

Introduction: Echo

HANNAH MCINTYRE AND HAYLEY O'KELL

UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD AND UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS

In those days, this nymph was more than a voice.
— Ted Hughes¹

Blow, bugle, blow, set the wild echoes flying,
And answer, echoes, answer, dying, dying, dying.
— Alfred, Lord Tennyson²

This present volume is indebted to an illuminating keynote lecture given in 2018 by the writer and translator Jhumpa Lahiri, for the Society for Italian Studies Biennial conference at the University of Edinburgh. Her lecture drew a sustained and insightful parallel between the mythical figure of Echo and the perils and potentials of literary translation, lingering on the intellectual depth of the echo as a concept. This depth is reflected in the many ways that the authors of this volume have chosen to engage with the theme. They draw on ideas of translation, but also on personal identity, memory, tropes, and trauma. They share with Lahiri's lecture an emphasis on the (mis)communication of the echo, an idea befitting the multilingual remit of *Working Papers in the Humanities*. With essays on literature and culture in French, English, German, Italian, and Spanish; and spanning from the work of Boccaccio in the fourteenth century, to Leila Slimani in the twenty-first century, we hope that readers find compelling threads between these diverse ideas and perspectives.

A salient feature of the echo is its dislocation, both in terms of place and time. This distance recalls a persistent temporal thread in last year's volume, entitled 'Reframing Exoticism in European Literature'. The contributors to the aforementioned volume often described a Western culture that conceived of the East in terms of an idealized, unreachable past. The echo is identified as a diminished present relative to a more complete past; but drawing on the critical theory of Exoticism we can question the truth of this original wholeness.

¹ Ted Hughes, 'Echo & Narcissus', in *Tales from Ovid* (London: Faber and Faber, 1997), pp. 74–84, (p. 75).

² Alfred, Lord Tennyson, 'Songs from *The Princess: The Splendor Falls*', in *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*, ed. by Margaret Ferguson, Mary Jo Salter and Jon Stallworthy, Fifth Edition (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2005), pp. 994–95, (p. 995).

The contributors to this volume take up the rhetoric of the echo to examine diminishing returns in memory, or communication, positing that: where thoughts and language are filtered by writing, time, the spoken word, or the human mind, the location or even existence of their original cannot be taken for granted.

Without encroaching too much on the rich critical analysis of the Echo myth within Classics, it is compelling to consider how the story itself has been filtered through oral traditions and translations. Ted Hughes's version of the myth, itself adapted from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, highlights in the above quotation the sense of loss inherent to the idea of Echo. The echo as a literary device, or tool of analysis, brings to mind this sense of diminishing returns, or incompleteness. It suggests, as above, a more complete past. Indeed, part of the fascination with the idea of the echo may be the fallibility of the human yearning for completeness, as Peter Brooks confronts with his writing on the narrative yearning for innocence, where 'paradise is always lost, it is always in a temporal relation of irretrievability'.³ Given that echo evokes spoken language particularly, this idea of irretrievability is key.

Yet although the original is lost, and the echo might alter or even distort in its transmission, a more positive interpretation would point to the echo's reverberations and repetitions as opportunities to communicate and disseminate images and ideas. There is an undeniable tragedy to the mythological Echo, who was once 'more than a voice'; but students of literature and culture might well point out the potential of a voice. Such an understanding allows for the use of the echo in literary analysis across time periods, between authors, between the narrating subject and their past self. Unbound from the notion of a pure original, the dislocation of the echo also resonates in dismantling hierarchies and traditional, linear, modes of thinking in favour of a plural cacophony of voices and perspectives. Discussing the historical development of identities, Joan W. Scott engages with these ideas in the formulation of her term 'fantasy echo', asking:

Where does the identity originate? Does the sound issue forth from past to present, or do answering calls echo to the present from the past? If we are not the source of the sound, how can we locate that source? If all we have is the echo, can we ever discern the original? Is there any point trying, or can we be content with thinking about identity as a series of repeated transformations?⁴

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³ Peter Brooks, *Psychoanalysis and Storytelling* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), p. 120.

⁴ Joan W. Scott, 'Fantasy Echo: History and the Construction of Identity', *Critical Inquiry*, 2 (2001), 284–304, (p. 292).

[...] the Castilian translation of the *Decameron* is an echo: it is not a perfect reproduction of Boccaccio's text transposed into a different language, but an adaptation filtered through a sequence of human perspectives.

— Emily Di Dodo

Emily Di Dodo (University of Oxford) considers the levels of distortion that occur during the early textual transmission of Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron* and in its subsequent Castilian translation(s). In her essay entitled, 'From Multifaceted Mosaic to Disjointed Anthology: The Distorted Castilian Echo of Boccaccio's *Decameron*', Di Dodo explains the processes by which such drastic variation could occur in early textual transmission, focusing in particular on subjectivity and human error. Di Dodo begins her essay by considering the textual history and transmission of the *Decameron* in Italian, moving onto the Escorial Manuscript and the Castilian translation first printed in Seville in 1496. Finally, she considers the drastic structural differences in the translated manuscripts (E and S). By comparing the translated manuscripts (E and S), Di Dodo hypothesizes that the evidence collected thus far strongly suggests that E and S are parallel reverberations of a single echo of the *Decameron*. The Castilian translations are achieved through a deconstruction and rebuilding, based on the textual decisions made by the scribe or compiler, of Boccaccio's carefully stratified mosaic of narrative voices, audiences and tales. Whilst there was a particular predilection for personalization in the early transmission of the *Decameron*, there certainly was not the same disregard for the *cornice* as in the Castilian translation. Despite the subjective distortions that characterize these echoes of the original Italian text, Di Dodo argues for their scholarly significance and for the importance of the *cornice* that Boccaccio so carefully constructed in the original text.

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If an echo is an externalized noise then traumatic events are also externalized from the subject's power in their re-enactment. The agency belongs to the scene, not the subject re-enacting it. — Isabelle Jenkinson

Isabelle Jenkinson (University of Leeds) proposes the term 'echo compulsion' in response to, and building upon, Freud's theorisation of the compulsion to repeat traumatic experiences. In her essay, 'Echo Compulsion: Formative Trauma in Leopold von Sacher-Masoch's *Venus im Pelz*', Jenkinson posits that the echo is pertinent to the repetition of traumatic scenes in that it foregrounds the individual's lack of agency. A distinction is drawn between echo and mere repetition, drawing on the *compulsion* to reproduction implied by the former. Jenkinson roots this analysis in Jean Laplanche's distinction between two distinct schools of thought on subject formation, the Copernican and the Ptolemaic. The echo is aligned with the Copernican approach to subject formation in that it is externally produced, relative to the original sound, thus

decentring the individual's own agency. Jenkinson furthers these notions with close analysis of particular memories and their re-enactments in *Venus im Pelz*, paying close attention in the second half of the essay to the title image itself, and how it offers an incomplete distortion, or simplification, of earlier formative experiences. This argument outlines the Copernican dependency of the individual upon their environment; in the case of the masochist narrator, the subject is convinced of the Ptolemaic innateness of their own identity.

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[...] the text is structured in such a way that we see how it is possible to prioritize the echo of memory, over its original source. — Elizabeth Purdy

Moving into the twenty-first century, Elizabeth Purdy (University of Leeds) focuses on the hierarchies of memory for the first-person narrator in her essay entitled: “‘You still don’t get it. You never have and you never will’: Memory as an Echo Chamber in Julian Barnes’s *The Sense of an Ending*.” Her analysis considers the similarities between the function of memory and the echo, where the distance of time presents a decay or distortion of the original ‘whole’. Purdy furthers this comparison by considering the concept of the ‘echo chamber’ in the literary context. Building on the meaning of the echo chamber in contemporary cultural use, where an individual or group reinforces their own perception through repetition within a vacuum, Purdy considers how carefully selected memories are ‘amplified’ by the narrator of *The Sense of an Ending*. The essay traces this process of amplification through a thorough close reading of the structure of the novel, demonstrating how the echoing of memories selected as ‘important’ by the narrator draws the reader into the same echo chamber.

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By centring the narrative on a killer nanny protagonist who commits various *soulèvements* [uprisings] against her employers and their children, Slimani recontextualizes and updates these fears of a dangerous servant figure in the twenty-first century. — Jessica Rushton

Jessica Rushton (Durham University) approaches the idea of echo through literary heritage, tracing the figure of the maidservant in the French novel. Her essay, entitled ‘Destabilizing the Nineteenth-Century Maidservant Revolt Narrative: Leïla Slimani’s *Chanson douce* (2016)’, considers how the archetypal figure of the maidservant is subverted in the contemporary text. This analysis is rooted in the particular context of the nineteenth-century figure, whose heritage is that of a shifting conceptualization of the domestic sphere amongst the French upper classes. Drawing particularly on Mirbeau’s *Journal d’une femme de chambre*, Rushton establishes a compelling link between the sociological and political mores of the nineteenth century, and their exploration within

the numerous texts she identifies as *le roman de la servante* (the novel of the servant). Transfigured into the twenty-first century, Rushton likewise addresses the idiosyncratic neuroses of the modern employer/ nanny relationship. Using Georges Didi-Huberman's categories of revolt as a framework, the essay interrogates the echoes of the nineteenth-century relationship between servant and employer with that of the modern day, focusing on the servant's unique position as simultaneous outsider and intimate aide.

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Humans are constantly losing pieces of themselves to the world; hair, skin, teeth, breath [...] Gell calls these lost pieces *exuviae* — that which is stripped down, drawn, or taken off the body, but remain associated with the individual who lost them, an echo of that person. — Emma Venter

In her contribution to this volume, entitled 'Oaths and *Exuviae*: Echoes of Credit in Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*', Emma Venter (University of Leeds) considers the physical and verbal echoes that humans leave behind in their social milieu. *Exuviae*, Venter avers, are pieces that humans lose to the world: hair, skin, teeth, breath or language. Such pieces remain associated with the individual who initially lost them, existing as an echo or remnant of their past selves. Venter investigates Alfred Gell's theory of 'distributed personhood' with particular emphasis on oaths and promises in early modern England.⁵ Moving beyond a strictly physical consideration of *exuviae*, Venter examines immaterial *exuviae* such as names, breath and language; first in the economy of early modern England and then, more specifically, in Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*. In early modern England, oaths and promises were the foundations of a rhetorical cultivation of reputation and credit and thus echoes of the individuals that swore them. Notably, Venter does not strictly focus on the role of oaths and the verbal in the early modern economy, as she also draws on how the body is implicit in the language of credit. First, through the lens of Marxist economic ideologies; second, considering the physical oaths in *The Merchant of Venice* and third, analysing how the punishment for being indebted beyond one's means was physical harm on the body of the debtor. Venter conclusively argues that the reliance on *exuviae* to cultivate credit created an environment of mistrust and confusion of value, rather than improving upon a devalued coin economy fostered by the debasing carried out under Henry VIII's reign.

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It is our role then, as editors of *MHRA Working Papers in the Humanities*, to draw attention to the echoes that resonate between each of the essays

⁵ Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 104.

that encompass this volume, mapping out the reverberations that link their distinctive interpretation of this year's journal theme: Echo. Each author has contributed to the heterogeneity of the term, echo, using it to fruitfully enrich their essays. Despite the wide scale of time that this issue addresses, moving from the fourteenth century in Di Dodo's analysis of Boccaccio's *Decameron* to Rushton's analysis of twenty-first century Leïla Slimani's *Chanson douce*; one distinct thread links each author's work, namely, their analysis of literature. Given the homogeneous decision to examine literary texts in light of the journal theme, it seems apt then to reflect on the frequent use of the echo, as an incomplete reproduction of an original whole, by writers and literary scholars. Joan W. Scott summarizes the dislocation of the echo often fruitfully used by literary scholars, '[e]choes are delayed returns of sound; they are incomplete reproductions, usually giving back only the final fragments of a phrase. [...] Poets and literary scholars have made much of this incomplete, belated, and often contradictory kind of repetition.'⁶ Crucially, the early career literary scholars that contribute to this journal make use of this 'incomplete, belated and often contradictory kind of repetition' to explore various themes including memory, trauma, textual inconsistencies, environments of mistrust and echoes between literary figures and genres.⁷

Di Dodo, Purdy, Jenkinson and Venter, in particular, grapple with the incompleteness, imperfection and miscommunication at the heart of the echo. To discuss how echoing and remembering can be productively compared, Purdy uses John Mowitt's definition of an echo as a springboard for her analysis of Julian Barnes's *The Sense of an Ending*, '[an] echo is structured by delay, by time. Moreover, the delay always marks a decay. Something is missing from the sound source, and as a consequence the "mirroring" is more than simply reversed; it is systematically imperfect.'⁸ Mowitt's productive comparison of echoes and decay illuminates the central thesis of Di Dodo's essay, as she claims that the Castilian translation of the *Decameron* is not a perfect reproduction of Boccaccio's text transposed into another language, but rather an incomplete echo, filtered and distorted through human error and subjectivity. Di Dodo then, uses the systematic imperfection of the echo to comment on a very specific example of the distorting and indeed decaying, process of early textual transmission.

In their grapple with the systematic imperfection of the echo, Purdy and Jenkinson employ echo-related terminology to navigate the close interconnection between echoes and memories. Stemming from Freud's notion of the subject's 'compulsion to repeat' traumatic scenes, Jenkinson coins her own term, 'echo compulsion', that illuminates her analysis of the sexuality of *Venus im Pelz's*

⁶ Scott, p. 291.

⁷ Scott, p. 291.

⁸ John Mowitt, *Sounds: The Ambient Humanities* (California: The University of California Press, 2015), p. 27.

masochist protagonist, Severin. Revising Freud's repetition compulsion into an 'echo compulsion' thereby incorporates the idea of an echo as a distorted re-enactment of the traumatic childhood moments that Severin experiences, that ultimately feed into his sexuality as an adult. Purdy's literary analysis of Julian Barnes's *The Sense of an Ending* is infused with the productive metaphor of memory as an 'echo chamber'. Drawing on contemporary notions of an 'echo chamber' as the tendency to surround oneself with those who perpetuate their worldview, as supported by Roland Barthes' contemplations; Purdy argues that Tony Webster's narration acts as an echo chamber for the perpetuation of his own version of events. Tony's narrative, rather than cohesively leading the reader to 'perceive beginnings, middles and ends through time', results in chaos, leaving the reader murkily questioning their own dynamics of memory.⁹ If memory is intrinsically linked to the theme of echo in its imperfect reverberation of an original event and is potent in understanding the 'shaping power of narrative', Tony's narrative can shed light on the wider effect of literature and its relationship to echoing.¹⁰

Venter expands on the incompleteness that defines the echo in her analysis of the economy of exchange in early modern England and the role of *exuviae* in Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*. Venter productively uses the theme of echo to consider how the plebeians of Rome have the power to put their 'tongues into [Coriolanus'] wounds', speaking for them, commodifying them and thereby producing verbal echoes of his original, complete physical body. By trading in echoes of his physical body, Coriolanus first risks becoming constructed and signified by his wounds and second, his body is evoked in an incomplete reverberation; the plebeians' verbal language can never match the completeness of Coriolanus' body, self and the origin of his wounds. Names, breath and language all function as a shadow of the being that created them, remnants of a more complete past. The breath and language of our authors within this volume then, exist as shadows of their work and as shadows of the plethora of texts they discuss.

Our remaining author addresses the cross-temporal reverberations that exist within a literary genre and how texts can shadow one another. Namely, Rushton outlines the echoes that reverberate between Leïla Slimani's twentieth-first-century novel, *Chanson Douce* and Octave Mirbeau's nineteenth-century novel *Le Journal d'une femme de chambre*, examples of what Rushton terms *le roman de la servante* (the servant novel). Slimani recontextualizes the fears of a psychotic, infanticide-driven servant figure in the twenty-first century with her unsettling representation of Louise's unstable psychological state. Slimani's nanny however does not simply echo the strategies of revolt of her nineteenth-century counterpart, Célestine, but Louise's revenge transcends that of the nineteenth-century literary maidservant, as she turns to murder as her solution.

⁹ Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), p. 11.

¹⁰ Brooks, p. 11.

In Rushton's paper, the echo is far more intense and psychotic than its original representation in the nineteenth century.

The human yearning for completeness and the irretrievability of a complete past that has been addressed in complementary manners by our aforementioned authors, can be contemplated further with regard to literature and death. In Walter Benjamin's essay *The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov*, he remarks on theories of the novel and why humans are drawn to the art of storytelling. Conclusively, he claims that reading a novel, from start to end, encapsulates a wholeness that we could never obtain from our own lives: we can never entirely understand our story from its beginning to its final moments. He inextricably links the novel with the human yearning for completeness:

[t]he novel is significant, therefore, because it presents someone else's fate to us, perhaps didactically, but because this stranger's fate by virtue of the flame which consumes it yields us the warmth which we never draw from our own fate. What draws the reader to the novel is the hope of warming his shivering life with a death he reads about.¹¹

We turn to literature, then, to strive for the completeness we lack in our own lives; this incompleteness and yearning for an irretrievable, complete past is inextricably bound up with the concept of the echo. In the same way that our memories, filtered by our subconscious and subjective minds, can never match up to the purity of an original event, literature acts as the imperfect reverberation of our own death, a finality that we ourselves can never truly digest or understand. Echo, then, in its multifaceted embodiment, can stand in for all creative and reflective phenomena that reverberate throughout the essays in this special issue.

¹¹ Walter Benjamin, 'The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov', in Dorothy J. Hale, ed., *The Novel: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory, 1900-2000* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), pp. 362-78, (p. 373).