Polysèmes

Revue d'études intertextuelles et intermédiaires

20 | 2018

Résonances d'Écho

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Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/polysemes/4286>

DOI: 10.4000/polysemes.4286

ISSN: 2496-4212

Publisher

SAIT

Electronic reference

Céline Lochot, « De Quincey's Ambivalent Echoes », *Polysèmes* [Online], 20 | 2018, Online since 15 December 2018, connection on 03 May 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/polysemes/4286> ; DOI : 10.4000/polysemes.4286

This text was automatically generated on 3 May 2019.

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Céline Lochot

- 1 An echo amplifies and multiplies the original sound: even as it repeats it, it modifies it and potentially endows it with new meaning. No echo can ever be neutral, whether it be the repetition of a natural sound, of a human voice, or of written words. De Quincey's occasional remarks seem to present us with a dual vision: literal echoes almost always seem to be the bearers of unfortunate or even tragic events, and have a prominent place in the opium-eater's nightmares; whereas literary echoes are the sign of a good style and of literary recognition. However, even metaphorical echoes coincide with ambivalent feelings: they are both a source of creativity and a threat, eventually leading to the author's self-erasing even in his autobiography.

Literal echoes: ominous sounds

- 2 When a man imitates another, whether in speech or manner, it makes a parodic echo: "no man, falling into any gesticulation or expression of fervour from a natural and uncontrollable impulse, would bear to see his own involuntary acts parodied and reverberated as it were in a cool spirit of mimicry; that would be an insult" ("Dr Parr and His Contemporaries" VIII, 446). Similarly, impersonal echoes seem to be mocking us, as if they were purposefully mimicking us. Such is the case of Mr Robert Smith, familiarly and humorously nicknamed Mr Bobus. A prosperous businessman, Mr Smith desired a grand political career and announced his arrival on the political stage: "At length came a letter from Mr Bobus, saying, 'I'm coming.' [...] *he's coming!* echoed many whispers". The echo repeats Mr Smith's words, but they take a parodic hint by contrast with the biblical expression "the coming man", while the choice of italics and of a whispering echo change the initial plain words into a solemn or awful event. The echo parodies Smith's ambition to appear as a providential man, and anticipates his predictable failure, as his rocketing career ends in bathos: "At this critical moment of his life, upon which, as it turned out, all his vast cloud-built fabrics of ambition were suspended [...] suddenly his presence of mind

forsook him; he faltered: rudder and compass slipped away from him: and—oh! Castor and Pollux!—Bobus foundered!” (“Dr Parr and His Contemporaries” VIII, 447).

- 3 Such echoes refer to tragic irony. They mock our ambitions, exposing them as vain “cloud-built fabrics”. Fame is nothing but “babbling echoes of [our] own public illusions, expressing rather what was desired than what was probable” (“Charlemagne” VIII, 192). The humorous tone of the Bobus anecdote is rather an exception: throughout De Quincey’s texts, echoes usually have sinister, even oppressive connotations. They announce tragedy—imminent, unavoidable, unescapable tragedy. It can be the sound of a mortal enemy approaching in great numbers, such as the noise preceding and announcing the murderers of the last descendent of the great Cesar: “his ears caught the fatal sounds of echoes from a body of horsemen riding up to the villa [...]” (“The Caesars” IX, 55). The actual echo is mimicked by the text, as the same image actually occurs three times within a few lines: De Quincey quotes a similar sentence in Greek from Homer’s *Iliad* (Book X), then translates it: “The resounding tread of swift-footed horses reverberates upon my ears”. The fact that this is a quotation adds yet another echo, albeit of a different kind: in the *Iliad*, the sound of horses announces the victorious return of Odysseus among his troops.
- 4 Even the echo of laughter can be threatening: “his smiles and echoing laughter, masking (yet hardly meant to mask) his foul treachery of heart; his hideous and tumultuous dreams, his baffled dreams, and his sleepless nights” (“The Caesars” IX, 65). This is the laughter of cruel, mad emperor Caligula, who had atrocious murders committed under his very eyes for his amusement; while the mention of “tumultuous dreams” reminds us of the chaotic nightmares of the opium-eater.
- 5 Echoes can also be psychological. The premonition of future misery and madness takes the shape of feelings echoing inside one’s mind:

It seemed to him as if on some distant road he heard a dull trampling sound, and that he knew it, by a misgiving, to be the sound of some man, or party of men, continually advancing slowly, continually threatening, or continually accusing him: that all the various artifices which he practiced for cheating himself into comfort, or beguiling his sad forebodings, were, in fact, but like so many furious attempts, by drum and trumpets, or even by artillery, to drown the distant noise of his enemies. (“Charles Lloyd” XI, 201)
- 6 When De Quincey describes the words *Consul Romanus* as “the most solemn and appalling sounds”, it is as though they were endowed with these qualities merely through repetition, from being “so often occurring in Livy” (C1 II, 67/C2 II, 258).¹ The echo is also emotional, and it finds its way into De Quincey’s opium dreams. There, echoes become omnipresent, even as they change from a literal to a metaphorical expression: from sounds to images. Remarkably enough, even though the dreams are mostly visual, they are framed with echoing sounds. In the first dream of which De Quincey gives an abstract, the sounding words *Consul Romanus* interrupt a gathering of aristocratic English women and replace the festive atmosphere with mourning and lifelong distress. The echo interrupts the splendour of pageants to introduce other splendours, all the more terrifying or horrifying as the imagery seems to be infected with the obsessive repetition and amplification of the echo: “endless growth and self-reproduction” (68), “innumerable faces [...] surged upwards by thousands, by myriads, by generations, by centuries” (70), “All the feet of the tables, sophas, &c. soon became instinct with life: the abominable head of the crocodile, and his leering eyes, looked out at me, multiplied into a thousand repetitions” (C1 II, 71/C2 II, 262). Then the last dream is introduced with “a music of

preparation and of awakening suspense”, preparing us for another imminent tragedy. It ends in the reverberations of sighs and “everlasting farewells”, until De Quincey wakes up in anguish, and exclaims, echoing Macbeth’s famous words: “I will sleep no more” (C1 II, 74/C2 II, 264). The echo is deepened by yet another literary reference, as Wordsworth also quoted these words in *The Prelude*: “I seemed to hear a voice that cried, / To the whole city, ‘Sleep no more’”, X, 85-87).

- 7 Thus, it appears that echoes are dreadful, not on account of the repetition, but because of the amplification process. As far as De Quincey is concerned, the pattern was set in the Whispering Gallery of Saint Paul’s Cathedral: “the softest of whispers [...] reached me as a deafening menace in tempestuous uproars” (C2 II, 156). The Whispering Gallery provides a metaphor : all our actions will keep echoing during the rest of our life. The slightest mistake will trigger disastrous consequences, that get increasingly out of proportion with the original transgression: “in some mysterious way the sense and the consequences of this error would magnify themselves at every stage of life, in proportion as they were viewed retrospectively from greater and greater distances” (C2 II, 171). The episode is all the more meaningful as De Quincey is actually mistaken: the walls carry the original sound from one end of the gallery to the other without modifying its initial intensity. As with the quotation from the *Iliad*, he endows an echo with a sinister quality which it did not originally have.

- 8 Indeed, young De Quincey’s troubles had barely started: as he likes quoting, “The earthquake is not satisfied at once” (Wordsworth, *The Prelude*, X, 84). The ill omen of the Whispering Gallery was followed by a second ominous echo, this one objectively loud. He decided to run away from school with the help of a groom, who unfortunately dropped his heavy trunk in the stairway. The result of the fall was a resounding echo: “it trundled, or rather leaped, right across, with the noise of twenty devils, against the very bed-room door of the *archididascalus*” (C1 II, 17/C2 II, 158). Noticeably enough, the noisy fall of the trunk is evoked with added detail in the second edition, as it is described twice within the space of a dozen lines. It is as if the echo were still reverberating and amplifying in De Quincey’s memory; not to mention the repetition of the verb “trundle”, creating a slight but unmistakable echo to the reader’s ear: “trundling down from step to step with accelerated pace and multiplying uproar, like [...] (the contumacious stone²) of Sisyphus”. As it happens, this decision as a schoolboy may be interpreted as the first step towards all of De Quincey’s trouble and misery for the rest of his life. He tries to defuse the tragedy with humour, speaking of “this unhappy *contretems* [sic]” and “the unhappy *étourderie* of the trunk” (C1), and later of “the comic wilfulness of the trunk” (C2); and yet he cannot but compare the trunk to the stone of Sisyphus, the exemplary myth of repetition: the initial echo will be prolonged by other mistakes, other falls, whether literal or symbolical, and other tragedies.

- 9 For De Quincey, echoes always imply excess, loss of control: anarchical, terrifying, nightmarish proliferation. The worst nightmare, however, is not narrated in the *Confessions* but in “The English Mail-Coach”. The mind echoes itself, and each echo is a darker and stranger version than the previous one, until one is utterly alienated from oneself: “What if it were his own nature repeated,—still, the duality were distinctly perceptible, even *that*—even this mere numerical double of his own consciousness—might be a curse too mighty to be sustained. But how, if the alien nature contradicts his own [...]. How again, if not one alien nature, but two, but three, but four, but five, are introduced within what once he thought the inviolable sanctuary of himself?” (XVI, 422).

The autobiographical texts contain more, milder figures of doppelgängers: echoes of himself that De Quincey does, and yet does not, recognise. The Dark Interpreter “is originally a mere reflex of my inner nature. But [...] the Interpreter sometimes swerves out of my orbit, and mixes a little with alien natures. I do not always know him in these cases as my own parhelion. [...] [A]s his face alters, his words alter; and they do not always seem such as I have used, or could use” (“*Suspiria de Profundis*” XV, 184-185).

- 10 The most innocuous echo is the apparition of the Brocken, probably thanks to its purely imitative nature: it is “but a reflex of yourself” in the clouds (184), and can be controlled at will. De Quincey further neutralises it by binding it to Christian ritual gestures. Noticeably enough, the word “echo” seems to occur most often when De Quincey attempts the history of Christianity, and more particularly the origins of the Christian community, when it still had to hide from numerous enemies. Whenever he is discussing religious matters, the echoes of the divine are endowed with a positive connotation: “the awe that belongs to spiritual phenomena [...] that belongs (in the sublime expression of Wordsworth) to ‘echoes beyond the grave’” (“*On the Essenes*” XI [variant], 707, quoting “Yes, it was the Mountain Echo”). However, there is more to spirituality than religious dogma and rituals, and spiritual echoes, once they are no longer contained within the comforting frame of the Christian faith, reflect once more deeply ambivalent feelings.

Spiritual echoes: the sublime

- 11 We should remember that the traditional places of echoes also serve as the *topos* of the sublime: they are the mountains, rocks, deep forests, and sea shores; the sublime being the echo that transcendence awakens within us when we see these places, to remind us that we have something of the divine inside us. De Quincey thus evokes the awe that we experience then:

The depths and the heights which are in man, the depths by which he searches, the heights by which he aspires, are but projected and made objective externally in the three dimensions of space which are outside him. He trembles at the abyss into which his bodily eyes look down, or up; not knowing that abyss to be, not always consciously suspecting it to be, but by an instinct written in his prophetic heart feeling it to be, boding it to be, fearing it to be, and sometimes hoping it to be, the mirror of a mightier abyss that will one day expand in himself. (“*System of the Heavens As Revealed by Lord Rosse’s Telescope*”, XV, 401)

- 12 Through the very repetitive structure of these lines, De Quincey creates a complex echo to replicate the one created inside our minds by the grandiose sights of nature. It is also a typical instance of De Quincey’s rhetorical style, using a repetitive three-part structure. The idea of “depths and heights” is repeated and explained in two short developments, both evocative of a quest: one for knowledge (“searches”), one for spiritual revelation (“aspires”). This first echo suggests the similarity and complementarity of man’s researches and aspirations. The first sentence is then expanded: the term “abyss” is but a variation of the “depths and heights” (so that the concept actually appears five times within seven lines). It is followed by six occurrences of the complement “it to be”: a strong assertion, but at the same time one that still is “to be”, retaining a somewhat tentative undertone despite the confident conclusion that the divine “will” be revealed to us eventually; all the more so as the predominating feeling is fear rather than hope. As a result, the repetitions of the echo seem to be simultaneously building the author’s confidence and undermining it. They also contribute to a beautiful and striking passage.

- 13 What is at stake here is that transcendental sublimity is unavoidably related to painful feelings. First, God's mysterious ways always seem to imply suffering (partly, no doubt, because De Quincey is anxious to find a justification for his own sufferings). For instance, in "Suspiria de Profundis", we find the description of a city that has been submerged under the ocean, leading to the announcement of Revelation, when "the echoes of heaven" will be raised in the silent city; and it seems that the future celebration of divine glory cannot be separated from past and present human suffering: "we touched the mighty organ keys, that sang no *jubilates* for the ear of Heaven—that sang no requiems for the ear of human sorrow" (XV, 186). Then, what De Quincey mostly finds fascinating is the mystery of the divine, and especially its ambivalent connection with sin. A faint but deep-seated unease eventually underlies De Quincey's texts, almost in spite of him. Like the Dark Interpreter that guides him inside his dreams, his texts echo dim impressions and ideas that he does not quite acknowledge as his own.
- 14 One image after the other, De Quincey's texts refer to an ambivalent vision of the sublime. Four instances are particularly telling and powerful; they are all told as a personal experience, and three of them appear in the autobiographical texts. The earliest is found in the *Confessions*; De Quincey describes the Gothic architecture of a painting by Piranesi:
- Creeping along the sides of the walls, you perceived a staircase; and upon it, groping his way upwards, was Piranesi himself: follow the stairs a little further, and you perceive it come to a sudden abrupt termination, without any balustrade, and allowing no step onwards to him who had reached the extremity, except into the depths below. Whatever is to become of poor Piranesi, you suppose, at least, that his labours must in some way terminate here. But raise your eyes, and behold a second flight of stairs still higher: on which again Piranesi is perceived, but this time standing on the very brink of the abyss. Again elevate your eye, and a still more aerial flight of stairs is beheld: and again is poor Piranesi busy on his aspiring labours: on so on, until the unfinished stairs and Piranesi both are lost in the upper gloom of the hall. (C1 II, 68/C2 II, 259)
- 15 This tormented ascent, constantly interrupted and yet never over, forever leading to the brink of the abyss, is nothing but the experience of the sublime: the terrifying and fascinating vertigo which overwhelms us, and cannot be escaped. Thus, the artist is imprisoned inside his own painting. Similarly, De Quincey himself is a prisoner of his own imagination and of his nightmares, which he keeps referring to as the sumptuous climax of his *Confessions*, even though he concludes with his desperate "struggles" to awake; nightmares which provide the main illustrations of the "Pains of Opium" and their attending "conflict of horrors" (C1 II, 74), even as he advises opium "for the sake of obtaining splendid dreams" (C1 II, 69/C2 II, 260).
- 16 The next image is inspired by a tale of *The Arabian Nights* that De Quincey used to read with his sister in early childhood. Several years later, by ordering books which he cannot pay for, he feels that he has unfortunately attracted the attention of a mysterious spider representing the power of London: "[H]ere was a ghostly cobweb radiating into all the provinces from the mighty metropolis. I secretly had trodden upon the outer circumferences, had damaged or deranged the fine threads and links,—concealment or reparation there could be none. Slowly perhaps, but surely, the vibration would travel back to London. The ancient spider that sat there at the centre, would rush along the network through all latitudes and longitudes" ("Suspiria de Profundis", XV, 166). Young Thomas' inadvertent misstep is bound to attract heavy retribution: once again, the

consequences are out of proportion with the original transgression. Even though he was never actually punished, he lost his peace of mind.

- 17 The third image appears in “System of the Heavens”. Describing a nebula, De Quincey claims that its shape is like a horrifying head evocative of Milton’s description of Satan, Sin and Death in *Paradise Lost*, and which combines the quintessence of both evil and the sublime. The whole passage is too long to be quoted in full; it is introduced thus:

[T]he appropriate atmosphere for investing it must be drawn from another silence, from the frost and from the eternities of death. It is the famous nebula in the constellation of Orion; famous for the unexampled defiance with which it resisted all approaches from the most potent forms of former telescopes; famous for its frightful magnitude and for the frightful depth to which it is sunk in the abyss of the heavenly wilderness; famous [...] for the horror of the regal fantasma which it has perfected to eyes of flesh. [...] [I]n these dreadful distances before which, simply as expressions of resistance, the mind of man shudders and recoils [...] the same expression of power in the detestable phantom, the same rebellion in the attitude, the same pomp of malice in the features to a universe seasoned for its assaults. (XV, 403-404)

The paragraph starts with the repetition of “famous” and ends with the repetition of “the same”, creating a slightly hypnotic rhythm. A particularly interesting choice of word in the last lines is “recoils”, applied not as a moral rejection of a horrifying vision evocative of Satan, but as an objective reaction to the proportions of the scene. Somehow, any experience of the sublime, even, possibly, as a positive experience, contains an almost physical reaction of revulsion, as the mind is faced with something immeasurably larger than itself, which it vainly strives to absorb. Later in the same text, De Quincey translates a passage from John Paul Richter that expresses similar anguish: “the spirit of man aches with this infinity. Insufferable is the glory of God. Let me lie down in the grave from the persecutions of the infinite” (XV, 417).

- 18 The last image is also taken from a tale of *The Arabian Nights*. The evil character is a powerful magician who has the ability, not unlike the spider’s, to gather vibrations from every action in the world and to understand its meaning: “The pulses of the heart, the motions of the will, the phantoms of the brain, must reveal themselves in secret hieroglyphics uttered by the flying footsteps; the inarticulate or brutal sounds of the globe must be all so many languages and ciphers that somewhere have their corresponding keys—have their own grammar and syntax; and thus the least things in the universe must be secret mirrors to the greatest.” (“A Sketch from Childhood”, XVII, 131). Even the echo of our footsteps would reveal our inmost nature, but what the magician might know instantly will remain a secret to us, who are not endowed with such divine capacities. In the tale, the magician uses his powers to harm an innocent child. Behind the comforting belief that everything is endowed with meaning, and that nature reflects divine purposes, a secret doubt remains about the exact nature of these mysterious purposes and of the divine decipherer. On the one hand, De Quincey persistently presents God as a comforter, who distributes sorrow for the children’s own good; on the other hand, it must be noticed that in all his texts children often come to harm. However romantically idealised, childhood is no Paradise.
- 19 All these figures epitomize a particular experience of the sublime: “mysterious and unfathomable [...] dark sublimity” (XVII, 131). The echoes of the sublime raise images of the divine as a terrifying other, rather than a benevolent co-presence: Piranesi is desperately alone; the stars are the seat of Satan himself; both spider and magician are

endowed with a miraculous capacity to decipher the meaning of the world and the fate of each individual, and both are terrifying and wholly devoid of empathy.

- 20 However, this terrible experience may be man's last remaining access to transcendence. Like all Romantic writers, De Quincey mistrusts the Industrial Revolution as potentially destructive for spiritual and intellectual values. Constantly stimulated by Progress and the general acceleration of life, man has lost touch with the divine. Even the sea, we may observe, is "[n]ot so sublime, however, as at first it may be fancied" ("The Pagan Oracles", XIII [variant], 420); while "Mont Blanc might be improved in a century of chiselling from judicious artists" ("The Antigone of Sophocles as Represented on the Edinburgh Stage", XV, 314). The quest for the sublime of the ocean turns into a scientific experiment as De Quincey and his friend Professor Wilson attempt to count the waves to check if, in accordance with the Roman expression *fluctus decumanus*, the tenth wave really is more impressive than the others. Needless to say, the experiment remains inconclusive. The anecdote is also openly humorous, even parodic; yet the endeavour is also tinged with nostalgia. The Romantic sublime to be found in Nature is becoming an abstract experience: as soon as we try to consider its detail we are beginning to dissect it, until we are left with blasé indifference, or even a sense of bathos. Significantly enough, this anecdote takes place in a text about Pagan oracles: the Romantic experience is on its way to becoming a naïve, out-dated vision which it is no longer possible to experiment in the flesh.
- 21 The divine feels increasingly distant because the echoes of the sublime are fading away. They are relegated to spaces unfit for human life: oppressive *no man's lands*, such as the snowy mountain peaks, or the inaccessible and frightening stars. In more hospitable spaces like the shores, the sublime is either gone, or out of reach. In short, De Quincey is going through the early stages of the modern sense of a general fragmentation of the world, which makes it impossible to experience the world directly, without mediation. In De Quincey's case, such mediation is to be found in literature, to the extent of sometimes making nature redundant: "[I]t is better to have read [the poet's] lasting description, than to have seen, with bodily eyes, the fleeting reality" ("Notes on Gilfillan's Gallery of Literary Portraits", 308).

Literary echoes: how to be an author

- 22 Hundreds of voices can be heard in Thomas De Quincey's texts: they are well-known to be full of allusions, quotations and biographical anecdotes. When echoing other texts, the author is both paying homage to his great predecessors, and making a claim: De Quincey belongs with the great authors he quotes. His frequent allusions to Wordsworth, in particular, are not to be seen as the obsessive quoting of an admirer, but as the expression of a similar sensitivity by a fellow spirit: "In this place I derive my feeling partly from a lovely sketch of the appearance, in verse, by Mr. Wordsworth; partly from my own experience of the case; and not having the poems here, I know not how to proportion my acknowledgements" ("Suspiria de Profundis" [XV note], 162). Like a friendly face, a text may "serv[e] as a mirror to echo and reverberate [our] own feelings" (C2 II, 163).
- 23 Still, Antoine Compagnon reminds us that quotations are "a foreign body inside my text" (31). Quotation marks may emphasise the otherness of the quotation and introduce a distance. There are of course many degrees of distancing that can be played upon at

will to include or exclude both other authors and readers. For instance, De Quincey enjoys quoting Greek authors without translating them. The foreign characters stand out, but they also refer to a common classical education and a common culture with the learned reader. Considering that the Romantics witnessed the first stages of an anonymous mass readership, De Quincey's learned references help him to redefine, and bond with, the reader; so do more subtle references that only the *happy few* will recognise. Thus echoing is one way of projecting onto the reader the comforting image of an alter ego, with the same references and the same values. In other words, De Quincey turns the reader into an echo of himself.

- 24 However, most often, De Quincey favours the lightness of the implicit echo to an explicit quotation. Obvious quoting interrupts the free flowing of the feeling and of the text, and may imply that the author lacks in knowledge or honesty: "direct quotations always express a mind not fully possessed by its subject, and abate the tone of earnestness which ought to preside either in very passionate or in very severe composition. [...] this reference to a book had the effect of breaking the current of the passion" ("Dr Parr and His Contemporaries", VIII, 75). Autonymy in a lyrical passage should be almost invisible: so well integrated within the host text that it seems to belong to it. De Quincey often quotes without mentioning the name of the author, or without quotation marks; sometimes it is not clear whether he's aware of referring to another text.
- 25 Echoes mean that the original text is transformed, if only because it is transposed into a different context, so that they are a source of creativity. As the creator of *impassioned prose*, he is indebted to Wordsworth's "impassioned feeling" ("preface", 886); but as he applies it to prose, he is fully aware of his own value as an original writer: "ranging under no precedents that I am aware of in any literature" ("Preface to Autobiographic Sketches", XX, 16). Sometimes it is done unawares. Borges realized that De Quincey had invented the story of the magician from the *The Arabian Nights*: "[I]t was an unintended gift of De Quincey, whose active memory enriched and enlarged the past" (Ledesma 126). Other references and their mutations are meant to be obvious, for instance for parodying purposes. "The English Mail-Coach" thus echoes the Odyssey with a burlesque tone. The epic tale has inevitably degraded into parody as it comes to life as a disappointing reality. Cyclops has become an old coachman prone to "the shocking affection of sleep": "Oh Cyclops! Thou art mortal: thou snor'st!" (XVI, 436). Because of this display of humanity, their coach nearly collides with a frail jig, but De Quincey raises the alarm in a feeble imitation of Achilles: shouting loudly. However burlesque, the scene inspires the apotheosis of the Dream Fugue; the epic tone comes to life again, and makes the autobiographical events sublime. Through the echo, the original text has been modified, but not betrayed.
- 26 Creativity is also essential in style. As a stylistic effect consisting in echoing one's own text, the literary echo is all the richer as it is anything but a mere repetition, the opposite of a mere "rebound" of the original thought, "presenting the same thought in a diluted form" ("Memoirs of the Marquess Wellesley", XV, 341). Echoes thus follow the principle of all good art: "the agency of *idem in alio*. The *idem*, the same impression, is to be restored; but *in alio*, in a different material" ("The Antigone of Sophocles as Represented on the Edinburgh Stage"). It is a great shortcoming of Charles Lamb's style that it does not contain any echoes:

He [...] shrank from the continuous, from the sustained, from the elaborate. The elaborate, indeed, without which much truth and beauty must perish in germ [...].

The instances are many in his own beautiful writing in which he collapses, literally sinks away from openings suddenly offering themselves to flights of pathos or solemnity in direct prosecution of his own theme. On any such summons, where an ascending impulse, and an untired pinion were required, he *refuses* himself (to use military language³) invariably. The least observing reader of *Elia* cannot have failed to notice that his most felicitous passages always accomplish their circuit in a few sentences. The gyration within which his sentiment wheels, no matter of what kind it may be, is always the shortest possible. It does not prolong itself, it does not repeat itself, it does not propagate itself. ("Final Memorials of Charles Lamb", XVI, 380)

- 27 We may have a better opinion of Lamb's style, but at any rate De Quincey's was admired both by his contemporaries and by modern critics. He displayed "painstaking mastery of assonance, alliteration, balance, swelling and falling rhythms, and haunting and evocative diction" (Jordan xv). Most of De Quincey's papers, and a large part of his sentences, are built by a process of accumulation and amplification of his theme, in a three-part structure⁴; he often repeats a few words to strengthen the tone and meaning of his text. The echo itself is a recurrent image, with such verbs as repeat, magnify, amplify, swell, duplicate, reverberate, revive, etc. As nothing is ever systematic with De Quincey, he does however provide us with two examples of a "cacophonous" echo: "Burke's Works", which he calls "an eye sore and an ear-sore"; and the "hideous jingle" of the name "*John Donne*" ("Lake Reminiscences", XI, 117).
- 28 In short, echoes allow De Quincey to create his idiosyncratic "impassioned prose": a lyrical, poetical prose, and an essentially musical prose: "where a single false note, a single word in the wrong key, ruins the whole music" ("Preface to Autobiographic Sketches", XX, 16). To De Quincey's mind, Charles Lamb's faulty style partly results from a sort of deafness: Lamb is utterly unable to appreciate music, and thus deaf to the rhythm and sounds of all written texts. This is far from being the case with De Quincey, who, he says, rather tends to the other extreme. The best example of De Quincey's musical prose is the last part of "The English Mail-Coach", entitled "The Dream-Fugue", which starts with an indication similar to what can be read on music scores: "Tumultuosissimamente" (XVI, 443). Calvin Brown provides an interesting analysis of the way that text closely imitates the structure of a musical fugue, in particular through the repetition of several themes and motifs (speed, young women threatened with imminent death, summer associated to dying): the name of the "fugue" is not a mere metaphor for a very lyrical text, it is an accurate description of the text. Finally, he describes a successful echo in musical terms: "[W]here indeed the thought is effectually varied, so that the second line acts as a musical minor, succeeding to the major, there may happen to arise a peculiar beauty" ("Memoirs of the Marquess Wellesley", XV, 341).
- 29 Though they seem to be wholly beneficial, even stylistic echoes have their own danger, and of the most horrifying kind, because they come, as De Quincey expressed it dimly in "Suspiria", from inside his own mind: while writing, he might lose control of his imagination, and of the creative process altogether. Even the most cheerful ideas or jokes, or any instance of creativity (as far as they depend on spontaneous associations of ideas: one image echoing, as it were, several others) will lead to an overflowing of wit and of imagination which will sooner or later spin out of control, until it becomes painful: "[...] through some casual or capricious association with images originally gay, yet opening at some stage of evolution into sudden capacities of horror" ("The English Mail-Coach", XVI, 416). Thus the image of a lovely girl, associated with several other images, eventually

leads to the terrifying and proliferating crocodile. De Quincey says very little about his own writing, but Jean-Paul's mind is described as "painfully and almost morbidly active: there is no respite, no repose, allowed—no" ("Jean Paul Frederick Richter", III, 23). To an ever-active fancy, any kind of proliferation may unexpectedly turn into a nightmare at the slightest provocation. They might also seem to endanger the author's identity.

The voice of Echo: the author as biographer and "self-effacing autobiographer"⁵

- 30 The wealth of quotes takes a particular meaning (or a particular sound) in De Quincey's autobiographical writing. Paradoxical though it may seem for a writer to illustrate key moments of his life or major traits of character with the words of other authors, Compagnon claims that "nothing in the book is more intimate than its quotes" (320), while Lejeune argues that "the texts chosen for quotation are themselves elements of our history [...] texts that teach us how to live, or suggest role models [...] Life itself is 'intertextual'" (1998, 29).
- 31 According to Lejeune, intense identification with another's writing commonly creates a feeling of dispossession:

With Proust, I have had the feeling of what members of Oulipo call "plagiarism in anticipation", viz., incredibly enough, Proust had in advance written my own work. Everybody, at one time or another, has felt this, even though it is grotesque to say so. It is a feeling both exalting and destructive. It is destructive in two ways: you tell yourself that every possible text has already been written, there is something unsurpassable and overwhelming here, something absolutely dizzying. (2005, 178)
- 32 Whether or not De Quincey wished he could have written Wordsworth's poems, he jokes several times about this idea of "plagiarism in anticipation" (to mock the pretensions of other authors); and he harbours a fantasy of murdering his own doppelgänger (for which Coleridge would be a very good candidate, for many reasons):

If I had a doppelgänger who went about impersonating me, copying me, and pirating me, philosopher as I am, I might [...] be so far carried away by jealousy as to attempt the crime of murder upon his carcass; and no great matter as regards HIM. But it would be sad for me to find myself hanged; and for what, I beseech you? For murdering a sham, that was either nobody at all, or oneself repeated once too often. ("Milton versus Southey and Landor", XVI, 52)
- 33 His portraits, compared to his own life, also suggest that he was unfairly deprived of the material conditions to become as great an author. Overall, his texts are haunted by the fear of being himself no more than an echo, the mere repetition or doppelgänger of Wordsworth and Coleridge. The nightmarish fantasy of having no existence of his own, no original being, had actually occurred a long time before De Quincey was acquainted with the Romantic poets. As a boy, he identified with the character of the tale he was reading, and found himself to be a mere repetition of an ancient past: "I had been reading a legend concerning myself in the *Arabian Nights*. I had been contemplated in types a thousand years before on the banks of the Tigris. It was horror and grief that prompted the thought" ("Suspiria de Profundis", XV, 168).
- 34 De Quincey's autobiographical anecdotes sometimes contain a wealth of subtle echoes that demonstrate obsessive concern about his real worth. Even an echo may be authentic or counterfeit, and nineteenth-century tourists used to buy echoes (the tourists being,

here, De Quincey's family members, whom he sent on a wild goose chase when he ran away from school):

To an echo, first quality £0 10 0

To do., second quality 0 5 0

It seems the price of echoes varied, reasonably enough, with the amount of gunpowder consumed. But at Low-wood, on Windermere, half-crown echoes might be had by those base snobs who would put up with a vile Brummagem substitute for "the genuine article". (C2 II, 173)

- 35 De Quincey's family happens to be "chasing an imaginary 'me'", viz., an echo of the real Thomas: it is thus appropriate that they should buy echoes on the way. Besides, echoes have an interest of their own, independently of what causes them; similarly, De Quincey's "Preliminary Confessions" (the events that led to his opium-eating) are said to have an interest of their own, though the real subject is the opium. Finally, the anecdote is followed by a series of suppositions about what may have happened if De Quincey had had the patience to wait for his sister's return and sympathy: is the real Thomas the boy who ran away, and ended up taking opium, or the boy whom he might have been, in a completely different set of circumstances? Was De Quincey a mere echo of himself? In the same way, De Quincey may well have felt that his real masterpiece was not any of the texts he managed to publish, not even the "impassioned" tale of his dreams, but the dreams themselves, of which he could only give us an abstract, or an echo.
- 36 De Quincey's autobiographical texts undergo a drastic mutation when he starts discussing events that took place during his adult life. Apart from a couple of anecdotes, the narration becomes a biographical one, entitled "Lake Reminiscences"; and yet this is supposed to be "the most interesting chapters of [his] autobiography" (XI, 42). De Quincey thus seems to become a figure of Echo within his very own autobiography: either as a disincarnate voice repeating the life and opinions of his famous contemporaries; or as a disconsolate voice echoing his lost childhood over and over again, unable to leave its traumas behind to assert himself as an adult, unable to find the unity of his life and reconcile the promising child with the opium-eater.
- 37 Within his own texts, nothing is left of De Quincey's adult life, but an echo of other authors' lives; unless (one may wonder) it is the other way round. The autobiographical hero disappears from his own life as an "I", but he is still there: De Quincey explains his contemporaries' character and life as if he were assessing his own. Most biographers tend to do the same, but De Quincey seems to be going further than most: "In De Quincey, the innate involuntary tendency of the biographer to identify with the subject surfaces as a conscious narrative strategy" (Cafarelli 128). Furthermore, the portraits of famous authors (Wordsworth, Coleridge, Southey), or famous critics such as Samuel Parr, or even insignificant figures like Bobus Smith, are introduced through personal anecdotes: they are a testimony, and thus they are a life experience. De Quincey's autobiographical narration contains, and absorbs, the life of his great predecessors, so that a separate narration even becomes superfluous: "I have traced the history of each until the time when I became personally acquainted with them; and, henceforward, anything which it may be interesting to know with respect to either, will naturally come forward, not in a separate narrative, but in connexion with my own life, for [...] my life flowed on in daily union with theirs" ("Lake Reminiscences", XI, 108). A pessimistic reading might suggest that the echo has spread until every author became interchangeable shadows of one another; an optimistic reading, that Echo has finally found a voice of her own.

- 38 De Quincey's deeply echoing prose gives it complexity and depth. Echoes have a strong emotional value, as they reverberate, after all, mainly within our minds and hearts. Echoing texts are the hallmark of good authorship and of the capacity to reach out to the readers, but as we open to other individuals, echoes make us vulnerable, and potentially unsettle our very identity. It is particularly the case with the oppressive experience of the Romantic sublime, which De Quincey still refers to as a privileged access to transcendence, in spite of its decidedly nightmarish quality. The source of an echo is both close and distant: whether an object, an author from a distant century, or a manifestation of the divine, it can reach into our inner selves. Sometimes it changes us; then we incorporate it and change it back. Sometimes it triggers a feeling of unbearable loneliness and emptiness. De Quincey's writings enact a complex negotiation to adjust to the changing status of authors, and to establish a degree of distance or intimacy with readers and with other writers on his own terms.
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NOTES

1. Both editions of the *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* (1821/1856) will be mentioned as C1/C2.
 2. In the original text, the parenthesis is preceded by the two words in ancient Greek and accompanied by an untranslated footnote from the *Odyssey* (XI, 598) describing the boulder that Sisyphus was condemned to roll uphill forever (reference provided by editor Grevel Lindop).
 3. *refuse*: to decline to oppose (troops) to the enemy (OED).
 4. See our earlier example of spiritual echoes, taken from "System of the Heavens As Revealed by Lord Rosse's Telescope".
 5. Stephen J. Spector, "Thomas De Quincey: Self-effacing Autobiographer". *Studies in Romanticism* 18 (1979): 501.
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ABSTRACTS

For De Quincey, the proliferating sound of the echo is the ominous forerunner of loss of control, whether of his life (which turns into tragedy) or of his imagination (whose restless activity eventually turns any creation into nightmare). Long misunderstood as a minor voice echoing canonical Romanticism (Wordsworth), De Quincey uses the echo as a source of creativity and of idiosyncratic style. However, torn apart by the echoes of the Sublime, he finally becomes Echo: the invisible narrator of others' lives and texts.

Pour De Quincey, la prolifération de l'écho annonce une inquiétante perte de contrôle de sa vie (qui devient une tragédie) et de son imagination (dont la créativité devient cauchemardesque). Longtemps vu comme un auteur mineur dans l'ombre des poètes romantiques canoniques (Wordsworth), De Quincey utilise l'écho comme source de créativité et d'un style unique. Néanmoins, déchiré par les échos du sublime, il finit par devenir Écho : l'invisible narrateur de la vie et des textes d'autrui.

INDEX

Keywords: proliferation, tragedy, omen, intertextuality, creativity, sublime, style, identity

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oeuvre citée *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater*

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