I SEE A VOICE

A Philosophical History of Language, Deafness and the Senses

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It is rather obvious that our experience of the world begins with our senses; and equally clear, after a moment's thought, that we have several of them: touch, smell, taste, hearing and vision, according to the usual reckoning. So it is natural, when we come to reflect on our experience, that we should start by trying to make sense of this five-fold sensory world.

We may begin by worrying about mirages, hallucinations, dreams, and illusions: if our senses sometimes delude us, how can we ever rely on them to acquaint us with real physical objects, as opposed to the state of our own subjective perceptions? But soon we will feel the need to make some distinctions between the different senses. Touch will probably be reckoned the most robustly realistic of them, followed by taste and smell: they make real physical contact with their objects. Vision and hearing, by comparison, are indirect and abstract, since they connect us not with physical things, but only with the light and sound they emit or reflect.

Vision may perhaps have an advantage over hearing in that it imparts distinct information about the shapes of things and their spatial relations, whereas hearing informs us only about sounds, not about real objects in space. On the other hand, hearing has an advantage over vision in terms of our ability to affect it at will. Simply by making sounds with our voices, we can enter into our auditory

world in a way that has no analogue amongst the other senses: our voices are like an extra antenna, even an honorary sixth sense.

Metaphysicians and mystics have always liked to associate the voice with an immortal soul or divine spirit; and although we may be impatient with such unmodern notions, we will still have to admit that individual voices have a rather special significance in human life. We respond to them as we do to faces: as immediate embodiments of personal character and sensitive indicators of fluctuating mood. At the same time, they are marked by an enigmatic inner divide: the elusive fault-line between the voice that simply makes sounds, and the voice that speaks and utters the words of a language.

When a little baby whimpers or cries or yells, its voice gives uncontrived expression to its emotions; but when a child begins to speak, it is using its voice to participate in social communication in accordance with artificial linguistic conventions. Voices thus encode an intriguing human tension, even a contradiction: they are both expression and communication, both feeling and intellect, both body and mind, both nature and culture. The whole of us, it would seem, is included in the compass of the human voice.

1

Sound and Substance

Which would be the greater calamity: losing your sight or losing your hearing? That, as I remember, was the most absorbing question in the whole of my ramshackle childhood metaphysics. I would keep screwing up my eyes or sticking my fingers in my ears, and comparing the results. But my preference in those days was always the same: given the choice, I would far rather be deaf than blind. Blindness would mean never knowing where I was or what was going on around me. It would be like stumbling and fumbling through a pitch-dark dungeon – and my mind was stocked with enough stories and images and dreams to make that prospect terrifying: rats and spiders and ganglions of fleshy roots; putrefying bodies, gaping chasms, quicksands, and pits of slurping slime. The thought of blindness made me shudder.

Someone told me I could ruin my eyes by straining or tiring them, and the idea of going blind terrified me so much that I tried to remember to keep them shut whenever possible. If I lost my eyesight, I thought, I would never be able to tell what was brushing up against me, or what I was about to tread on or sit in. I would not even know what I was picking up and putting in my mouth.

Compared with that, what would it really matter if I lost my hearing, as long as I still had the use of my eyes? The world of sound had little to offer me except interruptions and interferences, or the drone of

grown-up conversations, so in some ways I could imagine deafness more as a liberation than a deprivation. Of course I would not be able to hear what was going on downstairs or out in the street. But I could always go and have a look, so it seemed that deafness would not be much more than a mild inconvenience.

What is more, sounds seemed peculiarly thin and unimportant: flimsy, wispy nonentities, almost entirely disconnected from the real world. They lacked palpable solidity; and solidity – as I learned when reading John Locke many years later – is not only the most constant of our sensations, but also 'the Idea most intimately connected with, and essential to Body'.[1] Blithe little materialist that I was, I presumed that nothing really existed except pieces of solid matter: as far as I was concerned, body and being meant more or less the same. I might hear something, or taste it or smell it or see it, but unless I could hit it or kick it or lean up against it, or feel its weight or its impact, I would not be convinced that it was really and truly there.

And touch seemed to me the most central kind of sensation, as well as the most reliable and realistic. If your eyes left you uncertain how far away something was, or what it was made of, you could always reach out and feel it, at least if you were close enough and had the nerve. In general you can expect the things you see to correspond one for one to those you can touch. Taste was much the same: you could touch your food before tasting it, and you could also feel it, crisp or soft or chewy in the mouth. Once again, the evidence of one sense appeared to interlock with that of the others in mutual support. To some extent, the same kind of reassuring correspondences are available with smells: they might waft around unpredictably in the wind, but they were clearly composed of physical matter, even if they were not exactly tangible. You could watch the smoke drifting towards you before you caught its smell, and you could feel your bowl of soup and see the steam rising from it towards your nostrils. Sight, taste and smell therefore made an integrated team, under the reliable leadership of touch: they huddled snugly together round the same solid palpable objects.

With sounds it appeared rather different. Compared to other deni-

1 John Locke, *An Essay concerning Human Understanding* (1690), edited by Peter H. Nidditch, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1975, Book II, Chapter IV, 'Of Solidity', §1, p. 123.

zens of our sensory worlds, they were out on a limb. Of course I could hear a car go past, as well as seeing it; or I could pick up a watch and put it to my ear to find out if it was working. I could drop a stone down a well and listen for it splashing into the water. But in and of themselves, what exactly were the things that I could hear? Often, lying in bed in the dark, I could not place or even recognize the sounds that crowded in on me – the dripping of a tap or the ticking of a clock – until I turned on the light to have a look. And even when my ordinary curiosity was satisfied and I could see where the noises came from, I was still baffled when I tried to pin them down to a particular bodily existence at a definite point in space. I could quickly get myself lost in metaphysical mazes by asking: what exactly are all these tickings and drippings, and what precisely are they made of? I knew where they originated; but how did they spread out from their place of origin, and where were they at any given point in time? That I could not understand.

Sounds seemed to me to be nature's waifs and strays: they did not fit into the familiar world of physical things, and they could not be tracked down by my other senses either. After hatching in the dripping tap or ticking clock, they plunged into empty space, fanning out through the room, passing my ears on the way, and then spreading through the rest of the house, growing weaker and weaker all the time, and then the garden, the sky, the moon, becoming more diluted, mile after mile, year after year; but never, I supposed, reaching any absolutely definitive end. They were colourless, tasteless, odourless, and intangible. They were not part of the material world, and they had no weight to them, no substance. Is it surprising that I thought I could happily do without them?

It probably did not occur to me at the time, but I wonder what it would be like if we had only one sense instead of five. Our lives would be impoverished of course, even though we could have no idea what we were missing; but would they not also be profoundly and structurally *altered*?

Just how different they would be might depend which sense we were left with. Touch on its own should enable us to understand our world in much the same way as with a full set of five senses: we would be able to feel our way towards the idea of a spatial world

filled with plants and trees and animals and stones and water and earth, not to mention our own bodies and those of other people. We could still frame an idea of ourselves as individuals, each making a unique journey through space and time; and we would still be able to conceive of objects and other people coming into our lives, leaving it, and being recognized again if they turned up on another occasion. Even if we had nothing to go on but our sense of touch, we could still imagine ourselves as a locus of feelings, a continuous subject of experiences, and we would still be able to distinguish between our subjective sensations and the objectivity of the real world outside us.

Perhaps we would not be quite so well off if we had no sense organs except our eyes, so that we could see things but not feel them. At the best of times it is unsettling to come across things that can be seen but not touched: rainbows, mirages, the sky, or the fruit in a *trompe l'œil* painting. The idea of untouchable apparitions is positively uncanny. Ghosts, of course, are supposed to look like ordinary solid people: the chilling truth is revealed when you try to hit them, or grasp them by the hand, and find you meet with no resistance. Perhaps we should agree with the celebrated blind man from Puiseaux, who was sought out by Diderot in the 1740s as a source of first-hand testimony in the philosophy of the senses. Diderot commiserated with him for having been plunged since birth into impenetrable darkness: Would he not be overjoyed to be granted the use of his eyes at last? Not particularly, the old man replied, unimpressed. 'I would just as soon have long arms: it seems to me that my hands would tell me more about what happens on the moon than you can find out with your eyes and your telescopes.'[2]

The blind man of Puiseaux had a good point: eyesight on its own does not always enable you to distinguish appearances from realities, and when in doubt it is wise to call on the sense of touch to settle the matter. All the same, we could probably develop some notion of our position in the world on the basis of sight alone, if not quite so securely as we would by means of touch. If we were left relying on one of the other senses, however, our predicament would be far more desperate.

2 Denis Diderot, *Lettre sur les aveugles, à l'usage de ceux qui voient* (1749), in Paul Vernière, ed., *Œuvres Philosophiques*, Paris, Garnier, 1964, p. 89.

The problem is not that life might get boring, but that the whole structure of our experience would be indescribably impoverished. It would be impoverished *ontologically*, one might say: our whole idea of what it means to experience the world would be degraded beyond recognition. Strictly speaking, in fact, we might have no use at all for the idea of a world of real objects distinct from our experience and set over against it. Scents or tastes might appear and disappear, but we would be in no position to wonder whether they existed in reality or only in our imagination; we could not even raise the question whether they ceased to exist when we stopped experiencing them, or just went away from us for a while, perhaps to come back later. When the same sensation recurred, we could not ask ourselves if it was the very same flavour or perfume which had returned, or only another one that we could not tell apart from it. If our sensations faded or intensified, we could not ask if this was because of some real change in the world, or merely some alteration in the vividness of our perceptions. The problem is not so much that we would be uncertain which experiences came from within us and which from outside: we would not even be able to make sense of the alternatives. Without visual or tactile clues, it seems, we could not begin to frame an idea of space, so it would not occur to us that there might be a difference between our own bodies and a world of objects independent of it. We would not distinguish between perceiving two similar objects in immediate succession, and perceiving the same one continuously. An experience of tastes and smells would not give a hint of anything but sensations of taste and smell: we would not live our lives as spatial beings at all, and we would have no sense of our own individuality or our own separate lives, let alone of other people.

The same would seem to apply, most starkly of all, to the world of sound. A purely auditory creature might enjoy a rich and various experience, taking delight in the most subtle patterns of loudness, pitch and timbre, but it would never have an inkling of a distinction between the private symphony of its sensations and a real world outside. It would have no conception that its experience might be limited to a small portion of reality, no notion of permanent objects existing out of reach of its hearing, or of itself as a creature that moves amongst them, acting and responding. In short it would not have *experiences* in any meaningful sense of the word; indeed it would not

really have a world either: it would be nothing but the sum of its sensations.[3]

Abstract considerations like these may have been latent in my childish sense of the flimsy insubstantiality of sounds; but probably not. What really impressed me at the time was the simple observable fact that sounds do not perpetuate themselves on their own. The piano may sustain a note, and the church bell may be tolled over and over again; but the sound will linger only a fleeting instant before sinking back into silence. A sound can barely survive the moment of its creation. As Hegel noted – and Hegel, like Locke, was a marvellously attentive chronicler of the stirrings of ordinary metaphysical fantasy – the peculiarity of a sound it that 'the ear has scarcely grasped it before it is mute'.[4]

In Baldassare Castiglione's *Book of the Courtier*, there is a story about an Italian merchant who was in Poland one winter, and wanted to trade with some Muscovites on the opposite bank of the Dnieper. The river was iced over, hard as marble, but the hostility between the King of Poland and the Duke of Muscovy meant that neither party would cross over to the other side. Accordingly the Muscovites resorted to shouting their terms across the frozen river. But the cold was so bitter that their very words froze before reaching the ears of the Italian merchant, and the messages were left suspended in mid-air, congealed and unable to move. After a while the Italian merchant appealed to some Polish accomplices for help. They knew all about cold weather, and lit a great fire in the middle of the rock-solid river. At length the words began to thaw, and trickle down from the sky like snow melting from the mountains in May. (The Muscovites had left by then, but when the Italian merchant heard the prices they were asking he came away without regrets.)[5]

Castiglione's story may be beguiling, but the more you think about

3 The point has been persuasively argued by P. F. Strawson in Chapter 2 ('Sounds') of his *Individuals: an Essay in Descriptive Metaphysics*, London, Methuen, 1959. See especially pp. 73–4: 'the crucial idea . . . of a spatial system of objects through which oneself, another object, moves, but which extends beyond the limits of one's observation at any moment' cannot be translated into 'purely auditory terms'.

4 G. W. F. Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, translated by T. M. Knox, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1975, p. 892.

5 Baldassare Castiglione, *The Book of the Courtier* (1528), translated by Charles S. Singleton, New York, Doubleday, 1959, Book Two, §55, p. 155.

it, the less sense it makes. How could sounds be captured and preserved and then released later? How would they have lasted all that time, and how could they have perpetuated themselves in silence? And when they were eventually unfrozen, could they actually be the same sounds, after all? Surely it is like listening for the breaking waves in an old sea shell: you may be entranced at first, and hear them quite clearly; but the magic will be silenced once you ask yourself which particular waves you are hearing, or where they broke, and when.

The basic truth about sounds, it would seem, is that they never last. You cannot collect and keep a beloved sound, as you can a letter or a flower or a lock of hair. You may have a recording of it of course – a recording on a wax cylinder or magnetic tape, or, if you lack these technical facilities, directly in your heart (the word *recording* literally means learning by heart, after all). But recording is not the same as preservation: it is a technique for generating copies of an original, rather than maintaining it in existence. Recording is a technique of mimicry, imitation, or reproduction – like making a mould of a carving, so that replicas can be cast from it even if the original does not survive. It is a peculiarity of sounds, it seems, that they cannot be conserved, but only recorded and reproduced.

It would seem impossible, therefore, to hear exactly the same sound twice – but for one very striking exception: echoes. Thomas Hobbes was deeply intrigued by the way we can '*hear double* or *treble*, by multiplication of *echoes*', and regarded the phenomenon of echoing as positive proof that sounds are purely subjective, existing not 'in the thing we hear, but in ourselves'. Echoes, as he put it, 'are sounds as well as the original; and *not* being in one and the *same place*, cannot be *inherent* in the body that maketh them'. It followed, Hobbes thought, that sounds do not exist, at least not '*really*'.[6] In any case, even echoes quickly fade, and you will be lucky to catch them a third time, let alone a fourth or a fifth. After that, as Hegel said, they can 'reecho only in the depths of the soul'.[7]

If there are such things as natural symbols, then sounds are surely the natural symbol of transience and the lostness of past time. They are essentially evanescent, an exact correlative of wistfulness and poignant

6 Thomas Hobbes, *First Discourse, of Human Nature* (1640), in *English Works*, Vol. IV, edited by William Molesworth, London 1840, pp. 7–8.
7 Hegel, *Aesthetics*, p. 892.

regret, not to mention sentimentality. They seem to be nature's way of mourning, and in the inevitable metaphor, they are born only to die away. Perhaps that is why, as some would have it, beautiful music is always sad. But I was still only a cheerful child. I had not yet reached the age of nostalgia, and did not care for the world of sound.

5

Listening with the voice

When I was a child, I used to love playing about with my visual world. I would spend hours shutting first one eye then the other, making things move from left to right and back again, or watching distorted people through old-fashioned irregular windowpanes, or making faces at my misshapen reflection in the back of a shiny spoon. I held pieces of paper with the edge against my nose, so that I could see both sides at the same time; strained my eyes downwards trying to catch sight of my lips and tongue; and moved my eyeballs with my hands to get them to look in two different directions at once. I was intrigued too by the way I could still see a kind of red luminosity when I shut my eyes in the sunshine, and I enjoyed staring at bright lights and then looking away, and trying to inspect the darting after-images. And so on and on and on: the visual field was a playground to me, an endless source of experimental diversions.

But there were not many such games to be played with my hearing. I had no real control over my ears, for a start. They could not be closed or swivelled, and though I might block them with my fingers, I could not shut out external sound completely; in any case there was the ceaseless internal concert of my breathing and swallowing, and the eerie continuo of my beating heart. All I could do with my ears was take them with me to different places, like a pair of buckets, and wait for them to collect whatever sounds happened to drop into them.

Visual perception, in contrast, is distinctly voluntary and subject to intellectual control. Often it takes the form of deliberately *looking*, rather than merely seeing – looking *at* what is present, or *for* what is absent. It is as if the visual field were overlaid with a target-shaped view-finder, with a bull's-eye in the middle and concentric circles of diminishing attention shading off towards the outermost horizon. Looking, as opposed to seeing, means training one's eyes on this focal point, and concentrating one's gaze upon it.

It is natural to suppose that listening is the auditory counterpart of such concentrated looking: listening is to hearing, it might seem, as looking is to seeing. But the parallel is not exact. Although you may cup an ear with a hand, or put your ear to the ground, hearing is not intrinsically spatial: there is no auditory 'field' to compare to the visual one. Listening to or for a given sound – a specific instrument in the orchestra, a certain kind of birdsong in the dawn chorus – means analysing the total sound-effect and picking out some aspect of it; it is more like attending to some particular element of a smell or flavour than focusing your gaze on a visible object. You may well find it simpler if you can have a look – it is far easier to separate the sounds of the different instruments of an orchestra if you can see the musicians playing them – but listening is not itself a matter of homing in on a definite zone or object in a spatial field. It is only by a precarious analogical extension that the idea of concentration gets transferred from looking to listening.[1]

Vision is for the most part sheer self-commanding voluntariness compared with hearing, which appears to be little more than supine passivity. The ideas of visual concentration and freewill are closely similar, and they may indeed be somehow connected. Some psychoanalysts would even align the eyes with masculinity and the ears with femininity – vision being rigid, detached, and demanding, whilst hearing is fluid, responsive and selfless. According to many of them, in fact, sexual differentiation is itself rooted in visual experience, starting with the traumatic ocular proof that the little boy has something 'strikingly visible' which the little girl lacks.[2] (This is supposed to explain

1 For a superb discussion of auditory attention, see Don Ihde, *Listening and Voice: A Phenomenology of Sound*, Athens, Ohio University Press, 1976.

2 Sigmund Freud, 'Some Psychical Consequences of the Anatomical Distinction between the Sexes' (1925), translated by James Strachey, *Standard Edition*, Vol. XIX, 1961, p. 252.

why masculinity is typically identified with a stern, objectivizing gaze, and femininity with a warm and obedient embrace; but it stumbles when confronted with the fact that girls can see the difference as well as boys, and that sexual differentiation does not take particularly unusual paths in those born blind.)

Some apprehension of the lowliness of hearing compared with the lordliness of vision can be found sedimented in the depths of our vocabularies. The German language suggests that hearing or hearkening is related to belonging (*hören/gehören*); and, in Latin, obedience (*ob-audire*) appears as a kind of listening. In several languages, including English, many verbs designating different modes of sensory perception can be turned round and applied to the activity of their objects. You look at something, to find out how it looks; you smell how it smells, feel how it feels, and taste how it tastes. But the verbs 'listen' and 'hear' cannot be reversed out in the same way: you do not listen to how things listen, or hear how they hear. All you can listen to or hear is how they *sound*. Hearing, it seems, has nothing active in it: it is mere supine susceptibility. Hearing, as Theodor Adorno once put it, appears 'unconcentrated and passive . . . dozy and inert'.[3]

The idea that auditory perception is passive compared with seeing and looking seems to forget, however, that hearing and listening may also, in their way, be means of active inquiry, and methods of orienting oneself in the world. Doctors specialize in it and call it auscultation: investigating a patient's internal organs by means of the ear, perhaps assisted by a stethoscope (literally: chest viewer). But auscultation is part of common experience as well. Becoming acquainted with buildings or landscapes is partly a matter of getting to know their acoustic profiles – listening to the sounds they produce, and the echoes they give back. You are not really at home in a place until you have made yourself familiar with how it sounds and resounds. Part of the special personality of the limestone landscapes of Yorkshire, for instance, derives – as Ruskin once noted – from the watery whispers, murmurs, patters and gushes emitted by intermittent underground streams.[4] And

3 Theodor Adorno and Hanns Eisler, *Komposition für den Film*, Munich, 1969, pp. 41, 43, cited in Adorno, *In Search of Wagner*, translated by Rodney Livingstone, London, New Left Books, 1981, pp. 99–100.
4 John Ruskin, *Praeterita* (1885–9), Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1978, p. 151.

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Wordsworth, when he recalled the lakeland hills where his early feelings were formed, spoke of their 'audible seclusions, dashing lakes, Echoes and waterfalls, and pointed crags That into music touch the passing wind'.[5]

On the whole, though, exploratory listening attends to artificial sounds deliberately produced, not natural ones that are occurring anyway. Doctors drum on the patient's chest with their fingers and listen to how it responds; or you may drop a stone down a well and count how long it takes before you hear it plop into the water, or locate the struts in a hollow wall by tapping along it. 'Suppose you are stuck in a building in the middle of the night,' Rousseau says in *Émile*. 'Just clap your hands: you will be able to tell, from the resonance, whether the space you are in is large or small, whether you are in the centre or in a corner.'[6]

William Gilpin, the eighteenth-century English traveller who is credited with inventing the taste for the picturesque, cultivated a particular interest in how landscapes appeared to the ear. The traveller in the Lake District should pay great attention, he said, to the differences in aural scenery between Derwentwater, Windermere and Ullswater. On Ullswater, in fact, the Duke of Portland had obligingly equipped a boat with several brass cannon which could be fired one after the other to awaken the local echoes – an amenity which later became available to tourists in the Alps as well.[7] 'Such a variety of awful sounds, mixing and commixing, and at the same moment heard from all sides, have a wonderful effect on the mind,' Gilpin told his readers; and the performance was instructive from a geographical point of view too, providing 'a sort of aerial perspective' on the entire valley. But a small wind-band worked even better than the Duke's cannon. A few French horns and clarinets could send their harmonious sounds dancing round the lake to produce a thousand symphonies, and a quantity of notes that would amaze the most musical ear: 'in short, every rock is vocal,

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5 William Wordsworth, *The Prelude* (1850), edited by Ernest de Selincourt, second edition, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1959, Book Eight, ll. 636–8.

6 Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Émile*, p. 139.

7 As one traveller recorded in 1838: 'Half a mile from Bonneville – to the Café at Balme, where I paused on my own account to honour the grotto with a cannon shot; the grotto returned the compliment with a thunderous rumbling.' See Henriette d'Angeville, *My Ascent of Mont Blanc*, translated by Jennifer Barnes, London, HarperCollins, 1991, p. 7.

and the whole lake is transformed into a kind of magical scene; in which every promontory seems peopled by aerial beings, answering each other in celestial music.'[8]

Travellers who were not equipped with a boatload of cannon or a consort of wind instruments could presumably achieve much the same effect by shouting, singing or hallooing to the lakes, rousing the local echoes by the power of their own voices. Gilpin did not canvass this possibility, however: no doubt he would have found it rather indecorous. But Rousseau, who was less prone to embarrassment, or at least less averse to it, was fascinated by the part the voice could play in our auditory exploring. He admitted that hearing might be lazy, inert and beyond our voluntary control; but he pointed out that it had a unique advantage over all the other bodily senses, since it alone was paired with an 'active organ'. 'We have an organ which corresponds to hearing, namely, that of the voice,' he said. (He was in fact taking his cue from Buffon, who argued in his *Natural History* that an animal's sense of hearing is a 'passive property', whereas the human faculty of hearing 'becomes active through the organ of speech'.)[9] The pivotal position of vocalization in the experience of sounds meant that in their case active production and passive perception grew up in the closest possible connection: the voice was educated through hearing, and hearing through the voice. 'We have no such thing corresponding to vision,' Rousseau observed, because 'we cannot give forth colours as we can sounds.'[10]

The special bond between hearing and the voice is so obvious that it is easy to miss both its oddity and its significance; but Rousseau's observation deserves to rank amongst the key theorems in any philosophy of sensory experience. You can use your voice to populate your auditory world at will, and nothing remotely comparable applies to the other senses. You cannot make your body emit colours for the entertainment of your eyes, nor smells or tastes or tactile surfaces to please your nose, your tongue or your fingertips. Artists like Leonardo da Vinci – who sustained a constant inquiry into the way things look

8 William Gilpin, *Observations, relative chiefly to picturesque beauty, made in the year 1772, of several parts of England*, London, 1786, Vol. 2, pp. 59–62.
9 Georges-Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon, *Histoire Naturelle*, Vol. 3, Paris, 1749, p. 347.
10 Rousseau, *Emile*, p. 161.

by making sketches in little notebooks – are perhaps trying to get into the same relation to their visual world that every hearing person already enjoys with sounds simply by virtue of possessing a voice. But making drawings will always be at a disadvantage compared with vocalizing, because it needs a supply of inks, chalks, and paper, not to mention light, and hands free from other work. You cannot draw while walking, cooking, digging or dancing. In any case, you cannot fill your surroundings with your drawings as you can fill them with the sound of your voice. The analogy between drawing and vocalizing would be much closer if we were able to make pictures appear on our palms at will; or even better, if we could turn ourselves into magic lanterns, or natural colour-harpsichords, effortlessly beaming illuminated images onto our surroundings at will. Only then would vision have an active counterpart corresponding to the voice in relation to hearing.

Ice-skating on the lakes with his boisterous friends, the young Wordsworth noticed how the din of their voices would smash against the crags and precipices, making them ring and tinkle like iron, and then roll back from distant hills with 'an alien sound Of melancholy'.[11] Later, he would sing out greetings to the empty fields and groves and bowers, intermixing the strains of his voice with their own melodies; and so, as he experienced it, he taught the hills the sounds of poetry, and discovered to his delight that 'they lacked not voice to welcome me in turn'.[12]

Such attributions of voices to nature may of course be mere poetic artifice, if not sentimental projection – typical, we may knowingly say, of the bad old romanticist habit of painting human emotions onto mountain scenery. When Coleridge, inspired by Mont Blanc, imagined how 'Earth, with her thousand voices, praises God',[13] or Wordsworth, under the influence of the same landscape, noticed 'The rocks that muttered close upon our ears,/Black drizzling crags that spake by the wayside/As if a voice were in them',[14] they were of course proposing analogies, even allegories. But when Coleridge described 'the brook's

11 Wordsworth, *The Prelude*, Book One, ll.438–444.
12 Wordsworth, *The Prelude*, Book Thirteen, ll.133–6 (see also the 1805 text, ll.139–40); Book Five, ll.173–6.
13 Samuel Taylor Coleridge, 'Hymn: Before Sunrise, in the Vale of Chamouni' (1802).
14 Wordsworth, 'The Simplon Pass' (1799).

chatter', or 'the breeze, murmuring indivisibly', it is less certain that he was abandoning literal statement in favour of metaphorical evocation.[15] If the very same sounds can be made by a natural process and a human voice, why insist that the epithets describing them have been transferred from humanity to nature? Might it not just as well be the other way round? May not chattering, singing, or murmuring be the proper activities of brooks and breezes, or birds and bees, as well as human beings? Who is to say that such a perception is only ever figurative, and never literal? Similarly, when Wordsworth heard the 'loud/Protracted yelling' of the ice-break on Esthwaite, or the 'roar of waters, torrents, streams' as he looked down at the Atlantic from the top of Snowdon, he could have been offering a direct description, not just a metaphor. You may suspect that he crossed the line into figuration when he spoke of them 'roaring with one voice', or when he portrayed the brooks as 'muttering along the stones';[16] but how could you ever be certain? The desire to segregate metaphorical from literal uses of words tends to overreach itself at the best of times, and it very soon becomes mere pedantry when applied to the description of sounds.[17]

The noisy vociferousness of nature as depicted in poetry – the endless murmurs of romantic streams, together with the yells, shouts, chatterings and mutterings of the mountains and lakes – are not blatant figurations, comparable to a smiling sun or a chaste moon. They need not be put down as relics of a 'pathetic fallacy', a transfer of epithets from humanity to nature: when it comes to sounds there is no clear and unbroken boundary between the two. For our voices are the radiant centre of our auditory world. We can use them like torches, as a means of exploration; but whilst a beam of light can only touch the surfaces of things, our voices go out and mingle with all the other sounds we hear. We use them as a probe for sounding out the world, and they draw us into it, and anchor us there. We hear with our voices as well as our ears, and it should therefore be no surprise if nature often turns out to sound uncannily familiar – in fact, very much like ourselves.

15 Coleridge, 'Lines written in the Album at Elbingerode' (1799).
16 Wordsworth, *The Prelude*, Book One, ll.539–43; Book Fourteen, ll.59–60; Book Twelve, ll.18–19.
17 Cf. Heidegger's observation that the idea of conscience as issuing a 'call' or having a 'voice' is more than just a 'picture' (*Being and Time*, §55, p. 316).

6

Voice as expression

It is hard to get away from the idea that we all have a concealed inner life as well as a public, outer one: our own secret garden where we can be alone with our thoughts, our private memories, hopes and fears, behind the wall of appearances that we present to the outside world. Such images of spiritual seclusion are probably the most constant and universal element in every variety of folk metaphysics. Each of us, we imagine, is essentially a self or soul, contained by our bodies like wine in a bottle, or cooped up inside our heads like a poor bird in its little cage. We think that we are essentially an inner self, and conceive our emotions as accumulations of energetic animal spirits which, if we do not discharge them regularly, will build up inside us until the pressure can no longer be contained. Or we picture ourselves as vulnerable little creatures who can either stay cowering apprehensively within our bodies, or stiffen their resolve and step out boldly into the dangerous traffic of the real objective world.

Traces of these ideas of private inwardness as opposed to outward expression can also be found all through the vocabulary of folk morality. Every contrast between sincerity and hypocrisy, for instance, or between what you are and what you do, every dramatic confrontation between your impulses and your attempts to keep them under control, suggests some kind of imaginary diagram of yourself as a world within the world, a soft subjective kernel inside a hard objective shell. In

scientific psychology and physiology, too, it has been hard to escape the assumption that the nervous system must, like the well-ordered classical political state, have a single centre of command, to which incoming information is ultimately referred and which is finally responsible for all external actions. The same kind of imagery is usually implicated in beliefs about the possibility of surviving bodily death: a bubble of plasma, perhaps, slipping out of our mouths with the last breath, to be whisked away to an absolute elsewhere. And of course it also affects the movements of love: what is lurking there, I wonder, behind those dark shining eyes? And of anxiety and loss: is the one I love still in there, beneath that cold impassive mask?

The living of a human life, according to this way of imagining it, is a two-way process: there are perceptions or passions going in towards the centre, and expressions or actions coming back out. As far as the inward traffic is concerned, the basic facts have always seemed quite straightforward: the senses are so many gateways to the soul, supplemented perhaps by inner faculties such as fantasy, conscience or reflection. And the opposite process – self-mastery and the controlled outward expression of inner states – will be familiarly compared to a pilot steering a ship, a sovereign controlling the machinery of government, or a shepherd calling a dog to heel. But as Plato observed, the whole idea of self-mastery appears to be thoroughly contradictory. 'There is something ridiculous in the phrase *master of oneself*,' he says: 'for the master must also be the servant and the servant the master, since in all these modes of speaking the same person is denoted.'[1]

Hegel was characteristically undismayed by these old difficulties, and undertook to demonstrate that there was a deep truth implicit in the tangle of folk doctrines about inwardness and outwardness, expression and self-control. He decided to raise these instinctive insights to the level of a science of the bodily actions of the soul, or what he called *psychic physiology*. The task of this science would be to explain how inward sensations become objectified within the 'circle of corporeity', and for this purpose it was necessary to interpret the human body not as a biological organism, but as the 'systematic embodying of what is spiritual'.

1 Plato, *Republic*, translated by Benjamin Jowett (adapted), 430e-431a.

> The most interesting aspect of a psychic physiology would be . . . the . . . specific investigation of the embodiment assumed by spiritual determinations, especially as affects. One would have to comprehend the connectedness involved in anger and courage being sensed in the breast . . . in the same way as meditation, spiritual activity, is sensed in the head.[2]

The basic principle behind the localization of psychic functions in different parts of the body was that when inner sensations 'form themselves from the soul' and find outward expression, they are not just made public, but physically extruded or 'expelled'. Weeping provided the most vivid example of the process, because it transforms stunned inward grief into 'a real material being'. It may be only a poor thing in itself, but still it is a genuine and tangible trophy, distilled from bodily or spiritual pain: a droplet of salty water, that is to say – a tear, or even on occasion a flood of them.

But weeping is a rather special case, and Hegel noted that expression is based, for the most part, on the element of air rather than water: inner feelings acquired objectivity, that is to say, primarily through the expulsion of air from the lungs. The simplest form of this affective exhalation was the 'vigorous and intermittent expulsion of the breath' in laughter, which enabled the soul to rid itself unreflectively of any feelings that happened to be causing irritation. A similar process underlay the convulsions of crying, sobbing and sighing. But the best and highest way of exhaling or expressing inner sentiments was by means of the sustained sounds of the voice in singing, wailing and moaning. A sentiment which has been vocalized in this way, Hegel says, 'dies away as fast as it is uttered' – a point which he thought was well understood by the women of ancient Rome, when they wept and yelped at funerals in order to transform, externalize, and hence eliminate their inward pain. 'It is primarily through the voice that people make known their inwardness, for they put into it what they are,' according to Hegel. The human voice was the most perfect instrument for giving expression to the inwardness of the soul and thus accomplishing an 'objectification of subjectivity'.[3]

2 G.W.F. Hegel, *Philosophy of Mind* (1830), §401; see *Hegel's Philosophy of Subjective Spirit*, translated by M. J. Petry, 3 Vols, Dordrecht, Reidel, 1978, Vol. 2, pp. 171, 163, 183–4.

3 Hegel, *Philosophy of Mind*, §401; Petry, pp. 195, 193, 199, 181, 201.

In making the voice the key instrument for the outward expression of inner emotion, Hegel was keeping close to common sense. Ordinary language is littered with fragments of the idea that you can relieve emotions by 'outing' or 'uttering' them, and with words like *spirit* or *expression*, which are historically connected with the idea of breathing out. For centuries, *pneumatology* was philosophy's formal name for the systematic study of the soul. These linguistically attested connections, according to Hegel, 'cannot very well be explained away as an age-old error'.[4] Like all such persistent patterns in ordinary language, he thought, the association between breath and the soul must contain an element of truth.

In any case it would be absurd to imagine that our sense of ourselves could be unaffected by images that pervade our entire everyday vocabulary. It may be hard, too, to get away from the child's familiar conundrum, as to where exactly the voice comes from. Is it the lips or mouth? Or the throat? the head? the chest? Clearly none of these answers is quite satisfying, so it may be better to accept the mystery of it and say that your voice comes straight from your self, from deep inside you, from your soul. Where else should it come from, indeed? And perhaps the converse is equally true: how else could we imagine the soul, except as the source or the seat of the voice?

The Renaissance metaphysician Francis Mercury van Helmont was probably the most dogged and systematic theorist of the link between the glory of the voice and the mystery of life. Part of his theory, as elaborated in conversations taken down by a disciple in London in 1685, was that the voice is carried by air from the belly, which was itself a 'true living fiery Essence' – as could be seen, he explained, when 'wanton Children that are in health, let a fart through their shirt . . . into the flame of a Candle', thus producing 'a great blaze much like that of Brandy or Brimstone'.[5]

But, Helmont continued, there was more vitality in the voice than could be accounted for by the brimstone in the breath. The voice was also controlled and articulated by our inmost soul, by the 'central Spirit' located in our heart, at the nerve-centre where the body's active,

4 *Philosophy of Mind*, §401; Petry, pp. 187–8.
5 Francis Mercury van Helmont, *The Paradoxal Discourses Concerning the Macrocosm and Microcosm, set down in writing by J. B.*, London, 1685, Part Two, p. 47.

masculine, 'out-flowing' faculties meet up with its passive, female, 'in-working' ones. Whilst the spirit's female side welcomed and nurtured the 'images' which entered the body through the senses, the male side busied itself making decisions about them, and despatching 'out-going Spiritual Ideal Beings' to carry its orders to every part of the body, and also beyond it in the form of vocal utterances.[6] These airy messengers were infused with a special 'reproductive power' extracted, Helmont maintained, from semen held back from physical emission so that it could be 'consumed and dispersed in a spiritual force' instead.[7] (Those whose voice was troubled with a cough are, as he observed, 'at the same time indisposed for the act of generation.') The mouth, Helmont concluded, 'was chiefly given to man for this end, that he might (through his voice) bring forth the Issues and Births of the other Senses'. And these, once expressed in the sublime form of vocal sounds, could be consecrated to God, before freeing themselves from our bodies and flying off heavenwards to participate in the bliss of 'endless and everlasting Being'.[8]

In Amsterdam about five years later, Helmont made the acquaintance of a young Swiss physician called Johann Conrad Amman, soon to become famous for his specialized work in the treatment of vocal disorders. With the help of Helmont, Amman was able to adorn his empirical practice with an ostentatious metaphysical superstructure. What possible explanation could there be, he asked, for the universally acknowledged centrality of the voice to all of human life?

> I have oftentimes heard from some Persons, that it was little beneath a Miracle, that God should give Men, to express the Thoughts of the Mind, rather by Motions, which are effected by the Lips, the Tongue, the Teeth etc., than otherwise, and that so universally, that there is no Nation so Barbarous, no not excepting the Hottentots, which cannot speak in a Language.[9]

6 Francis Mercury van Helmont, *The Paradoxal Discourses*, pp. 13, 34, 7.
7 Francis Mercury van Helmont, *Alphabeti vere naturalis Hebraici brevissima delineatio*, Saltzbach, 1667, pp. 56–7. See also Allison Coudert, 'Some Theories of a Natural Language from the Renaissance to the Seventeenth Century', in *Magia Naturalis und die Entstehung der Modernen Naturwissenschaften*, *Studia Leibnitiana* Sonderheft 7, 1978, pp. 56–118, p. 63. Coudert reports that the equation between speech and the ejaculation of semen was a 'standard renaissance theory'.
8 Francis Mercury van Helmont, *The Paradoxal Discourses*, pp. 51, 49, 63.
9 Johann Conrad Amman, *Surdus Loquens*, Amsterdam 1692; translated by Daniel Foot, *The Talking Deaf Man*, London, 1694, p. 3.

In a later presentation of his theory, Amman extended his discussion by means of a historical speculation:

> Let us suppose the inhabitants of the globe to be in absolute ignorance of any kind of language, yet equally gifted with the same sympathies as ourselves, and consequently possessing an intense desire to discover the thoughts of others and to communicate their own; it is very likely that they would leave nothing untried to effect this object, and eventually . . . they would have recourse to the voice.

The voice has the notable advantage of being detectable 'at a considerable distance, in the dark also, and by the blind', and it is exceptionally easy to articulate at will, and 'without the interruption of other work'. All of this makes it 'a really wonderful convenience', and a natural choice as the principal means of human self-expression.[10]

But the selection of the voice for its special place in human life was, Amman thought, more than just a practical convenience. The substance of the voice is breath, after all, and it was metaphysically fitting that breath should be the means by which people enjoy the solace of conversation.

> They desire to open the most inward Recesses of the Heart, yea, and to transfuse their own proper Life into others, which thing cannot be more commodiously done, than by Speaking; for there is nothing which floweth forth from us, which carrieth with it a more vivid Character of the Life, than our *Voice* doth; yea, in the Voice is the *Breath* of Life, part of which passeth into the Voice; for indeed the voice is the child of the Heart, which is the Seat of the Affections, and of Desire . . . Thus, when we desire something in ourselves, and yet are afraid to express it, the Heart labours like a Woman with Child, and becomes Anxious; but if we can pour it forth into the Bosom

10 Johann Conrad Amman, *Dissertatio de Loquela*, Amsterdam, 1700, pp. 5–6; translated by Charles Baker, *Dissertation on Speech*, London, 1873, pp. 6–7. This way of explaining the origins of language was by no means original to Amman: see for instance Locke's comments on how, in order to communicate our thoughts, which by nature are 'invisible, and hidden from others', we resorted to 'articulate Sounds', nothing else being 'so fit, either for Plenty or for Quickness'. John Locke, *Essay concerning Human Understanding*, III, II, §1, p. 405.

> of a Friend, there presently ariseth great Tranquility, and we say, that we have emptied our Hearts.

Words themselves might be arbitrary human institutions, but the voice that animated them was a gift from God – 'an Emanation from that very Spirit, which God breathed into Man's Nostrils, when he created him a living Soul'.[11] God himself, furthermore, had created the world by means of his voice. ('By pronouncing the Ideas of things to be created he commands them to become creatures,' Amman said.) Our own voices, properly used, were 'luminous emanations from the source of light, and therefore God has given to man the power of propagating by his living voice effective rays of his own life into the creatures subject to him'.[12] The human voice, in other words, placed us above the rest of God's earthly creatures, and allowed us to participate directly in the power of the Creator.

Amman, Helmont, and Hegel, therefore – the physician, the metaphysician, and the dialectician – all agreed in endorsing the traditional link between spirituality and the voice. And their unanimity is hardly surprising: the basic human experiences of hearing and vocalizing provide the clearest possible illustrations of the idea that perceptions enter into the body and pass through it on their way in to the soul, whilst actions push past them in the opposite direction, heading out towards the objective world. Vocalizing is one of the most voluntary kinds of activity, after all, and hearing the most passive form of perception. The voice, it seems, is not only the centre of the world of sound, but also the expressive secret of the soul.

11 Amman, *The Talking Deaf Man*, pp. 5, 6.
12 Amman, *Dissertatio de Loquela*, p. 14; *Dissertation on Speech*, p. 15.