The Echo of an Echo:
Translating Hopkins ... Cautiously

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The Leaden Echo and The Golden Echo was to be part of a projected drama on St. Winifred, which Hopkins began in 1879 but never completed. The two companion poems were designed as a choral song for two groups of girls to mark and celebrate the difference between mortal and spiritual beauty. Hopkins mentions the poem, still a work in progress, already in a letter to Bridges in 1880: "You shall also see *The Leaden Echo* when finished […] it is dramatic and meant to be popular" (Hopkins [1935] 1955, 106). A month later, still in a letter to Bridges dated 5th September 1880: he could announce that he had completed the poem and was quite pleased with it. The manuscript bears the date 13 October 1882. Only a month later, however, in November, his optimism had faded away and doubts as to the quality of the poem were coming to the surface, particularly as regards the first line of the first of the two companion poems, which was re-written as we read it today.

Like so many of his poems, *The Leaden Echo and The Golden Echo* is concerned with beauty and its significance in human life. Here material beauty, which is connected with time and, as a consequence, is corruptible, is compared with spiritual beauty, which is not tied to time, comes directly from God and never decays. The theme itself is obvious, almost banal. What makes it relevant is the way it is conveyed through a musical pattern, which involves both the structure of the poem and its linguistic complexity. What I have defined as two companion poems may be also considered as two sections of the same poem, like two faces of a medal or a coin: one cannot exist without the other. The difference between material beauty and spiritual beauty, then, is made clear by the very distribution of rhythm and sounds in the poem: strained, restless, conveying a sense of urgency when mortal beauty is shown to be bound to decay; unhurried, gentler when the subject is spiritual beauty; falling down towards despair in the first part, soaring high towards heavenly fulfilment in the second.

Because of the complexity of its sound and rhythmic patterns, this poem is certainly challenging for a translator. As is well known, Hopkins was an expert in prosody and metrics, particularly Latin and Greek, which he even

taught at Stonyhurst College when in Wales and University College, Dublin, Ireland, from 1884 until his death in 1889, but he had applied himself also to the study of Welsh and its literature, so he had a pretty good knowledge of its complicated prosody, not to mention the influence Anglo-Saxon poetry had on his own. Besides, Hopkins himself declared that "Poetry is speech framed for contemplation of the mind by the way of hearing or speech framed to be heard for its own sake and interest even over and above its interest of meaning" (1959, 289a). This just seems to be the case with the *Echo* poems: Hopkins is certainly interested in comparing two different kinds of beauty, but he wants this idea to be conveyed through the music of verse and the fine balance between the two sections, a line and the lines surrounding it and even between individual words – their sounds, their meanings – within the same line, well aware that "there [must] be a relation between the parts of the thing to each other and again of the parts to the whole" (*ibidem*, 98). *The Leaden Echo and The Golden Echo* emphasizes Hopkins's dialogic technique, which – as evidenced by Donatella Badin in a 1992 essay[1] – characterizes as many as thirty of the forty-nine poems in the canon. In this particular poem, Hopkins was confronted with the need to reproduce the sound effects of an echo while holding fast to the moral-spiritual message he wanted to impart upon his readers, or rather listeners, as a good deal of its emotional effects would be lost in a written text.

Who is speaking in the poem, to whom? If you shout, say, in a valley with an echo, your voice comes back with exactly the same sound and intonation, yet in most cases you do not recognize your voice as your own: it is as if somebody else were calling you from the other side of the valley and you were trying to decode his/her message. If you read the poem from this perspective, the message seems to come from a voice from above, a ghost, an angel, perhaps God himself; or it might be the voice of your conscience warning you of the danger to value mortal beauty too much and reminding of the bliss that spiritual beauty, immortal beauty, can guarantee. But the dialogue may also occur between the two sections of the poem, that is between the leaden echo and the golden echo, despair and hope, producing the effect not just of two different points of view, but of two contrasting personalities. The frequent repetition of phrases, words, sound clusters and individual consonant and vowel sounds reproduces the effects of an echo, which conveys different states of mind depending on who is speaking, his mood and the development of that mood; for example, in the first section the sense of bewilderment of the speaker before a distressing question in the first couple of lines becomes anguish and despair in the final line of the section:

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[1] Badin 1992, 55-72: "[…] moreover, his poems also present to an eminent degree an 'internal dialogicality' ".

1. *How to kéep—is there ány any, is there none such, nowhere*
    known some, bow or brooch or braid or brace, láce,
    latch or catch or key to keep
2. *Back beauty, keep it, beauty, beauty, beauty, … from vanishing away?*

As can be seen from the example, there is practically no word or sound which has not its mirror effect. The speaking voice seems to be breathing fast, driven by the internal urgency to receive a quick response to the painful question of whether it be possible to keep beauty as it is today for ever. But when the same voice comes to the final four lines, the problem posed at the beginning has not received a satisfactory answer and despair has taken the place of expectation:

13. *So be beginning, be beginning to despair.*
14. *O there's none; no no no there's none:*
15. *Be beginning to despair, to despair,*
16. *Despair, despair, despair, despair.*

Nothing but despair is left, and the repetition practically of all the sounds in the four lines indicates that the kathabasis of the quest has reached its lowest point.
The same device, in the second section, acquires quite a different meaning, firstly it is made to sound as an encouragement to leave all worldly cares for something which is due to decay and disappearance:

15. *Winning ways, airs innocent, maiden manners, sweet looks,*
    loose locks, long locks, lovelocks, gaygear, going gallant, girlgrace—
16. *Resign them, sign them, seal them, send them, motion them with breath,*
17. *And with sighs soaring, soaring síghs deliver*
18. *Them*

then in the wake of an ever growing enthusiasm for God's gifts, it points the way towards higher, safer and lovelier goals:

27. *When the thing we freely fórfeit is kept with fonder a care,*
28. *Fonder a care kept than we could have kept it, kept*
29. *Far with fonder a care (and we, we should have lost it) finer, fonder*
30. *A care kept.*
31. *Yonder.—What high as that! We follow, now we follow.—*
    Yonder, yes yonder, yonder,
32. *Yonder.*

Practically every device in the poem, besides evoking some feeling or reinforcing some idea, seems to have been introduced as if the piece had

been devised as a musical composition: from repetition of single words and phrases to incremental repetition (*whatever's prized and passes of us, everything that's / fresh and fast flying of us, seems to us sweet of us; sweet looks, / loose locks, long locks, lovelocks* with the additional effects of alliteration) to hyperbaton *(sighs soaring, soaring sighs; kept with fonder a care, / Fonder a care kept);* from enjambement *(to keep / Back beauty,* conveying the desperate feeling of some value which cannot be kept, whatever the efforts, or *Ó is there no frowning of these wrinkles, rankéd wrinkles deep, /Dówn?* where the sense of a fall, implicit in the adverb "down" is further reinforced by its position at the beginning of the line); to the interruption of a sentence to insert another, suggesting a sudden thought or afterthought: *Nor can you long be, what you now are, called fair*; *every hair / Is, hair of the head, numbered*; *kept / Far with fonder a care (and we, we should have lost it) finer, fonder / A care kept.*

In *The Leaden Echo and The Golden Echo*, he was particularly interested in creating an emotional effect comparable to the wonder produced by a sound reflected and repeated by someone or something invisible, but apparently perceptive and ready to reply. An echo could be such a device and in fact all the poem resounds of echo effects. In fact, what Hopkins was doing in this poem was not a mere reproduction of echo effects. Scientifically, an echo does not simply reproduce a sequence of sounds exactly as they are pronounced: unstressed syllables, for example, are likely to disappear or be distorted; also, the quality of the sound itself has its effects on its echoic reproduction according to its pitch, timbre and duration. Echo, then, is rather a metaphor of the inner conflict of a troubled mind, which keeps repeating the same words or phrases over and over again under the pressure of some unsolved psychological or moral conflict[2]. For example, an echo would not reproduce the first syllable of "beginning" (line 13 and 16, *The Leaden Echo*), which is unstressed, but rather the last two syllables, which justifies "principia-ncìpia" in my translation.

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[2] I wish to thank Francesca Romana Paci for our conversations on Hopkins and translation, which encouraged me to go back to this translation which I had begun years ago and left unfinished.

Hopkins relies on the musical quality of language to express the whole variety of his feelings and ideas concerning his response to nature, life, religion practically in all of his poems, but here his purpose is, explicitly, to produce not just a poem, but a musical piece, "a song for [his] play" to be performed by two choirs. "I must invent a notation […] as in music", he wrote to Bridges in a letter dated October 13 1882). He "marked the stronger stresses", but "the degree of stress perpetually varying" made him aware that no marking could be satisfactory, so he thought that maybe it could be better to leave it to the reader.[3] This explains why Hopkins did not use his usual amount of stress marks and metrical marks as in many poems of his artistic maturity. Only a few have been preserved and appear in the original text. In my translation I have decided not to use them, except in the first line of *The Leaden Echo*, as the two languages are completely different as regards the average number of syllables which make up the Italian language, compared with the monosyllabic, iambic rhythm of English.

In general, I have tried to preserve the musical quality of the two poems by keeping as many as possible of their stylistic, rhetorical and euphonious features, particularly alliteration, hyperbaton and enjambement. Also, I have tried to preserve the word order and the number of lines as much as possible. There are things I am not pleased with, but I will not reveal them: I am sure you will be able to discover them, and more than I could point out myself.

Works Cited

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[3] In the autograph dated Stonyhurst, October 13, 1882.