

# WHAT'S IN A VOICE?

MLADEN DOLAR

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. 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, that is, between the voice and the signifier.

In this scene, at the simplest, the name is the enemy and the voice is the ally. "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 opposing ways: the name points to the inscription of our individuality into the social, into the network of social divisions, hierarchies and obligations, it ascribes us a social place, a symbolic identification. The voice, on the other hand, seems to escape the social network and its vicissitudes, it appears to be beyond the symbolic, it speaks from heart to heart, it is of such stuff that love is made of. Each voice is unique, it has the fingerprint quality. It is 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. By the name one is inscribed in a symbolic network, but the voice presents something that the symbolic network cannot account for, our inner treasure. 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 a paradox, but it is perhaps not a bad description of the use of one's own voice, as we will see. [By the way, the word person, persona, according to a popular (although doubtful) etymology, comes from personare, to sound through, namely to sound through a mask, to emit the voice through a mouthpiece – the uniqueness of a voice has to sound through a mask to invoke the person. One

could say that the name is like wearing a mask, the mask is generic, it highlights the characteristic features, the type, while the voice is unique, yet its uniqueness is voiced through a mask, so that the person is the troubled unity of the two.] But for the Veronese lovers it is a matter of life and death to sever this unity. The uniqueness that the voice evokes and testifies to is the uniqueness which is at stake in love, love aiming precisely at the exclusive trait that cannot be quite spelled out or pinned down by the symbolic. Voice is its harbinger, voice is the pledge, and the two lovers in the night have no problems communing in their voices – everything would be 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 off his name with the sword, castrate himself of his name, the name of the Father,<sup>2</sup> but to no avail. To cut off the name and to retain the voice – the name is expendable, the voice is not: “Deny thy father and refuse thy name” – in order to fully assume the voice? This is the fantasy of the Verona lovers – love beyond names and signifiers, the communion of “voices and nothing more”.

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, 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 pinnacle 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 the signifier, this could serve as its definition, 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 be linguistically described as such, although it stands at the very core of speaking. What can be linguistically dissected is the phoneme, a particular discrete sound, i. e. the voice as it is molded by the signifier, cut down to size so that it can produce meaning, in view of production of 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 – and linguistics seizes only that part of the voice that can be universalized. Hence it can serve as the pledge of one’s ineffable being in the midst of repetition and replication, the pledge of love – this is where the linguistic drama intersects the drama of lovers, linguistics meets love. But in its unrepeatable singularity, and for that very reason, it is also immediately vanishing, evanescent, disappearing the moment it appears, and hence bringing up the question of presence at its most acute.

The voice is the junction of presence and sense. I suppose that nowhere is the sense of presence more incisive, more invasive and acute than with the experience of the voice. There is an overwhelming sense of presence in the voice, be it in the voice heard which cuts directly into the interior, to the point that the very notion of interior can be put into question (and the most frequent experience of psychosis, that of 'hearing voices', only takes on and amplifies something which is there in the most common functioning of the voice, blurring the line between the exterior and the interior); be it in emitting one's own voice – and for Derrida hearing one's own voice, 'hearing oneself speak', is concomitant and coextensive with the very notion of consciousness – there is no consciousness unless one can hear one's own voice, in a loop of self-affection. Both are spectacularly there from the first moment on, since emitting one's voice is the first sign of life, the first opening to the other, and hearing voices is the first experience of the presence of the other. There is something striking and immediate in the experience of the voice, with the impossibility to maintain distance to it (as opposed to the visual world), one cannot close one's ears the way one can close the eyelids, one is constantly exposed and available to the voice. It hits the interior and it stems from the interior, so that sorting out the divide between the interior and the exterior is always endowed with a puzzle, a riddle, it constitutes the predicament of the first massive epistemic and affective 'decision' one has to deal with in life, the line to draw. At the same time the voice is the epitome of passing, it's gone the moment it is emitted, as well as the epitome of changing, of constant becoming and elapsing, being on the move. It is intimately involved with the very notion of time and hence with our hold on presence. The voice is both immediate and treacherous, treacherous in its immediacy.

But if the voice epitomizes presence par excellence, it is also most immediately and inextricably linked with making sense, the other part of our provisional alternative. It is the most immediate and general means we have for conveying a meaning, for 'expressing oneself', in the broadest sense. The voice is singled out among the innumerable sounds and noises by being a means of 'expression', by bringing forth the inside, externalizing the interior, and hence conveying, wanting to say something. From the first moment on, the moment of baby's cry, the voice is the first and the most prominent bearer of signification, its vehicle, but which at the same time, while conveying and signifying, in the very same process, also conveys itself in its singularity and materiality. This can be described as the dichotomy or the antinomy of the voice and signifier, where the signifier is that part of the voice which contributes to signification, and the voice proper, the object voice, is that part which doesn't take part in the signifying process, but maintains a paradoxical and intense relationship with presence as the other part of our alternative. There is an intimate drama of presence and sense which is being played out with every use of the voice.

I will take up two well known literary examples as two models of conceiving this drama. The first one is a short story by Italo Calvino, "A King Listens", one of the last things he wrote, in 1984, just before his death (in 1985).<sup>3</sup> [It is a story which should have been a part of a collection of stories on the five senses, but he finished only three before his death.<sup>4</sup> The story was also a part of collaboration with Luciano Berio, one of the most prominent modern composers, who actually wrote an opera, *Un re in ascolto*, based on this story (and some other sources).] What is interesting for our purpose is the way that the story is entirely built on the

alternative ‘sense or presence’, the way it pits the two functions of the voice against each other, and in this dilemma it clearly takes sides, it endorses the ‘return to presence’ as opposed to making sense.

There is a king lonely on his throne, the sovereign in the place of power, in the middle of the palace, with all the insignia, the scepter, the crown, the hosts of servants. He has come to occupy the throne by a coup, dethroning the previous ruler, he has achieved the highest post that a man can achieve in this empire, in this world, he is duly adulated, all his needs are amply seen to. So what is left to be done once there? Well, all he can do is to wait and to listen.<sup>5</sup> The king is not the emitter of the voice, the conveyor of the commanding voice of power, the Master’s voice; the king is not the voice but the ear. All days long he listens to the sounds of the palace, the footsteps of servants, the morning trumpet blares, the people going around their business, the ceremonies, the visitors to the palace, the clocks, the clicks, the music, mostly played in his honor, the flattering words; and beyond the palace, the sounds of the city, the parades, the distant echoes, but also the riots and their stifling. “All the acoustical routes converge on the throne room” (p. 38). All the voices and noises flow into king’s ears.

Why does the king listen? His position at the top is most precarious: he deposed the previous ruler and can be himself deposed at any moment. This is the world of power and it is in its nature to be the world of usurpation and conspiracy, so all the voices are submitted to a gigantic hermeneutics of power. The point of king’s listening is to scrutinize all the voices and sounds in order to sort out the recalcitrant, the mutinous, the non-compliant, rebellious voices, to draw an elusive line. The king is the permanent listener and the permanent interpreter – to rule is to listen and to interpret. He is constantly on the watch-out for the hidden meaning. What do voices say? The trouble is not so much their explicit meaning, their positive and immediate messages – this is the easy part. The trouble is the undecidable hidden part which pertains precisely to the voice, to its inflections, its shadings, its tone, its cadences, the panoply of its infinite possibilities. They may appear docile and compliant, but this may be just a mask concealing subversion, mutiny and conspiracy. He doesn’t listen to the semantic part, but precisely to the voice as a bearer of semantics beyond semantics, the semantics beyond signifier. They are saying this, but what do they really want? *Che vuoi?*<sup>6</sup> This duplicity runs through all the sounds he hears, the duplicity of appearance and its hidden underside. The king is the ear intercepting the sounds of the Other, and no matter how sharply he listens there is something in the Other which is elusive, there is a dark spot in the Other, something unfathomable, and all the voices and sounds of all kinds are tainted by this. No sound is what it seems. This is a permanent stakeout which tries to discern the most obscure, the meaning of what structurally and necessarily escapes, that in the voice which is, by definition, beyond meaning, conveying something else than the signifiers it is attached to. It’s not just voices, also the pauses between them are suspicious. “You cannot help looking for meaning, concealed perhaps not in single, isolated noises but between them, in the pauses that separate them.” (p. 43) Silences are even worse, the absence of sounds is threatening, a fateful sign of conspiracy. And also if the sounds are all ordinary and follow the routine pattern round the clock, this is highly suspicious, the conspirators may be lying low and creating the pretense of normality.

Perhaps everything continues as before, but the palace is already in the hands of the usurpers; they have not arrested you yet because, after all, you no longer count for

anything. They have forgotten you on a throne that is no longer a throne. The regular unfolding of palace life is a sign that the coup has taken place, a new king sits on a new throne... (p. 45)

The king doesn't listen alone, he has his secret service, his CIA, his Stasi, the web of spies who listen throughout the kingdom, with all the technology. The king is an ear with many extensions which reach into the most remote recesses of the country. But this doesn't help, it only makes things worse. Not just because of the massive extent of material that has to be carefully inspected, but because it is in the nature of spies to be double agents. There is a mole in every spy, they may be themselves the perpetrators of conspiracy. "It is pointless for you to read [the secret reports]: your spies can only confirm the existence of the conspiracies, justifying the necessity of your espionage; and at the same time they must deny any immediate danger, to prove that their spying is effective." (p. 39) So all the reports are saying the same thing, they are useless as a way to pin down meaning. One would have to eavesdrop on the eavesdroppers, and so forth into infinity.

So the primal scene of power is an acoustic scene, a scene of constant listening. Practically all the voices here are acousmatic voices, so the trouble is not only to assign them a meaning, but also to assign them a source at all. They can come from all quarters, from anywhere, and even more disturbingly, it can never be quite clear whether they are coming from the outside at all or just from one's head.

You are wise to listen, not to let your attention lapse even for an instant; but you must be convinced of this: it is yourself you hear, it is within you that the ghosts acquire voices ... You are not convinced? You want absolute proof that what you hear comes from within you, not from outside? Absolute proof you will never have. (pp. 48-49)

So it is not even clear that these are not the voices in the head, the vocal ghosts. Or rather, it is clear that the ghost part cannot be detached from them. There is a hallucinatory moment involved which is structurally part of power, there is a moment where power cannot quite escape hearing voices. It listens to the voice of the people, *vox populi*, and tries to draw an impossible demarcation line in it, but which is always prey to fantasy and hearing voices.

Foucault proposed Bentham's Panopticon as a model for a certain functioning of power, and here we have its counterpart, the Panacousticon. In both, the decisive thing is the dividing line between seeing and being seen, and hearing and being heard. Maintaining the position of power depends on clearly maintaining this line.<sup>7</sup> But if Panopticon seems to be doomed to success, it appears to function well by imposing detachment and transparency through the mere mechanism it puts into place, then Panacousticon seems to be doomed to failure, it can never achieve detachment and transparency, for the more it listens, the more blurred things become, the less it is clear what all those voices really mean, the more it appears that total control is powerless. The king is quite literally the subject, he is subjected to the mechanism he imposes to control the subjects. The more power he has, the more powerless he is.

One could say: the king is the analyst of the empire. He tries to discern his subjects' voices in order to pin down their unconscious which pertains to the secret recesses of what they say. He spies on the gaps of their speech, on the secrets of their noises. Everything means, this is the analysis as the paranoia of meaning. And this is where he is the furthest removed from the position of the analyst and presents its caricature, its reverse side, since the point of analysis

is precisely to undo the ties of meaning, to decompose them, to work counter the paranoia of meaning.

So this is the first model of dealing with the voice, which one could call the hermeneutical paranoia. Every meaning is a potential threat, every interpretation leads to a delirium of interpretation. Maybe there is a part of paranoia in every hermeneutics insofar as it endeavors to capture the elusive meaning, but there always appears the phantom of more meaning beyond meaning, semantics breeds semantics beyond semantics, the elusive dark spot in the Other that one can't quite reduce by interpretation. The meaning one gets hold of breeds more meaning which escapes. The scene of power can be conceived as a double hermeneutical paranoia: on the one hand the subjects who try to decipher the messages of power, to figure out the signs that the power emits, but they can never quite succeed ('they are telling us this, but what do they really want?'); on the other hand the power which tries to decipher the voice of the people, but can never come to the bottom of it, it keeps hearing voices in its own head, and acts out with pre-emptive strikes. So everybody unhappily gets their own message from the other in the inverted form, in a double missed communication.

But there is a way out of this paranoiac universe. Among all the voices that the king listens to, there appears actually the voice of the Other, the Other voice, a voice different from all others. It is the voice of a woman singing in the night, and this voice doesn't raise the question of what does it really mean. It doesn't raise any hermeneutical question at all, but appears just as 'voice as voice'.

You are attracted by that voice as a voice, as it offers itself in song. That voice comes certainly from a person, unique, inimitable like every person; a voice, however, is not a person, it is something suspended in the air, detached from the solidity of things. The voice, too, is unique and inimitable, but perhaps in a different way from a person: they might not resemble each other, voice and person. Or else, they could resemble each other in a secret way, not perceptible at first: the voice could be the equivalent of the hidden and most genuine part of the person. (p. 53)

Here is the fantasy surrounding the voice in a pure form: there is a discrepancy of the voice and the person, but the uniqueness of the voice brings out what is in person more than her, the inner treasure, the most genuine part, the quintessential uniqueness, the pure exteriorization of the most intimate. The voice, detaching itself from the person, spreading invisibly in the air, is more real than this person herself. It is this split which produces a new and intensive kind of presence, endowed with the enigmatic power which pertains to the acousmatic voice. There is a real at stake in the split.

... what attracts you ... is the throbbing of a throat of flesh [la vibrazione d'una gola di carne]. A voice means this: there is a living person, throat, chest, feelings, who sends into the air this voice, different from all other voices. A voice involves the throat, saliva, infancy, the patina of experienced life, the mind's intentions, the pleasure of giving a personal form to sound waves. What attracts you is the pleasure this voice puts into existing: into existing as voice. (p. 54)

So the incorporeal is the quintessence of corporeality – the throat, the saliva, the flesh. The voice is the surplus of the body, and at the same time the quintessence of spirit – the childhood, memories, life experiences, intentions, in one word, the soul. It's like the overlapping of the surplus-body and the spirit, the embodied soul. This is linked with two

essential traits: 1. voice is self-referential. It only means itself, the pure externalization of interiority, it means its proper act of production. It is a self-revelation, it doesn't reveal anything but itself as becoming. 2. Voice is unique. It means: precisely this voice, this person, different from all others, in the singularity of this moment.

So the king, who is constantly in the terrible position of anguish, of spying on the voices of others, finally hears a voice he doesn't have to interpret, a voice whose meaning is not a threat. He is overwhelmed by this new magic, the magic of this self-referentiality and uniqueness which spells sheer joy—it is immediately understandable because there is nothing to understand, nothing to decipher. And with its overpowering appeal, there is suddenly no position of power to defend, defending power loses all sense, one can only let go.

This voice, not meaning anything, is at the same time pure interpellation, a provocation, an address, which instigates a desire for participation, it solicits a response. Insofar as it doesn't demand anything, it is a pure demand, an appeal for an answer, and one can only answer it by giving one's own voice, the only thing that can measure up to the appeal of the voice is one's own voice. So the king cannot but try to answer, in his own voice, that is, he can only sing in return, he can join the singing voice in the dark with his own voice. This is a purely phatic communication, not expressing anything but voice as expression, not communicating anything but communication, or rather a communion in the co-sounding of two voices in the dark. Like in *Romeo and Juliet*.

The king who sings is not a king who listens and deciphers. The singing king ceases to be a king. Solicited by this other voice he abandons his post, his throne, his hermeneutical paranoia and domination, he goes out in search of the bearer of this other voice, he leaves the palace, he loses himself in the labyrinth of paths and sounds, his own voice now one among many, he turns into a mere bearer of a unique voice, deprived of all insignia. In the rising dawn he is one with the multiplicity of voices in which he loses himself, that is, he finds himself. This is how this story ends.

So the story hinges on two paradigms of the voice, directly pitted against each other: the paradigm of deciphering, the paranoiac and vain attempt to reduce voice to signification, to pin it to the signifier, and because this is structurally impossible it can only breed more paranoia; and the paradigm not of listening, but of hearing the voice, which immediately translates into responding to the voice, for one can decipher this voice only by replying to it with one's own voice, taking part instead of interpreting. The voice conveys the joy of its own expression, which inspires the joy of responding with one's own expression. But isn't there something missing between these two paradigms, in this all too smooth transition from the one to the other?

Indeed, there is some cause for skepticism already in the fact that this Other voice, the call of the Other, happens to be the voice of a woman. Is the Other the Woman? Isn't there a tacit, or not so tacit, fantasy of the Other at work in this? There is a whole tradition and imagery which weighs heavily on the woman's voice, something that a feminist commentary on this story puts into a brief slogan: "The woman sings, the man thinks."<sup>8</sup> There is an assumption that one could sum up as follows: 1. The Woman exists. 2. There is a sexual relationship. Whereas Lacan, with his knack for striking slogans, notoriously maintained exactly the opposite: 1. The Woman doesn't exist; 2. there is no sexual relationship. The

fascination with the woman's singing voice has a terribly long standing, it is inscribed in one of the most inveterate fantasies which runs through our culture. The bearer of pure and genuine voice happens to be a woman, the voice beyond logos, with the sexually determined opposition between the masculine logos and the feminine voice. The power is the affair of deciphering, hermeneutics and control, hence 'culture', while the woman is on the side of the genuine joy and uniqueness of the voice, its overwhelming magic, hence 'nature', beyond culture, law and its vicissitudes. There was a massive tradition of fighting, exorcizing the insidious dangers of the effeminate voice and its boundless *jouissance* and of attempts to pin it down to logos – a classical 'patriarchal', 'metaphysical', 'logocentric' fantasy, but which in this story serves as a call of redemption, exactly with the reversed value. What was seen as damnation should now serve as salvation. The woman's voice should serve as the antidote to male preoccupations with power and interpretation.

The historic pattern of this was provided by the Sirens, the voice which reputedly makes us lose our mind and judgment, the irresistible voice which makes one run into shipwreck (cf. also Lorelei etc.). It is most curious, by the way, if we read the source of this in Homer (*Odyssey XII*, 186-191), that the Sirens are not at all presented as the source of fatal infatuation with sensual *jouissance*, but they actually present the figures of knowledge. In their song, they boast of knowing everything about past events and can offer the knowledge of all future events. There seems to be another figure in play, the figure of feminine knowledge, not of feminine song, or the omniscience within the feminine song, and there is a curious amnesia that has beset the host of interpreters, Adorno and Horkheimer included, who reduced Sirens to the voice and the sensuous (cf. Cavarero, pp. 115-129). What Calvino ultimately wants is a good Siren, the Siren as the savior. The loss of control in face of this unstoppable seductive voice which made people lose control is the very thing that is dearly needed. The meaning, the preoccupation with its endless deciphering, and hence the signifier which is supposed to spell it out, are the source of domination and of all the power games.

The two paradigms clearly embody our alternative: either sense or presence. It is the voice as presence which enables a relationship – ultimately a successful sexual relationship – a relationship of appeal and response, a congruence of voices, a harmony in their very difference and uniqueness, their happy match. Their match is only possible insofar they can circumvent the signifier and meaning, in an encounter beyond signification, beyond the signifying cut. The voices can meet in the material real beyond the symbolic, this enables their communion. But doesn't one thus enter into pure fantasy, doesn't one thus elude the real which is at stake in the voice and immediately translate it into the imaginary? Isn't the dive into pure materiality and uniqueness a dive into pure fantasy? Doesn't the alternative 'either sense or presence' present a choice between the symbolic and the imaginary, the third term missing in this being precisely the real? But where does this real emerge?

Let me take another literary example which also very much hinges on the voice, but in a strikingly different way. I can think of no more appropriate statement about the problem of the voice than a passage from Samuel Beckett's *The Unnamable*. I can just briefly remind that this is the third part of a trilogy, which comprises *Molloy*, *Malone Dies* and *The Unnamable*. With each consecutive part there is a reduction, more things are taken away. While in *Molloy* we still have some characters and some plot, then in *Malone Dies* we have just a dying man endlessly



rambling on, confined to a room; and finally in the third part there is not even that – there is just a voice whose source remains enigmatic, it is literally unnamable, a nameless voice that cannot even be ascribed to a person (it abandons the opposition between the voice and the name that was the backbone of the balcony scene, this is an unnamable voice). Plots and characters are all gone, this is a novel which has just ‘a voice and nothing more’ as its protagonist, a voice persevering, continuing till the last page, to the famous “I must go on, I can’t go on, I’ll go on.” The whole point is that the status of this voice remains uncertain, one cannot quite make out whether this is a voice like talking to someone or a voice going on in someone’s head (or whether this is pertinent at all). The particular passage I have in mind is the following:

... 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>9</sup>

This is the most succinct statement about the voice that I can think of. 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. It persists merely as the transition. 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. The voice is the cutting edge of both consciousness and the world.

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, the inner treasure, 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 endeavor 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, Foucault used Beckett’s line “Qu’importe qui parle” as the cue for his famous lecture ‘What is an

author?') For him the voice is precisely not something intimate or proper, but something that disrupts the illusion of one's self-presence in the voice, something that disturbs the interiority of consciousness. At the same time, if one of the most salient properties of the voice is to make sense, as the most common bearer of meaning, then Beckett brought the paradox of the voice to the extreme by gradually and radically reducing sense. It is just a voice which rambles on, all sense gradually becomes completely irrelevant, and what is left is the sheer persistence of the voice, at the limit of making sense. That is, at the limit where it doesn't go beyond language into the inarticulate, the scream, the laughter, the hiss etc., but persists as the extreme point within language.

In this universe it is more appropriate to say that the voice, far from being a self-expression, a harbinger of interiority and individuality, is more 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, a ventriloquism. In its spectrality it is something both intimate and external – Lacan invented an excellent word for this, the *extimate*.

I have used recurrently in my work on the voice the scheme of the intersection of two circles, a very simple didactical device that Lacan proposed at a certain stage, in Seminar XI,<sup>10</sup> as a way of understanding the basic alienation that the subject undergoes when submitted to the symbolic. This scheme can serve various purposes, where the point is that there are two areas which are linked by something that doesn't simply make part of them, although it is something they have in common and presents the area of their overlapping. The two areas, in the broadest sense, can be taken as language and body, which intersect in the voice, or more generally nature and culture, the somatic and the symbolic, phone and logos, the subject and the Other, interiority and exteriority. In all these dualities voice is always placed at their intersection. But this is perhaps a misleading way of looking at it, misleading insofar as it seems to presuppose that we are confronting two areas which are already constituted in themselves and stand opposed to each other, facing each other, so that we are then looking for their link, the link that would bridge their utter divergence, their incommensurability. 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 clear division into interiority or exteriority, no symbolic or biology, no nature or culture which would simply pre-exist this intersection 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 borderline 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 relies on its other, on an extension of nature. 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 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 we can never get to directly, which cannot be isolated by themselves, but can only be detected and pursued through the paradoxes of both areas they produce. This is why this object voice, which belongs to the most common experience, at the same time points to an ontological paradox, as it were, it requires a new kind of ontology, or rather a new kind of topology.

This is where the experience of the voice can never be quite adequately grasped and described either in terms of sense or in terms of presence. It is rather something that we can only glimpse, or hear, in the oscillation between the two, and the simplest way of getting to it may well be the device of the two intersecting circles, the circle of sense and the circle of presence. It's like the one intruding upon the other: a presence inhabited by sense, not by linguistic meaning, but an opening to sense as such, and a sense embodied in a presence, not an idea or a meaning, but a sense incarnate, the part where the sense meets the flesh. This is where sense doesn't simply make sense, but appears as something cumbersome, like a quirk in making sense, an obstacle to the flow of sense, and this is the part where presence is never simply there in its magic and intensity, but is referred to the signifying cut, the cut which enables making sense. So the intersection is something which is precisely eluded in both sense and presence, the part which cannot be positively present as such, but is constantly evoked by the glitches of both presence and sense. The voice as an opening is not an opening to either sense as such or to presence as such, but an opening to their pure divergence.

Espousing presence to escape the traps of meaning and its hermeneutical paranoia, like the king in Calvino's parable, is always prey to a disavowal, the disavowal of the cut that it is based on. Its overwhelming fascination, its power to overpower, its auratic presence, stems from a void which opens at the intersection, and it is by being placed in this void that the presence of the voice gains this power. It is the power not simply of what it displays, of what it brings forth, what it presents, but it gains part of its power from what it occludes, what it comes to cover and what cannot be presented as such. When it starts functioning as the token of individuality, of uniqueness, of the inner treasure, the full assumption of one's being, the communion with the other, then its seeming escape from the signifier and from making sense rather endorses sense as such, full meaning as such, the advent of meaning, the epiphany of meaning, the filling of the void which holds open the divergence of sense and presence as the very place of subjectivity. This is where Beckett's relentless pursuit of "almost nothing", the "unallable least", which escapes both presence and sense while being at their core, is exemplary for the new topology that I am after.

## Notas de fim

<sup>1</sup> “‘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.” (*Romeo and Juliet*, II/2)

<sup>2</sup> 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 not 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. The fate of the Veronese lovers may actually be sealed by this assumption that true love resides in the immediacy, by getting rid of the phallic signifier of the name as the intruder into the purity of heart.

<sup>3</sup> In an odd echo, the last thing that Kafka wrote before his death, 60 years earlier, was also a parable of the voice, the story of the singing mouse Josephine. What is it that makes great writers ponder on the question of the voice on the brink of death?

<sup>4</sup> They were published posthumously as *Sotto il sole jaguaro*, 1986, *Under the Jaguar Sun*, London: Vintage, 2001, from where I quote.

<sup>5</sup> “In sum, the throne, once you have been crowned, is where you had best remain seated, without moving, day and night. All your previous life has been only a waiting to become king; now you are king; you have only to reign. And what is reigning if not this long wait? Waiting for the moment when you will be deposed, when you will have to take leave of the throne, the scepter, the crown, and your head.” (p. 36)

<sup>6</sup> This is precisely where Lacan places fantasy: you are saying this, but what do you really want? The answer is provided by the intervention of fantasy, which supplies the framework of making sense of the other, of coming to terms with the dark spot of its non-transparency. Cf. Lacan, *Écrits*, New York: Norton, 2002, p. 300.

<sup>7</sup> Foucault proposed Panopticon as the model of power after the deposition of kings. Calvino inversely proposes a model of power which is modern – telephones, bugging and technology are mentioned – but which retains the pre-modern Master at its hidden core.

<sup>8</sup> Adriana Cavarero, *A più voci. Filosofia dell'espressione vocale*, Milano: Feltrinelli, 2003, p. 12. I am indebted to her reading of this story, although my take on it sharply differs from hers.

<sup>9</sup> *The Beckett Trilogy*, London: Picador, 1979, p. 352.

<sup>10</sup> *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, London: Penguin, 1979, p. 211.