating body and her surroundings. In losing a grasp on her subjectivity, Echo recedes into the relatively inanimate background instead of differentiating herself from it through a utilization of her remaining sensory abilities. Like the characters in Rossetti’s other poems, Echo becomes increasingly limited in her connective senses. Instead of turning inward to her remaining subjectivity and sensory capabilities, all Echo can do is pine for their return and mourn

their loss. As a result, she fails to see herself as a subject, further disconnecting her body and sensation, which instead creates a type of self-fulfilling prophecy or more appropriately, a self-*un*fulfilling prophecy. Though the setting proves to be a dismal void, Echo still invokes Narcissus' return, in hopes that the metaphorical experience of her silent night will transform them both through their intercorporeality, ultimately leading to the reemergence of her self.

The requests for Narcissus' return, interpreted as an effort to begin this transformation and to regain the self-sufficiency of her own breath, are the repetitive pleading lines for Narcissus to "come to," "come in," "come with," and "come back." These repetitions are her poetic, gasping attempts to inhale the air of which she has been literally and figuratively deprived. She beckons for his return to see, hear, feel, and breathe his body, that she may eventually recreate those particular signs of life in and for herself. The use of that particular verb is yet another appeal toward shared respiration. The OED indicates that the verb "To come" expresses "movement towards or so as to reach the speaker, or the person spoken to, or towards a point where the speaker in thought or imagination places himself...towards the person who forms the subject of his narrative" and "movement, involved in reaching or becoming present." Placing an emphasis on crossing a physical space accentuates the potential of the phenomenal body. Calling for Narcissus to cross is not likely to manifest in a consciously deliberate movement; after all, tradition suggests he will never see anyone but himself in the form of a reflection. However, the breath he emits into the world will inevitably pass through the space between their bodies. The repetitive request almost commands the exchange in

its persistence. As Echo literally speaks the word, she puts forth her struggling breath to prompt Narcissus to breathe her in, to phenomenally consume her enough that he would, in return, expel his breath into the area where she still exists.

Echo beckons for this crossing of bodies and space that she may transition into the dreamscape Rossetti regularly employs as a means to transcend into a recuperative state. It is through this imaginative space that Echo envisions the development of her own respiration and accompanying sensational exchanges. Echo establishes for herself an environment where the primary communication method is a “speaking silence of a dream” (Rossetti 2). These seemingly contradictory words offer evidence of a phenomenal voice that speaks through the body when actual words fail or cannot be uttered. Sensational activity acts as a supplement if speech is not possible in its traditional form. Assuming this as true, the ensuing silence resulting from the inability to speak in the traditional sense is no longer considered such a profound loss of self. It is not a sentence which creates feelings of disembodiment or renders the body mute, leaving it to become increasingly spectral. The silence becomes instead an opportunity to reintroduce the body and recover a new sense of wholeness, or at least repair, derived from the simulation of phenomenal action. It is here that Echo is offered a period of necessary relief. The “speaking silence” she desires extends beyond a transformation of speech from vocalization to body language. At this juncture, neither body nor voice is being literally strained. Because this communication is taking place through a dreamlike medium, Echo’s fatigued body remains at rest alongside its vocal counterpart. Echo experiences movement and speech through an intense imagining rather than through

literal action. In this manner, the silent yet speaking rest functions much like a meditative state where she can invoke a previous state of being a “memory, hope, love of finished years” (6).

It is through the rest and reunification within the dreamscape that Echo can possibly conjure enough strength to actually breathe on her own and sustain her “very life again” (Rossetti 14). As James Morley notes in, “Inspiration and Expiration: Yoga Practice through Merleau-Ponty’s Phenomenology of the Body,” the phenomenon of breath control has long been cultivated as a means to reach a harmony of the self and to reach a hidden potential within and through breathing bodies. Morley’s work accounts for the parallels between awareness and control of the breath to one’s phenomenal perception of the world. The act of respiration and regulation of the rate and time at which it enters the body allows for the individual to become aware of the dynamics between the inner and outer body. The concentration and even invocation of the breath creates for the individual a grounding occupation of space, though that grounding continually shifts. The practitioner’s focus on respiration allows for him or her to “live the opening and closing of these corporeal zones” (76). Morley continues that breathing, mediated through the senses, is the means through which the individual becomes a subject by engaging in a “cosmic ‘homology’ between the body and the world” (76). An emphasis, however slight, on the moment in between respiratory moments allows for an envisioning of one’s place in the world. As the breath is experienced in a meditative state, the recipients of the bodily air experience an increasing harmony as it enters, descends and expands throughout the body. As the lungs fill with air, the blood is renewed with oxygen, with

life; the individual is made aware of his or her position as a palpable entity and as a result feels the simultaneous internality and externality of the self (77). Completed through a dreamlike simulation, the invocation and interaction with the respiratory echoes of another body create a holistically reunified subject in Echo, bringing about a newly envisioned and embodied whole through phenomenal means.

While Echo's language suggests that the dream will offer the previously mentioned experiential benefits, it is important to realize that she is not actually in the dream during her appeal. A sudden pause in Echo's pleas for Narcissus to come close so that they may share in intercorporeal breath signals a shift in thought. The invocation's interruption suggests hesitancy on Echo's part to rely on sensation as the sole phenomenal experience that is necessary to bring her embodied feelings back or to unite herself and the elusive Narcissus in an intercorporeal exchange. She has yet to transition from reality and, fearing the possibility of a negative outcome, she renders herself immobile, both physically and emotionally within the dream state. Echo laments the possibility that the act of remembering herself as, for all intents and purposes, whole, capable of feeling sensations in their most vibrant exchange, will be too painful. Echo cries, "Oh dream how sweet, too sweet, too bittersweet, / Whose wakening should have been in Paradise" (7-8). These few lines are indicative of just how traumatic the transition into disembodiment and out of intercorporeality has been for her. The dream, she fears, will be a reminder of that which she has lost and may not be able to regain. If she were to awake from the dream without having recovered that reciprocity and sensation, her despair would be largely irreversible and the completion of her disembodiment,

imminent. However, by fixing herself within the dreamscape, Echo limits the possibility of an outcome where the exchange of breath was enough to reengage her body within an intercorporeal dialogue. Frozen in place, Echo can only simulate the breath experience she had so desperately attempted to invoke initially.

Echo continues to imagine the awakening gone awry. The initial hope of having souls meet and intertwine is interrupted by a shift in Echo's thoughts as she considers the awakening will be, "where thirsting longing eyes / watch the slow door / that opening, letting in, lets out no more" (10-12). The image of a slowly opening door which then disallows any further crossings over its threshold alludes to a false passage into a promising state. If Echo's door is initially thought to be an entryway into a paradise where an exchange would take place, its closing suggests otherwise. In this moment Echo ruminates on her fear that the dream will prove to be unsuccessful and that the breath she simulates will not result in any type of recovered sense of self. If upon waking, the breath which she had hoped would travel from another body through her lungs fails to sustain her, Echo's disembodiment would appear inevitable; literally, when the respiratory exchange ceases to exist, so does her life. These hesitations are substantial and suggest an incredibly deep contemplative state on Echo's part.

It is here that the poem concludes without a resolved end, and Echo's voice simply ceases to exist. The cutting off of Echo's voice allows for the possibility of multiple endings, suggesting that willing the act of sensational communication and the course to establishing intercorporeality within Echo's disjointed body is a difficult task. The first possibility alludes that in this moment of uncertainty, the depth of Echo's

introspection signals a capacity to reengage with her senses, to become re-embodied within her self, her tangible body, other bodies and her surroundings. The intensity of her emotion and contemplation validates Echo's capacity to experience in full, as these emotions are intimately associated with the senses. An alternate conclusion is that it is uncertain whether or not Echo will be able to breathe once again as her voice has vanished. The ambiguity in Rossetti's conclusion leaves behind a sense of incompleteness. An awareness of the intertextual implications of this suspended ending leaves the reader presuming Echo is fated to become the absent reverberation of Narcissus' cries despite her efforts to prevent this dissolution. What this then seems to produce is an immediate feeling of loss that places the reader on a similar plane of feeling disembodied along with Echo and a longing to reconnect her with sensation. The presumed lack of response from Narcissus and discontinuation of Echo's voice prompts a desire to complete the narrative and to breathe for Echo when it is likely that she cannot. It is through this incompleteness of the traditional myth that Rossetti indirectly suggests the importance of establishing a supplemental sensational relationship with another body to experience a full phenomenal embodiment or sense of completion.

#### REVIVING MERLEAU-PONTY'S "INTERTWINING:" ENGAGING WITH THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF RESPIRATION

The phenomenological grounding for my reading of Rossetti's "Echo" has largely been informed by an interpretation of Merleau-Ponty's *The Visible and the Invisible*, due primarily to the poetic language he employs when discussing sensational exchanges

between bodies. Within Merleau-Ponty's text are many allusions to respiration or references which mimic the respiratory process. However, the work noticeably lacks direct attention to the interactivity of breath and its exchanging characteristics, despite its underlying presence throughout his use of language for the purpose of discussing indicators of sensory exchange.

This void is especially significant and perplexing considering how the act of breathing interacts so closely with the other bodily sensations with which Merleau-Ponty directly engages. As air circulates through the lungs, the respiratory performance manifests both subtly and overtly through taste, smell, touch, sight and hearing, though the breath is not actually a sense in itself. Indicators of corporeal communication between bodies, primary sensations become entangled with one another as they are often experienced in tandem with another sense. This dynamic makes it increasingly difficult to extract them from one another. The impossibility of isolating a sensational experience in an effort to attribute it to just one particular sense is relatively impossible, barring scientific investigation. Likewise, the breath exists as an ethereal amalgam between bodies. Each respiratory manifestation is a moment of lived experience, however temporary, and the communication exchanged between those sensing bodies ebb and flow, inhale and exhale, in indecipherable ways. It is not as simple as directly saying "I breathe out as you breathe in." The exchange of breath is continual and varying rather than rigidly systematic. Clearly, the breath does not always exist in choreographed inhalations and exhalations performing one inhalation for an alternate body's exhalation. Instead, they begin simultaneously or oppositional to one another, are long or slow

breaths, all likely to change pattern without regard for the other body's breathing rhythm. The variety in their presence and absence creates an environment which breaks down the hierarchies of subjectivity and objectivity. As such, the sensations felt are possibly deeper and more saturated for existing concurrently. The dynamic ways in which breath and sensation interact play into an understanding of how the subject and object perpetually exist in intercorporeal embodiment. To suggest that the subject and object exist in isolation of one another would limit their potential interactivity. The interfaces of sensation resituate the participating bodies as embodied by continually receiving, interpreting and distributing sensory data to each other, thereby validating the bodies as simultaneously subjective and objective beings rather than demarcating them as one or the other at a given time.

At the forefront of the argument in "The Intertwining—The Chiasm," Merleau-Ponty privileges vision which, for him, exemplifies perception and sensation's potential. Sight, for Merleau-Ponty, functions as the sense through which the intersection of bodily interaction is most profound. He concentrates on the interactivity and blurred line between the bodies which look and the bodies which are looked upon. Focusing not upon the subject-object binary, but instead on their phenomenal intersection, he explores the "openness through flesh" (131) to suggest that the seemingly empty space between the bodies of the world is a medium that perpetually engages and intertwines those bodies through sensation. Continuing to ponder the impact of sensory exchange between bodies, Merleau-Ponty suggests that the potentially problematic dynamics between a subject and object are phenomenally negated by the persistence of the sensory body. The dichotomy

between subject and object collapses when sensation is privileged, and as such the subject is always itself and the simultaneous object through the senses. A body is always implicated in intercorporeality due to the constant influx of sensation projected from another body acting as a revival for that which may be seemingly felt as lost. Conversely, the embodied subject is never truly complete within itself, as it is compelled to project its senses onto other bodies and to receive another's sensations as they are absorbed through its own porous flesh. (133)

If Merleau-Ponty insists that vision, and indeed the other senses of the body, are capable of generating intercorporeal embodiment through the activation of the spaces in between bodies, should breath, which operates so closely with the senses, not also be a catalyst through which this also occurs? Vision crosses a shared space to perceive an alternate body whereas the breath actually projects an airy substance containing small traces of the body through that same space. It is in the physical exchange, the literal taking in bits of flesh,<sup>2</sup> that two bodies experience shared embodiment. The subtlety of the breath seeps between bodies with or without conscious thought: mostly, it recurrently travels in and out undetected, an experience often taken for granted. Regardless of one's level of awareness, respiration acts as a conduit for communication between bodies. It absorbs into the skin, flows through the cavities of the face and is detected through the

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<sup>2</sup> Flesh, in this context, references the infinitesimal cell particles which intermingle with the air that is exchanged between bodies. Individuals are always breathing in parts of other bodies resulting in a somewhat literal intercorporeality in addition to the phenomenal occurrence of breath exchange.

sensational body through sight, smell, sound, taste and touch.<sup>3</sup> Breath's readiness to engage with another body and active projection of the self signals the existence of a body always implicated in intercorporeality through tangible and phenomenal experiences. The result is a breaking down of an imposed hierarchy, a rejection of the Cartesian split between bodies, minds and the senses. What remains after the sensory amalgamation of subject, object and other is, to draw from Merleau-Ponty's terminology, an intertwining (138) of bodies.

Merleau-Ponty insists that the perception of sensation provides a substantial and intimate relationship between the communicating elements of the body and in turn, with the world itself. The corporeal actions and sensations are the "sole means [they] have to go into the heart of things, by making [themselves] a world and by making them flesh" (135). Looking back on Rossetti's poem, Echo's concentrated effort to interact through respiration is precisely the means through which she attempts to regain some semblance of subjectivity. Her ability or desire to breathe is an effort to distinguish herself as a participant within intercorporeality, rather than a passive vessel that air happens to flow through. As a sensationally manifesting activity, breathing serves to transform not only the lived body but the multitude of other bodies it encounters. Breathing is a sensational extension of the self into and through objects and bodies which initiates a reciprocal communication. The act of exhaling onto another body prompts a reciprocal inhaling and exchange not only of air but information about the self.

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<sup>3</sup> The breath is made visible on a cold, crisp day, understood as that which expands the chest cavity, heard in excited, frustrated, passionate gusts, smelled and correspondingly tasted it as it passes through the openings of our body.

Continuing the phenomenological frameworks established by Merleau-Ponty, Jean-Luc Marion ruminates on the biological connectivity and movement between flesh in *The Crossing of the Visible*. Marion, like Merleau-Ponty, insists that the movement of sensation awakens the phenomenal body to a level of heightened perception so that communication becomes “real” (4) or made possible through the interaction of the feeling body. Reciprocally, those bodies that are prompted to engage in this communication are gradually rendered more “present,” more embodied within and through one another, as their sensory perception grows increasingly intertwined. Marion elaborates that when invisible moments intertwine with the visible, like respiration often does, a relationship is created between the participating bodies in an effort to “rehabilitate it [both the body and the sensation], rather than to replace it or appease it” (5). Breathing, then, crosses the boundaries of the visible and the invisible to create and enhance an awareness of the phenomenal experience occurring between multiple feeling bodies. But because the breath is both an object and a subject of its own action, meaning the body perceives its own breath while observing the breath of others entering the very same body, it is impossible to be unaffected by the bodies it encounters in the world. With each puff of air sent into the world, “its own movements incorporate themselves into the universe they interrogate” (Merleau-Ponty 133).

That is not to say though that a collapsing of the subjective and objective is a destruction of the differential identity of bodies when they intertwine. Merleau-Ponty continues in “The Spatiality of One’s Own Body and Motility” that the complexity of sensation through the body does not sacrifice the individual for a global entity in

transformational and sensational feeling. Instead, communicative sensations and actions “put forth beyond itself meanings capable of providing a framework for a whole series of thoughts and experiences” (146). The development of an individually framed body schema is what allows sensational activities to be communicative. The subject cannot be defined only in relation to itself, but it comes to know its subjectivity through its counterparts: an amalgam of sensations and breathing bodies. Breathing is that simultaneous activity which frames the self as the one who breathes as well as reminding the body through sensation that while it breathes, it also becomes breathed, in a “coiling over” which “can traverse, animate other bodies as well as my own” (140).

Respiring bodies are already in a perpetual state of communication with themselves because they generate the communicative breath that they ultimately and reflexively encounter. Similarly, the respiring body is also always in communication with the surrounding bodies it encounters or breathes upon. The very appearance of breath engages those respective bodies through the “reflexive nature of beings” (144). The reflexivity of sensation brings bodies together to communicate with and validate the other through the compulsive exchange of inhalation and exhalation. “Logos and Psyche: A Hermeneutics of Breathing,” by David Michael Levin offers contemplation on the potential of breath. Though Levin focuses on the breath as an introduction to vocal speech, the act of respiration is the communication in and of itself rather than the framework through which vocality can take place. He suggests that the renewing presence of breath is a continual and innate manifestation not only of the body’s survival, but also as the body’s desire to communicate in an intercorporeal manner. Respiration,

for Levin, is the initial “experience of the *possibility* of speech; it is our most primordial articulation of the conditions necessary for speech” (124). As the conduit through which speech can appear and disappear, the preparatory conditions to which Levin refers are most basically a resounding vibration as the air propels through the body and a cyclical rhythm. As in the case of Echo, the simulation of breath has the potential to be the catalyst through which she can regain a sense of her own body. The bodily movements cited as prerequisites for speech are precisely the actions which create a communicative presence of the self and the body. Similarly, in his sole reference to inspiration and expiration, Merleau-Ponty corroborates:

But if I am close enough to the other who speaks to hear his breath and feel his effervescence and his fatigue, I almost witness, in him as in myself, the awesome birth of vociferation... This new reversibility and the emergence of the flesh as expression are the point of insertion of speaking and thinking the world of silence” (144).

Within these lines Merleau-Ponty posits that it is the presence of sensation projected and absorbed by adjacent bodies that engenders communication, a type of fleshly speech to animate those bodies and the world which they inhabit. If sensation is capable of generating a phenomenal union between bodies, it is a logical progression to assume that the breath functions in a corresponding manner due to its characteristic similarities. The rhythm of the breath’s biological cycle of venturing out into other bodies and then returning to its originating body indicates a natural propensity to connect the body with other similarly sensing bodies.

Though Elizabeth Grosz's *Chaos, Territory, Art* is not uniquely focused on the breath, she asserts that the sensations originating from the body are a deliberate means through which the body learns of itself within the world through the beneficial interactivity with other bodies. The vibration and circulation of the breath are a series of operational movements and rhythmic bodily processes which essentially function as sustainers and a "small capture of melodic and rhythmical fragments" which "is the tapping out of a kind of order of safety that protects the body through the rhythm of the earth itself" (Grosz 51-52). What Grosz perhaps means by this statement is that sensation operates in small moments of lived experience, manifesting in tangible signs from the body, like breath, which assist in reinforcing the body as an embodied subject through connectivity with another body. The lived body acts as a fortification against the threat of disembodied feelings through the constant reminder that the body is still a subject and made present and active even in the midst of intercorporeal sensation. Grosz asserts that one's rhythmic body is the means through which individuals delineate their selves, bodies and surrounding environment. The breath reminds its generative body that while it breathes, it lives, not in isolation but with others. As a result, the self becomes re-embodied with the sensory recognition of its own doing in addition to the impact it makes upon other sensing bodies. She continues, in a footnote, to allude to the vibratory rhythms produced upon an entry into the world to establish the body as an intercorporeal subject: an intensifying series of first vocalizations consisting of "sob[s], gulp[s] and breath[s]" (51). These articulating signals, derived from the respiratory process, are rhythms through which the body comes to know itself, to secure and protect its presence in the world.

These rhythms of respiration are conducted in continuous refrains and are echoed manifestations of the lived body.

However, for Merleau-Ponty, these remarkably telling signals from the body are often ignored as defining moments of embodiment. The complacency with which breath and the other senses are overlooked as they perform, communicate and intertwine is indicative of a failure to recognize the self as whole only through a shared embodiment. Without an acknowledgment of the sensory medium, without a concentration on those tiny moments of connectivity, Merleau-Ponty insists that the world would remain metaphorically silent as bodies would be rendered phenomenally immobile and isolated from one another. Bodies out of tune with the productive interactivity that sensation and the breath generate are limited to their own narrow bodily borders, unintentionally forsaking intercorporeality, and as a result those bodies experience the devastating feelings of disembodiment.

Tragically, it is the curse of Echo and of her presumed counterpart Narcissus to exemplify this disjointing in the extreme. An attempt to cure these disembodied feelings and an acknowledgement of the presence of interactive phenomenology is where Rossetti's and Merleau-Ponty's works respectively appear to collide: both propose the urgent negotiation of intercorporeal space to illuminate how bodies become embodied through one another's sensations and, in this particular case, how breath participates in that negotiation. Through Rossetti's attempt to re-embodiment Echo by modifying the capabilities of her traditional literary figure and Merleau-Ponty's theories of exchangeable sensations, there is a subtle commonality which suggests that bodily

experience compels an intercorporeal subjectivity that grounds the self within the world only in relation to other bodies. Rossetti approaches sensation actualized through respiration for the purpose of reviving an otherwise disembodied entity whereas Merleau-Ponty emphasizes the importance of recognizing the sensational interactivity already existing and engaging within and through the body. Though the ultimate stakes in their writings are approached from separate angles, the former being an effort to reunite the disjointed, the latter to awaken that which already exists, the basic undercurrent of their thoughts are profoundly similar. A reconsideration of respiration as a bodily ally of sensation reveals that it is a compelling conduit to experiencing the self through another sensing body. This analysis of breath is offered in hopes that it will produce a new perspective and means to know how one's body exists in the world with other sensing bodies and how those bodies phenomenally intertwine.

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