

me and my friends 6

Mladen Dolar

What's in a Voice?

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friends*



## WHAT'S IN A VOICE?

Juliet, standing on the balcony and talking into the night, says: "What's in a name? ... It is nor hand, nor foot, / Nor arm, nor face, nor any other part / Belonging to a man."<sup>1</sup> Juliet doesn't see Romeo, hidden in the darkness of the garden, not yet, she speaks into the dark, and Romeo listens to 'his Mistress's voice' addressing the night. This is first of all a scene of voices, voices heard in the dark, and at the same time, emblematically, a scene of names: precisely the drama of the disparity between voices and names. She will recognize Romeo, a moment later, by his voice, and they will commune with their voices in the dark, not quite seeing each other, they will swear their love in this scene of voices, the canonical scene which has defined so much of what we understand under the name of love. What is love? It is what happens in the balcony scene. The scene can be taken as a cue for the understanding of the voice, for the rather dramatic understanding of the discrepancy, the opposition between the voice and the name, and on a more abstract level, between the voice and the signifier.

In this scene, at the simplest, the name is the enemy and the voice is the ally, the friend. "Tis but thy name that is my enemy," says Juliet. Both the name and the voice point to individuality, they pinpoint our uniqueness, our singularity, but in very different ways: the name points to the inscription of individuality into the social, into the network of social divisions, hierarchies and obligations, the name ascribes us a social place. The voice, on the other hand, seems to escape the social network and its vicissitudes, it seems to speak from heart to heart, it is of such stuff that love is made of. Each voice is unique, it has the fingerprint quality.<sup>2</sup> It is

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1 "Tis but thy name that is my enemy; / – Thou art thyself though, not a Montague. / What's Montague? ... O, be some other name! / What's in a name? That which we call a rose, / By any other name would smell as sweet; / So Romeo would, were he not Romeo call'd, / Retain that dear perfection in which he owes / Without that title: – Romeo, doff thy name; / And for that name, which is no part of thee, / Take all myself." "O Romeo, Romeo! Wherefore art thou Romeo? / Deny thy father and refuse thy name; / Or, if thou wilt not, be but sworn my love; / And I'll no longer be a Capulet."

2 The comparison has some sinister undertones nowadays, since one can imagine the voice easily serving as a bio-pointer, just as the retina that is checked on crossing

Thanks to Mladen Dolar and Peter Widmer

Published with the kind agreement of Mladen Dolar

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far more unique and singular than the name, since the name is shared, it obeys social and family codes and it is always generic – one is always a Montague or a Capulet. Names can be replicated, they can be cloned, each name is ‘always already’ a clone, but the voices can’t (not until the troubling technological inventions more than a century ago which inaugurated the new fate of the voice in the age of mechanical reproduction). By the name one always impersonates someone else, one is always a representative of a class of people bearing certain names, a family, a nation, a tradition, but with the voice one always impersonates only oneself, as it were. ‘Impersonating oneself’ may seem an oxymoron, but it is actually an apt description of the use of one’s own voice. The person, *persona*, according to a popular (albeit dubious) etymology,<sup>3</sup> comes from *per-sonare*, to sound through, namely to sound through a mask, through a mouthpiece – the person meant also a mask, so the uniqueness of a voice had to sound through a mask to invoke the person. Also in Greek *prosopon* astonishingly meant both the face and the mask. One could say that the mask is generic, it highlights the characteristic features, the type, it is like the name, it constitutes a class, while the voice is unique, yet only by sounding through a mask, so that the person is the troubled unity of the two, the generic and the individual: this already gives us an inkling that one can assume one’s voice only by, literally, impersonation. But for the Veronese lovers it is a matter of life and death to undo this unity. The uniqueness that the voice evokes and testifies to is the uniqueness which is at stake in love, love aims precisely at the exclusive trait that cannot be quite spelled out or pinned down. Voice is its harbinger, voice is the pledge, and the two lovers in the night have no problems communing in their voices – everything would have been all right, or so it seems, if only they could be confined to the voice, it is the name that is the source of all trouble. “In what vile part of this anatomy / Doth my name lodge?” asks Romeo later in the play (III/3). “Tell me that I may sack / The hateful mansion.” And he draws his sword, as the stage directions indicate, prepared to cut off that vile bodily part, to cut

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certain borders. One can easily imagine an American immigration officer saying: “Stand in front of the desk, sir, and speak into the microphone.”

<sup>3</sup> This etymology was traditionally taken for granted, it is based on illustrious sources (Aulu-Gelle, Boetius), but which were prey to homonymy. The word is probably of Etruscan origin.

off his name with the sword, castrate himself of his name, the name of the Father, but to no avail. What part of the body might he purport to cut off when he draws his sword? Does he tacitly assume that ‘the phallic signifier’ resides in his phallus? Is this the spontaneous assumption that the audience inevitably makes? This is like an almost caricature Lacanian *Urszene*, bringing together the Name of the Father, the phallic signifier, castration, and the nature of love. To cut off the name and to retain the voice – the name seems to be expendable, one could do without it, the voice is not: “Deny thy father and refuse thy name” – in order to fully assume the voice?

So what’s in a voice, to extend Juliet’s question? What does the voice bear witness to? And which part of the anatomy does it inhabit? It is also ‘nor hand nor foot nor arm nor face nor any other part belonging to a man’. And how does ‘what’s in a voice’ differ from ‘what’s in a name’? There is a dichotomy, an antinomy of the voice and the signifier – this can serve as a general thesis, a starting point, something that this scene dramatizes most spectacularly, by pitting the voice against the master signifier, indeed that of the Name of the Father. But what is brought here to a dramatic peak happens on a more modest and elementary level all the time: there is a drama, a miniature drama carried out in virtually every sentence we may utter. For what is signifier? One could propose its simple definition: it is that in language which can be replicated – its replication, repetition, iterativity enables speech. It is that in language which can be linguistically classified, pinned down and dissected into a web of differences; it upholds a logic which functions well enough, despite its pitfalls and flaws with which we must make do. But the voice which sustains the speech, the voice which is the vehicle and the means whereby we can speak, cannot itself be linguistically described, although it stands at the very core of speaking. What can be pinned down, classified and analyzed, is the phoneme, a particular discrete sound, i. e. the voice molded by the signifier, shaped by it, cut down to size so that it can produce meaning. For it is only with signifiers that one can make sense, signifiers are there, as their name indicates, in order to signify. The voice is another matter: it is that in language which doesn’t contribute to signification; it is what doesn’t help making sense. And this could serve as its provisional definition – it is what cannot be said, although

it enables saying. It is the means in the ascent towards meaning, to be eventually discarded, like Wittgenstein's ladder, once we have climbed to the peak of meaning. The voice is unique, unrepeatable, singular, and therefore not subject to linguistic description, it is what cannot be universalized. Hence it can serve as the pledge of one's ineffable being in the midst of iterativity and replication, the pledge of love – this is where the linguistic drama intersects the drama of lovers. But in its unrepeatable singularity, and for that very reason, it is also immediately vanishing, evanescent, disappearing the moment it appears.

A chapter can be opened here under the heading 'poetry and the unconscious'. If the voice is the remainder of the universal, that what cannot be universalized, then this remainder works within the universal and contaminates it. It is not simply that the signifier excludes the voice and bans it out of its boundaries, it also contains it within its own nature – this is where a signifier is never simply a signifier, a creature of difference and replication, but possesses itself an erratic and unpredictable nature, stained by the voice, as it were. It is always also a sound object, not merely the bearer of signification. This is where the effort of poetry lies: to capture the voice with the signifier; to seize what cannot be replicated with what can be; to work with what is singular in the signifier, not with what can be cloned; with the contingent within the necessary. The signifier has a double nature: apart from its differential, signifying, sense-making properties it also produces erratic sound echoes, reverberations, sound contagions, similarities, the stuff that can be put to use in repetitions, rhythms and rhymes, the stuff that can unexpectedly produce another meaning, inside of what makes sense, signification beyond signification, although both are inextricably tied together. This is where signification redoubles itself, contingently, precisely where it stumbles upon the voice, the voice as the erratic appendix of the signifying logic. Following the signifier, i. e. what can be replicated, enables everyone to be a speaker, speech is a universal function, but following the sound echoes and unpredictable patterns is elusive, it cannot be universalized, so poets are very rare creatures. – I can here briefly mention the name of Roman Jakobson, whose illustrious linguistic career was constantly moving on this edge: how can language produce poetic effects, on top of its signifying nature?

Yet, there is a way in which everyone is a poet, unwittingly, a poet

against one's will, insofar as one is endowed with the unconscious. The unconscious, such as Freud understands it, depends upon taking the contingent nature of language, the voice, the echo, the sound contamination, as a ubiquitous function. The Freudian slip, one says, but what does one slip on? The meaning slips precisely on the excess of the voice, where words are not treated as signifiers, but as sound objects, and it is this excess of the voice, the sound echoes, similarities and contaminations, which make the meaning slip. 'Familiär' happens to have an echo in 'Millionär', so it can produce the famous joke of 'famillionär' ('I sat beside Salomon Rothschild and he treated me as his equal – quite famillionairly' – PFL 6, p. 47).<sup>4</sup> 'Geist', spirit, happens to sound like 'Geiz', avarice (PFL 5, p. 106), so it offers itself to the slip of the tongue – and a whole history can be encapsulated between those two words, the close similarity of sounds matching the maximum distance of meaning. There is a beautiful dream of Freud's which turns around the word *hearsing*, which appears as the name of a station on a travel. "Hear-sing' was a compound. One part of it was derived from the names of places on the suburban railway near Vienna, which so often end in 'ing': Hietzing, Liesing, Mödling ... The other part was derived from the English word 'hearsay'." (PFL 3, p. 406) Hearsing, as opposed to hearsay, hearsing along with hearsay, inserted into the hearsay – what an economical description of the way the signifier works in the unconscious! The element of singing in saying, that which doesn't contribute to signification, is the 'stuff that dreams are made of', it enables the flash of the appearance of the unconscious. And if the hearsay evidence is not admitted in court, then the point of the analysis is to lend it an ear, *to give hearsing a hearing*, to give a hearing to the point where the left-over of signification invades the very process of signification. But what is at stake now is not the aesthetic effect – 'let's listen how the unconscious sings and enjoy it' – but the question of knowledge, the unconscious knowledge and unconscious desire, the unconscious thought – that was Freud's outrageous idea. There is a beautiful sentence in Agamben: "The search for voice in language, this is what one calls thought."<sup>5</sup> Thought dependant not on the signifier, the meaning, but precisely on what is

4 The Freud quotes are from *The Pelican Freud Library* (PFL), 15 vols. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973-86.

5 Quoted in Jean-Luc Nancy, *A l'écoute*, Paris: Galilée 2002, p. 45.

recalcitrant to signifier, what escapes meaning. So the problem is to focus the question of knowledge precisely around the element of the voice which redoubles signification. Unconscious knowledge, unconscious thought, unconscious desire get their only foothold in the most precarious matter of sound contaminations and echoes, precisely in that which in the signifier doesn't contribute to making sense. They hinge on the excess of the voice against the meaning: they are always interruptions of meaning, its slips, and the point is not to unearth the hidden meaning in that excess, but rather to maintain the very excess and pursue its logic. For the unconscious, as Freud points out, doesn't reside in the latent thoughts disclosed by interpretation, it is not another meaning (deeper, hidden etc.), it resides in the form, in the excess of distortion, *Entstellung*, which sticks precisely to 'the voice in the signifier', its excrescence. Hence Lacan's concept of *lalangue*.

The unconscious is not a hidden meaning, a deeper meaning to be unearthed, it resides only in the distorted form. One could say: it seems that the unconscious is telling us something in a roundabout way, so it seems that our task, the task of analytic interpretation, would be to say this directly, plainly, without the by-pass of distortion. But this is the lure, the error: the unconscious is telling us something only in the roundabout way, it resides only in the distortion, in the surplus of form, and the form sticks precisely to the element of the recalcitrant voice. This is where the analytic interpretation is a misnomer, it runs against the grain of the common notion of interpretation, it is not the meaning it is after, but rather the vacillating object epitomized by the voice. For the unconscious, as Freud points out, doesn't reside in the latent thoughts disclosed by interpretation, it resides only in the form, and this form is nothing else but the excess of distortion which sticks precisely to 'the voice in the signifier'<sup>6</sup>.

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6 As Lacan put it: "... interpretation is not limited to providing us with the significations of the way taken by the psyche that we have before us. This implication is no more than a prelude. It is directed not so much at the meaning as towards reducing it to the non-meaning of the signifiers, so that we may rediscover the determinants of the subject's entire behavior [...] precisely in its irreducible and senseless character [...]" (*The Four Fundamental Concepts*, London: Penguin 1977, p. 212)

So what's in a voice? For one part, the lovers of Verona no doubt amply rely on the voice in this first sense, on the poetic voice which sustains their love in the dark, and this conjunction of their singularity and the poetic effects makes this scene so memorable. But there is more in a voice and other things. If it is 'nor hand, nor foot, nor arm, nor face, nor any other part belonging to a man,' where does it come from? The voice, in its most elementary manifestation, appears as something that can convey the uniqueness, it 'expresses' the interiority which it brings out, it testifies to an unfathomable interior, it exposes the hidden treasure of individuality – but, to put it bluntly, this is another lure. There is a powerful notion of one's presence in one's voice, a presence in a way more real than the usual presence, a presence beyond presence, although the voice is but a mere undulation of the air, fleeting, passing the moment it is emitted, and therefore evoking presence at its most elusive, yet so tenacious in being tenuous. Perhaps the very notion of presence cannot be conceived without a voice – this is where Derrida's notion of phonocentrism takes its hold, we need a voice to think presence, we need a voice not merely to think, but to experience one's presence to oneself, the self-presence, consciousness, based on auto-affection, where one is the emitter and the receiver of one's voice in the illusion of pure self-affection, and this is perhaps what we call consciousness.<sup>7</sup> There is a strong metaphoricity connecting the voice with the spirit, the breath, something more real than any positive presence. But this makes the very notion of presence depend upon something eerie, spectral and virtual. For where does the voice come from? Already the simple question of its emission involves a paradox: we can see the mouth, the bodily opening from which it is supposed to emanate, yet the voice comes from an invisible interior, it indicates an unfathomable interiority, we can never see its source. It divides the body into an inside and an outside and is actually the major operator of this division, the most dramatic division there is. Standing at this dividing line that it helps to produce (standing? there is no way the voice could stand), it is at the same time the intersection of the body and the language, it is what they have in common, it pins the language to a point of bodily emission, it ties language to the body. The signifier is a creature without a body, a creature of logic,

but with the voice it acquires an embodiment, an incarnation, for it can function only if someone assumes it with his or her own voice. But this connection is paradoxical, for the voice doesn't simply belong to either the body or the language – it cannot be seized by linguistics, it inhabits language without being its part, and it is not a positive part of the body, it is a missile which departs from it, it is not simply inside nor outside, but consists in the very transition. It is the great operator of the division into inside and outside, a borderline paradox, as it were, which requires a new kind of ontology or a new kind of topology.

Let me give another literary example – I started with Shakespeare at the dawn of modernity, so let me take an example from the opposite end, from one of the highpoints of modernism, Samuel Beckett's *The Unnamable*. The scene from *Romeo and Juliet* forcefully staged the opposition between the voice and the name, the ensuing drama of the two, while Beckett's text brings this to an extreme: what is at stake here is precisely a voice without a name, a nameless voice, an unnamable voice, for we literally don't know, throughout the novel, who is emitting this voice, where does it come from. The voice without a known origin or location is the whole point of the novel, the novel is driven just by a voice to whom no name can be assigned. (Let me just remind that *The Unnamable* is the third part of a *Trilogy*, which comprises *Molloy* and *Malone dies* as the first two parts, and with each consecutive part more things disappear, so that in the final part there are no more characters, heroes, plots etc., what remains is a mere voice.) One quote must suffice: "... I'll have said it, without a mouth I'll have said it, I'll have said it inside me, then in the same breath outside me, perhaps that's what I feel, an outside and an inside and me in the middle, perhaps that's what I am, the thing that divides the world in two, on the one side the outside, on the other the inside, that can be as thin as foil, I'm neither one side nor the other, I'm in the middle, I'm the partition, I've two surfaces and no thickness, perhaps that's what I feel, myself vibrating, I'm the tympanum, on the one hand the mind, on the other the world, I don't belong to either ..."<sup>8</sup>

One couldn't be more precise: the voice is the very principle of division,

itself not on either side and yet on both sides at once, at the intersection of the inner and the outer, yet unplaceable in that division, the thinnest of foils which connects and separates the two. There is a standard way to describe certain procedure of modern literature under the heading 'the stream of consciousness', when a writer supposedly follows the inner rambling and faithfully records it as a scribe, putting down its meanderings in a raw form as they appear to consciousness before being made presentable and coherent. As far as Beckett is concerned, the term is misleading and inappropriate, for the stream of consciousness presupposes consciousness as a realm neatly separate from the outside world, but the whole point with Beckett is that this inner voice maintains itself as unplaceable, at the very edge of the mind and the world, the speech and the body, cutting into both and being cut by both. Its inner split immediately translates into an outer split and vice versa. It is not that the consciousness is incoherent; rather the very line that separates consciousness and constitutes it as such is constantly blurred and indistinct.

We can mark in passing the distance that separates the two quotes: on the one hand the exemplary drama of the voice and the name, the name of the Father, at the other end the nameless voice, the voice without a foothold, with no name of the Father to stick to or to oppose and with no individuality to express, with no social obligations to fulfill or to fall back on, merely the persistence of the voice, but which obliges by its strange ethics of perseverance. It is as if the name (of the father) has lost its power and authority to name, to define the social, to prescribe, to allot a social place – it has become missing. This voice is a new voice, an invention of modernity, as it were, something modernity has brought forward, and Beckett's *The Unnamable* can be read as an exemplary counterpart to *Romeo and Juliet*.

The voice which literally embodies the dividing line is something that one can never quite claim as one's own, one can ultimately never speak in one's own voice: it may seem to be the most intimately mine, my own innermost possession, but it is also something which disrupts our self-presence, the very notion of the self, and refers it to virtuality. Stemming from the interior, it brings out more, and other things, than one catered for. Beckett is here an excellent point in the case: there are now many schools of creative writing which endeavour to teach people how to find

their own authors' voices, this is their guiding metaphor: to find your own voice in writing, what is specifically and originally yours, proper to you only. Beckett's problem was exactly the opposite: how to lose one's own voice, how to write neutrally, anonymously, how to get rid of style, how not to be an author (hence writing in a foreign language, to deprive oneself of the delusive shelter of one's mother tongue). Foucault, in the famous lecture 'What is an author?' took his cue from Beckett, from his line 'What matter who's speaking', '*Qu'importe qui parle*' – the point is how not to fall into the trap of one's own voice as an ineffable inner treasure and into the twin trap of authorship. For him the voice is precisely not something intimate or proper, but something that disturbs the interiority of consciousness. It is more appropriate to say that the voice is like an intruder, a foreign body, a prosthesis, a bodily extension, an artificial limb – it is never 'authentic', it is never just an expression. The voice has like a spectral autonomy, it never quite belongs to the body we see, the voice never sounds like the person emitting it, there is always a gap, a *Verfremdung*, a mismatch. There always seems that there is ventriloquism at work, as if ventriloquism was the standard use of the voice that we overlook by mere habit (and overhear when the habit drops its guard a bit). The voice as an intruder is endowed with a spectral nature, with something both intimate and external – Lacan invented an excellent word for this, the *extimate*.

Let me give two examples. In *2001 – The Space Odyssey*, the mythical film by Stanley Kubrick, there is a computer Hal 2000 which is running the space-ship and which at a certain point runs amok and has to be disconnected. So the hero (Keir Dullea) disconnects its brain cells, slowly, one by one, the computers were of huge sizes in those days, while we hear the computer speaking with 'his' completely mechanical voice, pleading for his life, pleading for mercy, regressing to his supposed childhood, singing a children's song – the computer dies a most human death, it is tragically human, as it were,<sup>9</sup> just by its mechanical voice, its humanity appearing precisely in its opposite, in the contrived voice, in this artificial extension, in its discrepancy. There is a contemporary 'real-life' counterpart to this, the voice of Stephen Hawking. There is this mastermind, this living supercomputer, the scientific icon of our times, the

9 In contrast, the hibernating astronauts in the movie die the most impersonal and mechanical death.

most astute mind there is in modern science, but reduced to the bare minimum of the body, the completely disabled body, the body shrunk to the outmost, and his humanity is epitomized by the completely mechanical voice, the most gripping and at the same time the most uncanny voice, the extracorporeal voice of the mind, gripping in its impersonality. I have used, on a number of places in my book, the schema of the intersection of two circles, a very simple didactical device that Lacan proposed at a certain stage, in *Seminar XI* (op. cit., p. 211), as a way of understanding a basic alienation that the subject undergoes as the result of the symbolic cut. It's a scheme that can serve various purposes, where the point is that there are two areas which are linked by something that doesn't simply belong to them, although it is something they have in common and presents the area of their overlapping. The two areas can be language and body, which intersect in the voice, or more generally nature and culture, biology and the symbolic, phone and logos, the subject and the Other, interiority and exteriority. The voice is always placed at the intersection. But this is perhaps a misleading way of looking at it, misleading insofar as it seems to presuppose that we have two areas which are already constituted and stand opposed to each other, facing each other, and we are looking for their link, a link that would bridge their incommensurability, their utter divergence. But here lies the major paradox of psychoanalysis and the major difficulty of understanding its object: the voice is precisely the operator of the split, it inhabits the split and by its operation actually produces the two areas which it is supposed to bring together in the overlapping. The overlapping produces the very areas which overlap. There is no interiority or exteriority, no symbolic or biology, no nature or culture which would simply preexist this intersection. They don't exist as independent areas. At the same time, what they have in common is not some positive element which would simply belong to either of them – hence Lacan's insistence that the object, *objet a*, is not at the disposal of the Other no more than it is at the disposal of the subject, it is there as if a quirk, an addition, an intrusion. It presents a dimension which is neither interior nor exterior, neither nature nor culture, neither somatic nor symbolic, but where the one intrudes upon the other, it emerges at their interface – Beckett says 'I have two surfaces but no thickness', there is no ontological thickness or substance to this interface. It embodies their borderline, but a border-

line which is constantly renegotiated and doesn't exist as a clear line of demarcation. In the voice the language infringes upon the body and the body infringes upon language, as it were. More generally, the psychoanalytic concept of the drive, *der Trieb*, circumscribes a paradoxical locus where nature infringes upon culture and culture infringes upon nature, it points to some nature which is not mere nature, a denatured nature, and it points to the spots in culture where it is not mere culture, as it were, but relies on its other, it intersects with the denatured body. So the area of overlapping is the area of production of pure divergence, it produces two sides which don't have a common measure, irreducible to each other, and the intersection is the very relationship of their non-relation, something that articulates them and binds them together while they remain absolutely heterogeneous. It connects and disconnects at the same time. This is the area where Freud, and Lacan, have seen as the proper location of the drives, those mythical beings, as Freud says, which one can never get to directly, which cannot be isolated by themselves, but can only be detected and pursued through the paradoxes of both areas that they produce. This is why this object voice, which belongs to the most common experience, at the same time points to an ontological paradox and requires, as I said, a new kind of topology and a new kind of ontology.

This spectral autonomy of the voice, this zone of indeterminacy can perhaps be best felt with what has become known as the acousmatic voice. The term was introduced by Pierre Schaeffer, the famous French composer of concrete music, and by his follower Michel Chion<sup>10</sup>, and it means simply the voice whose origin one cannot see or locate. We don't know where it is coming from and to what body it could be assigned. This voice can produce uncanny effects, the impossibility to locate it endows it with a special force, a sort of omnipotence and omnipresence. The most striking example is Hitchcock's *Psycho*, which entirely revolves around the simple question of where does the mother's voice come from, from which body it emanates. We have the voice and we don't see the body producing it, not until the very end. And the mother's voice, we may add, is not just any voice, it is the beginning of the vocal

10 Cf. Pierre Schaeffer, *Traité des objets musicaux*, Paris: Seuil, 1966; Michel Chion, *La voix au cinéma*, Paris: Cahiers du cinéma, 1982.

experience, the first voice one hears, the case is paradigmatic – the mother's voice which determines so much of the infant's fate in its first and decisive stages is precisely an acousmatic voice, whose origin the baby initially and structurally cannot locate, so the acousmatic voice is actually the originary experience of the voice as the voice of the other. This is where *Psycho* acquires the force of a parable.

There is an inherent link between the acousmatic voice and philosophy. Where does this word 'acousmatic' come from? The first person who called himself a philosopher and who founded the first philosophical school was Pythagoras. The acousmatics were his followers, his pupils, who had to listen to their teacher, their master, to his lectures, in such a way that the teacher was hidden behind a screen – and this for five years. We have the report of Diogenes Laertius (VIII, 10) for this. So if anybody wanted to be Pythagoras' disciple he had to undergo a period of apprenticeship when for five years he was merely listening to the master's teaching proffered behind a curtain, not being able to see the master. This is the acousmatic dispositive which stands at the very origin of philosophy. The teacher behind the screen, lecturing, an invisible creature of the voice – a stroke of genius which maybe inaugurates philosophy. This is a philosophical theatre, with the curtain and all, but a curtain which is not raised for five years, so that initially philosophy appears as an art of the actor behind the curtain. The aim of this mechanism was to separate the teaching, entrusted to mere voice, from any visual distractions, from all the imaginary, from any image and appearance, from the behaviour and the very body of the teacher – from everything that could divert from the ideas being proffered. The teaching, the ideas, the doctrine, all this was assigned only to His Master's Voice as their proper medium, the medium of the spirit, and the aim was precisely to separate the spirit from the body. But it is not only that the disciples could concentrate better on the ideas in this way, it is also that the teaching acquired an exceptional authority by being entrusted to the acousmatic voice, it acquired an additional surplus meaning, an aura which would be dissipated if one could see its banal location. The beauty of this mechanism is in its simplicity and in the manner in which it can function automatically, formally – one could even say that someone quasi-automatically becomes a teacher, a master, by lecturing



behind a screen. There is a surplus authority by which the teacher is not merely a teacher, but also the master, and this surplus stems from the invisible voice, not from the content of the proposed ideas. The body seems to be an embarrassment for the spirit, but there is a lure in this, an illusion, since the voice itself is a kind of body, in a reversal it is more body than the visible body, a spectral body more forceful and intrusive than any other body can be. The disembodied body compels and the teaching is more persuasive if it is supported by the acousmatic voice. The spirit obtains a new body in the voice, an aura, and this is the source of its efficacy. (One can remember that in the Bible and in a number of religions God regularly appears as an acousmatic voice.) And we can only surmise what happened with the hapless disciples once the curtain was lifted after all these years and they could see with their own eyes this wonder, this source of the voice, this pitiful and banal old man – for everyone would appear trivial in such circumstances, there is no way that one's appearance could measure up to this voice and its authority. One can pity the poor teacher when the curtain is lifted, and one can surmise that the thing could only turn into a black comedy, even worse, a comedy that no one could publicly admit.

If we have this acousmatic dispositive at the beginning of philosophy, then we find one also at its end, namely the figure of psychoanalyst. The analyst is also someone one cannot see – following Freud's guidelines he is supposed to sit behind the couch, outside of the field of vision of the patient, and here, too, the intention is to be rid of all visual distractions, in particular to prevent the possibility of patient's reading the analyst's reactions in his behaviour and to take a cue from there. The analyst is thus a ghost, an invisible creature, a spirit deprived of its body. But the situation is now exactly the reverse: according to Freud's dispositive it is now the patient, the subject, who has to do all the talking – this is indeed 'the talking cure', as it was called by the first psychoanalytic patient, Anna O., and the one who talks is the one to be cured. On the other side the analyst can do his job, in the limit at least, by keeping silent. Freud himself considers for a moment the possibility of a cure that could be carried out by him not saying anything. So the situation is directly reversed: the subject talks, not in order to proffer a teaching, dispense ideas, he speaks about anything that happens to fall into his mind, in the maximal distance to philosophy, this is mere babbling, free

associations, anything goes. But the point is that he speaks to the Other, to the one who is supposed to know (as Lacan's notorious formula goes, and the vocal tie is essential to transference). The one who is supposed to know is the one not to be seen, he is structurally behind the curtain and hence appears as omniscient and omnipotent. So the analyst, in this Pythagorean embodiment in reverse, is not a creature of the acousmatic voice, the voice of authority, but of the inaudible voice, which is perhaps the voice in its pure form, the voice brought to its concept. Not an acousmatic voice, but an acousmatic silence, a silence whose source one cannot see and locate. The subject learns and transforms himself not by listening to a voice and a teaching, but by speaking himself into this silence – to learn from the silence of the Other which receives his own voice and transfigures it. The Other is not the possessor of a doctrine, it is the subject who has to make his way to it through his own babbling, a babbling turning into something else through the loop of the silence of the Other.

Lacan insists a number of times that the object voice has to be divorced from sonority. It is as if the sonorous voice always appears as a stand-in for the object voice, or the object voice is something that is attached like an inaudible appendage to the vocal sonority, which precludes its insertion into the acoustics, although it inhabits the acoustic phenomena. What is the nature of this appendage, how can one isolate it?

In one of his (rather rare) reflections about the voice in the seminar on anxiety (5 June 1963) Lacan tries to demonstrate this tenet. He curiously makes an excursion into the physiology of the ear, he speaks about the cavity of the ear, its snail-like shape, *le tuyau*, the tube, and goes on to say that its importance is merely topological, it consists in the formation of a void, a cavity, an empty space, of "the most elementary form of a constituted and a constituting void [*le vide*]"<sup>11</sup>, like the empty space in the middle of a tube, or of any wind instrument, the space of mere resonance, the pure volume, volume as opposed to loudness, the silent volume. But this is but a metaphor, he says, and continues with the following rather mysterious passage:

"If the voice, in our sense, has an importance, then it doesn't reside in

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11 Lacan, *L'angoisse*, Paris: Seuil 2004, p. 318.

it resonating in some spatial void; rather it resides in the fact that the simplest emission [...] resonates in the void which is the void of the Other as such, *ex nihilo*, so to speak. The voice responds to what is said, but it cannot be responsible for it [*La voix répond à ce qui se dit, mais elle ne peut pas en répondre.*] In other words: in order to respond we have to incorporate the voice as the alterity of what is said [*l'altérité de ce qui se dit*]." (Ibid.)

What are we to make of this? The voice needs an empty space in order to resonate, it seems there is no voice without resonance, but this is not to be taken as a need for a resonating body, but rather the empty space in which the voice resonates is only the void of the Other, the Other as a void. One speaks, and there is a response, a voice that comes back to us, the voice as the answer to what was said, but a response of the mere resonance in the Other. The voice comes back to us through the loop of the Other. We say something, and what comes back to us from the Other is the pure alterity of what is said, that is, the voice. Which also means that there is no voice without the Other, and that the voice is not a shortcut to an immediate presence, or simply to presence. This is maybe the sense that one can give to the famous dictum that the subject always gets back his own message in an inverted form: the message one gets back in response is the voice. Our speech resonates in the Other and is returned as the voice, something we didn't cater for, the pure alterity, as opposed to meaning: the inverted form of our message is its voice. And this voice was created from a pure void, *ex nihilo*, it is the minimal form of the echo, not the sound echo that one can hear, but the inaudible echo of pure resonance, and this non-sonorous resonance endows what is said with alterity. The pure void produces something, something emerges out of nothing, there is a resonating nothing, although this resonance has no positive sonority. One expects a response from the Other, one addresses it in the hope of a response, this is the minimal function of speech, its address, but all one gets back is the voice. Not one's own voice, but the voice as the echo of the Other. It is a response to our words, but not responsible for them, the subject is the one who is responsible for the emission. The voice is what is said turned into its alterity, but the responsibility is subject's own, not the Other's, which means that the subject is responsible not only for what he said, but must at the same time respond for, and respond to, the alterity of his own

speech. He said something more than he intended, and this surplus is the voice which is merely produced by being passed through the loop of the Other. This is I suppose at the bottom of the elementary form of the analytic situation, the lever of its minimal efficacy: one says something in the presence of the analyst, that is, against the backdrop of the silence of the analyst, the analyst reduced to silence, to the pure Other without any content. And, rather strikingly, in this simple dispositive there is the dispossession of one's voice in the presence of the silence of the analyst: whatever one says is immediately countered by its own alterity, by the voice resounding in the resonance of the void of the Other, which comes back to the subject as the answer the moment one spoke. And this resonance thwarts one's own voice, it burrows it, makes it sound hollow. The speech is subject's own, but the voice pertains to the Other, it is created in the loop of its void. This is what one has to learn to respond for, and respond to<sup>12</sup>. The very notion of responsibility is coined on the acoustic metaphor, on the assumption of the response of the Other as the voice and on subject's responding to it.

On that view the resonance would thus be the locus of voice – voice is not a primary given which would then be squeezed into the mold of the signifier, the natural growth which would have to undergo the cultural trimming, it is rather the product of the signifier itself, its own other, its own echo, the resonance of its intervention. Resonance of the voice has to be opposed to *s'entendre parler*, to hear oneself speak, the formula which Derrida proposed as the model of consciousness. To hear oneself (speak) constitutes the acoustic mirror of self-presence, the pledge of self-transparency, the loop where one seems to be the sender and the receiver of the voice in one's own interiority, thus forming the closed circle of the self and the presence, precisely avoiding the loop of the Other and the alterity of its resonance. Indeed the criticism that Derrida directed against this notion, in his view the central tenet of metaphysics, and against the complicity it maintains with the notion of presence and a number of other related notions, is entirely justified – only that it disposes of the problem of the voice too easily and reduces it to the pledge of the presence. And here is the great difference between the Derridean and the Lacanian approach, although both see the voice

12 Bernard Baas (*De la chose à l'objet*, Leuven: Peeters/Vrin, 1998) puts it very well: "The voice is never my own voice, but the response is my own response." (p. 205)

as the central point. If for Derrida, to make it quick, voice is the key to self-presence, self-transparency and self-possession, and hence a key to the phonocentrism and logocentrism of metaphysics, then with Lacan voice functions as a disturbance, a factor of dispossession, so to speak, that what troubles the self-presence and refers it to a break. The voice as resonance is the opposite of self-presence: it is a reflexivity, a return, but which doesn't imply an identity or a self-presence, and in that very dislocation it is the opening of subjectivity. It is not the same subject which sends his message and gets the voice bounced back – rather, the subject is what emerges in this loop.

The object, as we have seen, is the excessive entity with no properties which presents a break in the horizon of meaning, in the existing world of bodies and signs, it is a crack, a site, a locus, an opening, which circumscribes the site both of subjectivation and of jouissance. One should recall here the very simple fact that psychoanalysis, at the most elementary level, is a practice of the voice. It can only be carried out *viva voce*, in living voice, in the living presence of the analysand and the analyst. Their tie is a vocal tie, a tie reduced to a vocal tie. The patient is (in principle) the principal or in the limit the sole speaker, the dubious privilege of the emission of the voice belongs to him. The analyst has to keep silent, at least in principle, and the great majority of the time. So the point of this simple device is to reduce everything else and retain merely the work through the voice, by the voice, on the voice. But here a curious reversal takes place: it is the analyst, with his silence, which is ultimately the embodiment of the voice, the agent of the voice as the object, or more precisely, the agent of that Other in which the voice resonates and 'takes place', the support of the alterity of the voice, the place where the voice takes the value of event, of a break in the field of meaning, the break of the existing situation, of the continuity of bodies and signs, and hence the emergence of that 'incorporeal body suspended between nothing and the pure event,' the emergence of truth.