

Earslips: Of Mishearings and Mondegreens

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Life's Fickles

When he drew systematic attention to parapraxes in *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, Freud emphasised the production of error through an interference of conscious and unconscious motivations. One can think of slips of the tongue as momentary relaxations of self-monitoring, breakings of the circuit of seemingly simultaneous self-hearing, that allow unconscious impulses to take the controls from the temporarily unsupervised tongue. Freud gives no attention at all to mishearings in *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* and, on the only occasion on which he mentions mishearing, which he calls *Verhören*, in the *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis* (Freud 1953-73, 15.25), it is quickly subsumed under the category of misreadings. In the absence of a separate theory, mishearings are presumably to be regarded as simply the reflex or redoubling of the *lapsus linguae* – an internal speaking of the substitution that one might make if one were the speaker rather than the hearer of the utterance. Theodore Reik, one of the few psychoanalysts to pay any attention at all to mishearing, emphasises just this feature of mishearing in paranoia, even while noting that mishearing has rarely been subject to the degree of psychoanalytic attention directed to slips of the tongue (Reik 1957, 509):

Mishearing and misunderstanding of pieces of conversation are put into the service of unconscious tendencies. Sentences, purposefully misheard, are repeated in the thoughts of paranoic patients, nourish his suspicions, and confirm his ideas of references. Words, tendentiously misheard, are interpreted as proof of the hostile or malicious plans of the imaginary antagonists of the patient. (Reik 1957, 512)

Mishearings often attach themselves to popular or traditional forms of utterance, the semi-scrutable topoi of impersonal belief or authority. In some societies, this may mean chants, prayers and hymns, in others fables, anthems, proverbs and popular songs. Mishearings in this last category have attracted

enthusiastic attention from collectors, who know them as mondegreens. This mimetic term was proposed by Sylvia Wright in 1954. She recalled the deep effect made on her as a child by hearing one particular verse of the ballad ‘The Earl of Murray’:

Ye Highlands and Ye Lowlands
 Oh where hae you been?
 They hae slain the Earl of Murray,
 And the Lady Mondegreen.

The fact that the Earl’s mysterious, tragic partner, Lady Mondegreen, has neither been named nor alluded to up to this point in the ballad, and receives no mention thereafter, made no difference to the vividness with which the young Sylvia imagined the noble lady meeting her death:

I saw it all clearly. The Earl had yellow curly hair and a yellow beard and of course wore a kilt. He was lying in a forest clearing with an arrow in his heart. Lady Mondegreen lay at his side, her long dark brown curls spread out over the moss. She wore a dark green dress embroidered with light green leaves outlined in gold. It had a low neck trimmed with lace (Irish lace I think). An arrow had pierced her throat: from it blood trickled over the lace. Sunlight coming through the leaves made dappled shadows on her cheeks and her closed eyelids. She was holding the Earl’s hand. (Wright 1954, 48)

But the Lady Mondegreen does not exist, any more than Hamlet’s otherwise unacknowledged Irish co-conspirator when he whispers of his murderous opportunity with the praying Claudius ‘Now might we do it, Pat’ (Hamlet 3.3). What she should have heard was ‘They have slain the Earl of Murray/And they’ve laid him on the green.’

Mondegreens are an indication of the state of semi-apperceptive reverie in which much popular sentiment and doxa are absorbed and resonate, and the mongrel meeting in it of private association and public utterance. As soon as one begins to look or listen closely, it turns out that listeners to popular music seem to grope in a fog of blunder, botch and misprision, making flailing guesses at sense in the face of what seems to be a world of largely-unintelligible utterance. Usually, the substituted versions of the lyrics are bathetic, often turning implausible romantic fantasy into realism, like those cynics who assume that the Monkees’ ‘Then I saw her face/Now I’m a believer’ is in fact ‘Then I

saw her face/Now I'm going to leave her'. The mondegreen will often puncture lyric or operatic pretensions with corporeal particularity, as in the mishearing of the portentous, Daphne du Maurier-like beginning of Madonna's 'La Isla Bonita' – 'Last night I dreamt of San Pedro' – as 'Last night I dreamt of some bagels'. Gavin Edwards, one of a number of longstanding collectors of mondegreens, points out that 'They tend to be about primal concerns: food, sex, animals. Any misheard lyric is an impromptu audio Rorschach test. It can be alarming to discover that significant parts of our brains want pop songs to cover the lyrical topics of cheese, walruses, and clowns' (Edwards n.d.). This might be confirmed by the florid mondegreen which rendered Buddy Fuller's 1965 'I fought the law and the law won' as 'Hot dogs in love in a round world' (Dianonymous 2008). Sometimes, mondegreens can transform lyrics of painful banality into something rich and strange, like the person who sharpened 'I can see clearly now the rain has gone/I can see all obstacles in my way' as 'I can see all life's fickles in the way' ('life's fickles' is positively Shakespearian). Mondegreens can also work in the opposite direction, turning the grotesque or the pretentious into something plainer and more powerful, as with the transformation of Elton John's 'Goodbye Yellow Brick Road/Where the dogs of society howl' into 'Goodbye Yellow Brick Road/There's a dark cloud inside of the house'.

The pleasure of mondegreens might seem to come from the sudden eruption of the aleatory. Sylvia Wright warns her reader that

if you lay yourself open to mondegreens, you must be valiant. The world, blowing near, will assail you with a thousand bright and strange images. Nothing like them has ever been seen before, and who knows what lost and lovely things may not come streaming in with them? But there is always the possibility that they will engulf you and that you will go wandering down a horn into a mondegreen underworld from which you can never escape. (Wright 1954, 51)

But, though mishearings may appear pleasingly or even subversively to sabotage sense, they are in fact in essence negentropic, which is to say, they push up the slope from random noise to the redundancy of voice, moving therefore from the direction of nonsense to sense, of nondirection to direction. They seem to represent the intolerance of pure phenomena. In this they are different from the misspeakings with which they are often associated. Seeing slips of the ear as simply the auditory complement of slips of the tongue mistakes their programmatic nature and function. Misspeakings are the

disorderings of sense by nonsense; mishearings are the wrenchings of nonsense into sense.

Hearsay

Mishearings that substitute intelligibility for plausibility are paralleled by auditory hallucinations that move from the nonvocal to the vocal, allowing ordinary sounds to be heard as voices. John Perceval, a nineteenth-century psychiatric patient who wrote a detailed account of his delusions, described such a condition, which we might call that of a panophonia - the production of voices out of ordinary sounds, especially the internal sounds of his own body: 'I found that the breathing of my nostrils also, particularly when I was agitated, had been and was clothed with words and sentences' (Perceval 1961, 295). The sound of air was particularly liable to become, in Perceval's expressive phrase, 'clothed with articulation' (Perceval 1961, 265). He describes his fear at the approach of his attendants: 'Their footsteps talked to me as they came up stairs, the breathing of their nostrils over me as they unfastened me, whispered threatenings; a machine I used to hear at work pumping, spoke horrors' (Perceval 1961, 93). As he began to recover, he was able increasingly to identify the sources of these sounds: 'I discovered one day, when I thought I was attending to a voice that was speaking to me, that, my mind being suddenly directed to outward objects, - the sound remained but the voice was gone; the sound proceeded from a neighbouring room or from a draft of air through the window or doorway' (Perceval 1961, 294). On another occasion, gasjets were identified as the source:

Continually over the head of the bed, at the left-hand side, as if in the ceiling, there was a sound as the voice of many waters, and I was made to imagine that the jets of gas, that came from the fire-place on the left-hand side, were the utterance of my Father's spirit, which was continually within me, attempting to save me, and continually obliged to return to be purified in hell fire, in consequence of the contamination it received from my foul thoughts. I make use of the language I heard. (Perceval 1961, 45)

Julian Jaynes proposed in 1976 that the strong tendency among schizophrenics to hear voices is a link with, or even survival of a feature of mental life that was widespread among human beings prior to the what he calls the 'breakdown of the bicameral mind', in which feelings and judgements belonging to one part of the brain would be processed by the other as a imperious voices (Jaynes 1982, 93). Jaynes also explores the possibility that statues and idols may have been

employed specifically as focuses for or producers of this kind of auditory hallucination (Jaynes 1982, 161-75). Though Jaynes emphasises the helplessness and the necessary obedience of those who hear voices (Jaynes 1982, 98), it should be noted that the voice does not manifest or produce itself; rather it must in some sense be bent or channelled into the condition of voice, before it can produce its effect of obedience. In this, Jaynes seems to confirm the suggestion made by the psychoanalyst Otto Isakower that ‘just as the nucleus of the ego is the body-ego, so the human auditory sphere, as modified in the direction of a capacity for language, is to be regarded as the nucleus of the super-ego’ (Isakower 1939, 344-5).

The processing of the sounds of the inanimate world as voices may strike us as a marginal or anomalous phenomenon. However, some recent work designed to explain why THC, the active component of cannabis, might sometimes trigger schizophrenia, points in another direction. Zerrin Atakan of London’s Institute of Psychiatry conducted experiments which suggest that subjects who had been given small doses of THC were much less able to inhibit involuntary actions. She suggests that THC may induce psychotic hallucinations, especially the auditory hallucinations which are classically associated with paranoid delusion, by suppressing the response inhibition which would normally prevent us from reacting to nonvocal sounds as though they were voices. The implications of this argument are intriguing; for it seems to imply that, far from only occasionally or accidentally hearing voices in sounds, we have in fact continuously and actively to inhibit this tendency. Perhaps, without this filter, the wind would always and for all of us be whispering ‘Mary’, or ‘Malcolm’.

Perhaps the most intriguing example of voice-divining is to be found in the practice of playing records or tapes backwards to make out subliminal or secret messages. This practice goes back at least as far as the rumours that circulated about the bit of gabble (‘Never could be any other way’, some people hear) that occupied the run-out groove of The Beatles’ Sergeant Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band. From the 1980s onward, such secret messages have increasingly been taken to be Satanic in intent and even in origin. The most famous of these is a passage of Led Zeppelin’s ‘Stairway to Heaven’:

If there’s a bustle in your hedgerow
 Don’t be alarmed
 It’s just a spring-clean for the May-Queen.
 Yes, there are two paths we can go by
 But in the long run
 There’s still time to change the road you’re on.

Played backwards, this appears to mutate, when processed by the eager ear of the Satan-seeker, to the following:

Oh here's to my sweet Satan
 The one whose path would make me sad
 Whose power is Satan
 He'll give those with him 666
 There was a little tool shed where he made us suffer, sad Satan.

The lurch of register, from Miltonic sonority to the infantile scariness of that 'little tool shed' is rapturously comic. The kind of suffering that might get inflicted in a tool shed – by a Satan who is presumably sad because he has been locked in there for being naughty, and that would no doubt involve fiendish improvisations with lawnrakes and rawplugs – would be both exquisite and ridiculous. The secret hymn to Satan seems to be doubled by the suggestion that these sucking articulations may actually be the voice of Satan himself, or that of some lieutenant demon. There is a long tradition which associates inversiveness with diabolical speech, whether in the form of the Black Mass, in which the Latin Mass and the Lord's Prayer are intoned backwards, or in the speaking on the inbreath rather than the outbreath that was thought by some to explain the characteristic hollowness of the voice in ventriloquism, as indicating the presence of the Old One, or some other possessing spirit, in the ventriloquist.

This allows the demonic to be thought of, not so much as the opposite and opponent of speech, as a kind of minor but insidious perturbation of it. The devil works parasitically, in the mode of the swerve, the near-miss, the counterfeit, the faux-ami, the fly in the ointment or the teleportation chamber. Thus, the voice of the devil is felt virally to infiltrate and inhabit Robert Plant's voice, rather than simply to displace or overcome it. It is an isotope rather than an antidote. The marginal kinds of interference and variation associated with the devil is also apparent in the tradition of the verses interpolated into the angel's dictation to Mohammed that is the generative heart of Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*.

Mean Machines

Many examples of mondegreens involve children trying to make sense of mysterious adult language. That is, they involve a third category of sense, lying

between the alternatives of the meaningless and the meaningful, that might be called the 'meant-to-mean'. The mondegreening ear may be said to belong to or recall the tendency to regard everything as potentially full of import, simmering with possible significance, and insurgent vocality. The child listening to prayers or religious language and processing their outlandishness into homely if implausible forms of intelligibility – like the young Sylvia Wright who hears 'his goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life' as 'the good Mrs Murphy will follow me all the days of my life' (Wright 1954, 49) – is responding sensitively to the heightened aura of meaningfulness with which such language throbs. The video retitling of hymns by pranksters such as Adam Buxton (see adam-buxton.co.uk) provide rich examples of how vague and slurred our apprehension can be of what such portentous discourse might be up to.

If we can view mishearings as a kind of defence or retaliation against pure nonsense or tendentious noise, then it would make it natural for their most fertile source to be in vocal music, especially popular song. But one might wonder whether the ear's desire for integration might also function without the presence or possibility of words or voices. It certainly does appear as though listeners to music will, under some circumstances, regularise or round up deficient tunings, harmonies or rhythms into what it assumes the music intends.

Perhaps the experiences of heightened significance that readers of poetry and art-lovers in general report may involve some recall of this apprehension of the world as 'meaning-to-mean'. The expectation or projection of such a world may indicate how nonvocal music may also be subject to reparative or reconstructive mishearing, as a result of which the phenomenality of musical sound may come to be construed as an expressive or intentional act, a kind of saying without a said, the gesture or posture of vocality with the specific content of speech.

One might even suggest that this regularising, resampling or rounding up occurs whenever one brings to bear the kind of attention that we typically donate to the kinds of sounds we take or expect to be musical. We may feel that, in listening to music we are giving ourselves to it more or less passively, if also voluptuously; but in fact musical listening, and listening musically, may activate a minor form of the hallucination involved in the mondegreen, in which we actively give to the sounds we hear a kind of structure and expressive intent that they might otherwise not possess if perceived as simple sound.

Music is often strongly implicated in the contrast drawn between merely hearing and more actively listening. It's not simply that we tend to say that we listen to music, whereas we merely hear sounds; it is that whatever we listen to in a certain way, that is, with the expectation of a certain kind of musical satisfaction, may then seem to have a musical effect and intent. But I think it would be a mistake to extrapolate from this too simple a distinction between unconscious and careless hearing and actively attentive listening. Consider the experience of suddenly hearing a background noise subside: a computer powers down, and the whine of its fan sighs away; an air-conditioning unit or central-heating pump suddenly cuts out; the refrigerator shudders into silence; the thrum of a car engine in the street outside is suddenly, deliciously, gone. The sensation is of being relieved of a burden that we had no notion we were bearing, of the abatement of a labour that we did not realise we were undertaking. A casual explanation might be that, in a case like this, we have unconsciously been hearing something without consciously listening to it. But this does not sufficiently account for the work that we suddenly realise we have been doing in holding the noise at bay, in keeping it from being heard. Indeed, it might seem better to put it the other way round; it seems that we have actually been listening to something without being able to hear it, or, better, listening to it precisely in order to prevent it from becoming audible. There has been an intense and depleting ear-work, analogous to the Freudian dream-work, or joke-work, a work that is apprehensible only when it is no longer going on, and of which we only become conscious at the moment at which we are abruptly, blissfully, relieved of it.

Michel Serres makes of the ear a kind of detection apparatus for what is otherwise silenced by the work of language: 'Myriad things shout out. Often deaf to unusual transmissions, our hearing is astonished by the shouts of things which have no name in any language'. Serres evokes the distancing and exposure of the self that hearing beyond the bounds of the 'orthopaedic sensorium' of collective meaning can give:

I only really live outside of myself; outside of myself I think, meditate, know; outside of myself I receive what is given, enduringly; I invent outside of myself. Outside of myself, I exist, as does the world. Outside of my verbose flesh, I am on the side of the world. The ear knows this distance all too well. I can put it out the window, project it far away, hold it distant from my body. Lost, dissolved in the transparent air, flowing with its every variation, sensitive to its shallowest comas, shivering at the

slightest breeze, given over to the world and mingling with its outbursts, thus do I exist. (Serres 2008)

But what I have been saying so far should suggest that the operation of hearing is to be understood otherwise than as the exposure, whether patient or impassioned, of which Serres, Lyotard and others have been wont to speak. In seemingly lying open to the world, the ear is in fact lying vigilantly in wait for it. It effects a gathering in, knitting together, appropriating. The ear subtly and actively connives to make what it takes to be sense out of what it hears, by lifting signals clear from noise, or recoding noise as signal. In other words, listening is full of replay, relay and feedback, the ear monitoring or listening in on, and out for, its own operations. Perhaps, in this sense, all hearing is mishearing, and a kind of deterrence of sound.

Early uses of the word 'mishear' tended to see it as much more active than we nowadays do, thereby making mishearing a mode of misspeaking. In a religious culture in which 'faith comes in at the ear', a mishearing could be seen as a stubbornly deliberate resistance to the sway of the Word. To mishear was thus wilfully to disobey or disregard, as well as, sometimes, to listen to something improper. We are told in a spiritual conduct book of 1496 that 'goddes name is taken in vayne by mysherynge. For yf yu haue lykyng to here grete othes of other men / or omy mysswerynge...thou takest goddes name in vayne' (Parker 1496 sig. ivjr). The word mishearing sometimes translated Latin *obauditus* or *obaudicio*, with *obaudience* therefore being a kind of complement to *obloquy*, or evil-speaking. Thus, Thomas Cooper's Latin-English dictionary of glosses *obaudire* as 'To heare hardly or vnwillingly' (Cooper 1578, n.p.). As Lancelot Andrewes explains 'As there is a saying, *loqui*, and *obloqui*, a gainsaying; so there is an hearing, and a hearing against, *audire* and *obedire*. There is never a hearing of God, but even when he speaketh there will be an *obloquutor*, one that speaks against what he speaks' (Andrewes 1650, 165). Oddly, the *ob-* prefix, which in *obaudire* signifies some blockage or obstacle to correct hearing, seems to have changed its force in the word *obedience*, reflecting the two meanings which the particle *ob* could have in Latin – firstly 'to, towards, or in the direction of' and secondly 'against, in opposition to'. *Obedience* and *audacity* change places.

Nothing, it seems, can get in or out without passing through this breakwater or firewall, being detained in this autistic toolshed in which what has been apprehended by the ear can only be heard once it has been tortured into coherence. Hearing during the waking state is conducted as it is in sleep – it tunes, smoothes and tickets the incoming sound in order to keep continuous the complex weave of the dream of waking or waking dream. Hearing, and

perhaps especially the hearing of music, attempts unceasingly to effect a kind of palindrome, or *hysteron proteron*, whereby every sound can be anticipated by its pre-understanding, headed off by its being-heard-as this or that. Hearing perception is interception, the making out of sounds – not least by making them out as distinct and separate ‘sounds’ – as what they will have been before they have a chance to resound as what they might be. Without such systematic mishearing, there can be nothing to be heard, but only the raw and amorphous racketings of noise.

The intensely active process of filleting out signal from noise helps account for the extraordinarily highly-developed capacity human listeners have to distinguish the phonemic – the meaningful units of sound – from the merely phonological – the sound of speech as such (Bond 1999, 129). Edward Sapir remarked of his interpreter from the Nootka language that he ‘often had the curious feeling that he was transcribing an ideal flow of phonetic elements which he heard, inadequately from a purely objective standpoint, as the intention of the actual rumble of speech’ (Sapir 1921, 56). In speech, something like a consensual audible hallucination occurs, in which the hearer and speaker agree to divide between them the work of compressing and filtering the ‘actual rumble of speech’, with all its acoustic accidents and anomalies, into the ideal, abstract stream of words. It is social ventriloquism of an extremely high order of subtlety, which depends upon intricately synchronised mishearing. This is nicely illustrated by the experiment in which employees behind a Post Office counter systematically, but undetectedly, concluded every transaction with a cheery ‘Fuck you!’, which the customers infallibly reconstrued as the ‘Thank you’ they thought they were due.

Echoloquacity

But this last example suggests a slightly different way of thinking about mishearing, which has been suggested by the writer and (sometime sound-) artist Paul Carter. Carter suggests that mishearing might be thought of, not as communicative misfire but as part of a process of tuning between partners in a dialogue. In such a process, the corrective internal rebroadcast which I have been evoking is supplemented by an external retransmission. Mishearing is thereby given voice and itself made subject to further mishearing and correction. Carter reads ambiguity and error as a process of echo-location between the dialogic partners in speech encounters, a process which is not just an accident that befalls communication, to be protected against, but the

aperture and prolongation of a space of exchange that, Carter believes, 'recapitulates the beginnings of all communication' and may even be constitutive of communication itself. This 'acoustically-shaped place-making' (Carter 2001) is the space of echo and feedback opened and occupied by the child who hears its blurs, lisps and bashes recognised, resample and offered for rehearing by interlocutors in its auditory environment.

It is also – and this is the particular kind of place-making in which Carter is most interested – characteristic of the 'first encounter' between peoples, especially settler and indigenous peoples. Carter reminds us of how often, and how notoriously, such encounters involve mishearings and misapprehensions – giving rise to names like 'Chinese Whispers' for the game of linguistic pass-the-parcel which transforms 'Send reinforcements, we're going to advance' into 'Send three-and-four pence, we're going to a dance'. Carter focuses in particular on the meeting between Columbus and the Taino people. Columbus's transcriptions of his exchanges with this people produce a cluster of near-homophones involving the sound *ca*, which Carter suggests may have arisen from Taino attempts to say back to Columbus the words that were most prominent in his discourse: *Can Grande* (Carter 2001).

Such exchanges involve a different relation between noise and signal from that suggested in the story I have been telling so far of the unsleeping effort to divert sound into sense. Instead of a unidirectional process of integration and sense-making, along with its comic or dangerous derailings, there would be a circulation, a back-and-forth sounding out, precisely a conversing in which every response is a turning-together. Speaking then becomes a kind of remote sensing mechanism, the tongue's attempts a tentative as-if ear extruded snailhornwise, in order to try to adjust and refocus what has just-now been half-heard. To be sure, the abstract horizon of such exchanges may be the hope of a perfect fit between conversing voices and a consequently exact interchangeability; but conversation depends as much upon the deferral of that angelic but inert ideal speech situation, in which everything would have been said, but in a way that would leave nothing left to say – the perfect noise of maximal information.

As a proof of this we might take note of the fact that mondegreeners seem so rarely to be dismayed by the revelation of the correct lyric. Rather, an oscillation is instituted, in which the intended reading and its near-miss cousin furnish each other's inner lining, thus creating a kind of echoic space between correctness and misprision. Mishearing does not go one way, and for that reason never simply goes away. It iterates, circulates, reverberates. In a letter

written to the Guardian, Chris Davies claims that, having become aware of the common mishearing of the Rimbaudian ‘ ‘Scuse me while I kiss the sky’ in ‘Purple Haze’ as ‘ ‘Scuse me while I kiss this guy’, Jimi Hendrix got into the habit of miming a large osculatory sally on his bass player Noel Redding while singing the lyric (Davies 2007). David Novak has told me that, in a concert in September 2009, John Fogerty acknowledged the common mondegreen in ‘Bad Moon Rising’ by substituting ‘There’s a bathroom on the right’ for ‘There’s a bad moon on the rise’. Some songs, like John Lennon’s ‘I Am The Walrus’ seem to try to set up and inhabit just such a paranomasic space. The lyrics of ‘I Am The Walrus’ seem less like an exercise in surrealist automatic writing than a kind of auto-mishearing. We might think of the song as the transcriptions and feeding back of a series of mishearings of an original not quite lost beneath layers of misapprehension. ‘Crab-a-lock-a fishwife, pornographic priestess, man, you should have seen them kicking Edgar Allan Poe’ reads exactly like the kind of lunging guesses that the challenged ear desperate to make out significance might throw out. Even the opening chords form a seesawing couple that it has been said was suggested to Lennon by the characteristic ‘ne-naw’ sound of a British police-car siren of the time, and seem to implicate their environment in the Doppler effect that is part of the general double-take of the song.

A particularly beautiful and expressive enactment of this ‘goalless ebb-and-flow of the sound in-between’ (Carter 2001) is to be found in the ‘Anna Livia Plurabelle’ section of Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake*, in which we are to imagine that we are overhearing the gossip being exchanged by two washerwomen scrubbing clothes on opposite banks of the Liffey. As they slosh, slap and wring, their efforts to make themselves heard above the river seems to result in a sudsy lathering together of location, locution and laundry, making their words steadily more waterlogged, not least with the names of hundreds of rivers. Since their discourse is so closely intermingled with the current of the river (and discourse is *dis-currere*, a running back and forth), they seem to be swept downstream in the gush of their own torrential gossip. The further on they move in, and are moved by, their discourse, the more widely the two banks of the babbling flood diverge. As the chapter gurgles to its close, the speech of the two women, that has soaked up so much of its aqueous environment, starts to become silted up. In the dimming evening light, amid the dissipating din of the river’s spate, their voices are increasingly lost to each other and to themselves, as one starts to turn into a stone and the other into an elm-tree, the names of which echo Shem and Shaun, the two sons of Anna Livia Plurabelle:

Can't hear with the waters of. The chittering waters of. Flittering bats, fieldmice bawk talk. Ho! Are you not gone ahome? What Thom Malone? Can't hear with bawk of bats, all thim liffeying waters of. Ho, talk save us ! My foos won't moos. I feel as old as yonder elm. A tale told of Shaun or Shem? All Livia's daughtersons. Dark hawks hear us. Night! Night! My ho head halls. I feel as heavy as yonder stone. Tell me of John or Shaun? Who were Shem and Shaun the living sons or daughters of? Night now! Tell me, tell me, tell me, elm! Night night! Telmetale of stem or stone. Beside the rivering waters of, hitherandthithering waters of. Night! (Joyce 1958, 215-16)

Paul Carter makes the point that a resonating dialogue of this kind, in which each of the partners sounds each other out through their mimetic speech, also draws the acoustic environment into the exchange. Resonation, as we may perhaps call it, occurs, not just between the two interlocutors, but also between the interlocutors and the specific space that furnishes their locale; it is an interlocution, that is, a locution, an echo-location, of the inter. While the obdurate efforts of the human ear to damp sound down into sense can never be wholly set suspended, it may at times be held in abeyance by such mixed sound-bodies of word and world.

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