

De Singultu: The Life and Times of the Sob.

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Holy Hickops

In most Latinate languages, the word for sob derives from Latin ‘singultus’. French has ‘sanglot’, into which some suggestion of the blood seems to have leaked, while Italian stays closer to Latin, with *singhiozzo*, like Spanish with *sollozo*. *Singultus* survives in English only as a posh technical term for hiccup or retch, though Lancelot Andrewes uses it in a sermon in the sense of a qualm or scruple of conscience: ‘For, after we once left our first way, which was *right*, there takes us sometimes that same *Singultus Cordis* (as *Abigail* well calls it) a *throbbing of the heart*; or (as the *Apostle*) certeine *accusing thoughts* present themselves unto us, which will not suffer us to goe on quietly’ (Andrewes 1629, 206). The English word *sob* is described as ‘of imitative origin’ by the OED, which also suggests an analogy with West Friesian *sobje* and the Dutch dialect word *sabben*, to suck. Webster’s dictionary, by contrast, suggests an analogy with Middle High German *sabben*, to drool. Greek is *lugmos*. German, meanwhile, has the altogether more snuffley *schluchzen*.

Sobbing has at times been closely associated with hiccup and the words for it, for example the sadly-obsolete verb ‘to yex’, which is defined in Blount’s 1661 *Glossographia* as ‘that we do, when we have the Hicket or Hick up; some take it, to sob or sigh’ (Blount 1661, n.p.). One sermonist offers ‘the hiccough of Conscience’ as a translation of *singultus cordis* (Basier 1673, 86). Elsewhere, *singultus* is rendered as ‘yesking’ (Brunschwig 1528, H2v), ‘yisking’, ‘yeasking’, ‘yolking’ and ‘yelking’ (Barrough 1583, 92-3). I imagine that the association between sob and hiccup has led to the Turkish word for ‘sob’, *hıçırma*. Yexing had none of the dignity of sobbing. ‘What thinkst thou of the Body, that yelpes and yexes, at any small push, at every sudden motion?’ thundered John Gaule in his *Distractions, or The Holy Madnesse* (Gaule 1629, 283). A 1675 pamphlet by ‘A Person of Quality’ described the praying style of a religious fanatic as ‘a Rapsody of holy hickops, sanctified barkings, illuminated goggles, sighs, sobs, yexes, gasps, and groans, not more intelligible than nauseous’ (Anon 1675, 6). Christian commentators were keen to point out that Christ died ‘clamore magno, non singultu’, ‘with a

loud cry and not a sob' (Brownrig 1664, 43) – or, as we may perhaps prefer, not with a whimper but a bang.

Seat of Convulsiveness

The voice is full of obstacles and incursions, that form a repertoire of impediments. For what is voice itself but a kind of patterned duress, a straining, stressing or checking of the breath? Some of these unvoiced interruptions of the voice seem to be of some entirely other order, to be sound in the raw, in a degree zero, 'unvoiced' condition, as linguists might say – clicks, hisses, whistles, pops, palatal burrs and purrs. Others merge their foreignness with that of the voice, and appear mantled in it – as, for example, lispings, whispering, growling, croaking, wailing. The sob does not quite do either of these things. For, rather than being a filter or coloration of speech, the sob is a kind of preemptive assault on it, a gag, clamp, or choke. The sob enacts the sense of a rising constriction, a desire for utterance so intense that it seems to fill and block the means of it. In his *Sylva Sylvarum*, Francis Bacon put sobbing alongside sighing as the fulcrum or turning-point in a spectrum of reactions to grief between resistance to and the desire for expulsion of the hurt:

Griefe and Paine cause Sighing; Sobbing; Groaning; Screaming; and Roaring; Teares; Distorting of the Face; Grinding of the Teeth; Sweating. Sighing is caused by the Drawing in of a greater Quantity of Breath to refresh the Heart that laboureth: like a great Draught when one is thirsty. Sobbing is the same Thing stronger. Groaning, and Screaming, and Roaring, are caused by an Appetite of Expulsion, as hath beene said: For when the Spirits cannot expell the Thing that hurteth, in their Strife to do it, by Motion of Consent, they expell the Voice. (Bacon 1627, 184-5)

Goldsmith in 1774 also defined sobbing as 'the sigh still more invigorated' (Goldsmith 1774, 2.92).

In Latin, *singultus* nearly always seems to be used in contexts to signify the breaking or prevention of voice. Ovid writes in his *Remedia Amoris* of Phyllis, lamenting the faithfulness of Demophoon, that 'ruptaque singultu verba loquentis erant', her words were broken by sobs' (Ovid 1985, l. 598, 218).

Propertius warns his rival that the woman he craves will humiliate him so much that 'tibi singultu fortia verba cadent', 'your strong words will be lost amid sobs' (Propertius 1933, 1.5, 8) This usage is faithfully preserved in Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis*, where we read of Venus begging Adonis to yield to her desire, 'now she weeps, and now she fain would speak,/And

now her sobs do her intendments break'; Cressida similarly vows to 'Crack my clear voice with sobs' (*Troilus and Cressida*, 4.2).

Countermanding speech, the sob seems nevertheless to cling round it; it strains for articulation, is empty and abstract until it has bound itself to it, like the virus with no DNA of its own which must acquire it of its host, or the ghosts gathered around Ulysses's trench who must lap up the libation of honey, milk and blood before they have enough substance to speak. The sob is incomplete without the voice it itself fractures and depletes. Sobbing has become a mode of utterance, though it is the utterance of the unuttered, the venting of the fettered. Novelists will often have their heroines speak 'with a barely-suppressed sob', but a sob is already suppression, a contraction or holding back of articulation. In the sob, the overcoming of the voice is itself overcome, as it becomes part of the armoury of voice. Sobbing can therefore become a kind of discipline, an exertion as well as a contortion. The essence of the *the* is said by Laotzu to be comparable to the state of a young boy, who does not yet know of the relations of the sexes, but whose spirit is nevertheless so virile that 'it may sob and cry all day but will not become hoarse' (Laotzu 1939, 56)

There have been few physiological or psychological studies of the sob. Some assistance is given by a study conducted by G. Stanley Hall and Alvin Borgquist of Clark University in 1906, based on 200 returns of a questionnaire, supplemented by ethnological data from the Bureau of American Ethnology and the Archives of Aboriginal Knowledge, and responses to questions put to missionaries regarding the peoples of the Pacific. The questionnaire included enquiries such as the following: 'Describe each symptom of "a good cry" in order...Describe lump in the throat and its repression, effects on respiration, on the voice, complexion and circulation...What is a sob? Describe its frequency and culmination. Is there physical pain and where; in throat, thorax, abdominal walls? Where is the seat of convulsiveness? Is sobbing the climax of the cry? Are there cry-fetiches, i.e. special acts, thoughts, experiences or scenes that have pre-eminent power to cause it in you?' (Borgquist 1906, 150-1).

Borgquist devotes a substantial section of his discussion of the physiology of crying to the sob. The definitions of the sob offered by his informants are interestingly various, including ' "a convulsive catching of the breath" ', ' "a convulsive choked drawing of the breath" ' and ' "a convulsive contraction of the diaphragm" ' (Borgquist 1906, 175). Some informants saw the sob as a muscular phenomenon and made no mention of its sound. Others defined it in terms of its sound, as ' "a short, quick sound, which indicates the cessation from [sic] prolonged weeping" ', or ' "a choking sound made in the throat" ' (Borgquist 1906, 175); one respondent even defining it as 'the

vocalisation of the cry' (Borgquist 1906, 176). Some saw the sob as the prelude to crying; others, by contrast defined it as the residue or diminuendo of the act of crying, one affirming that ' "not weeping but the sob comes late" ' (Borgquist 1906, 176).

Sobbing's relation to crying exhibits the same indeterminacy as its relation to speaking and, as we will see later, singing. On the one hand, sobbing is simply a particularly intense feature of crying, and so is often to be found as a synecdoche for the act of crying as such, especially in the formula, which seems to have been particularly common in the medieval period, 'sobbing and sighing'. And yet sobbing is also to be distinguished from crying. It may be regarded as the tense overture or onset of tears, the damming or welling of the tension that will spill over into unloosed inundation of full-blown howling, wailing or roaring. Equally, it may be thought of as the depleted hiccuping into which the wail proper subsides. In either case, the sob is the obverse or inside lining of crying, as seems to be indicated in Dryden's 'Break, heart, or choke with sobs my hated breath'.

Borgquist offers the suggestion that sobs are absent in the young infant, whose crying is sobless, and describes the typical adult cry as ' "sobs and gasps only" ' (Borgquist 1906, 177), the explanation being that 'the sob persists at a time of life when other elements of the cry have been inhibited (Borgquist 1906, 177). An eighteenth-century commentator by contrast writes that 'Grown persons *sigh*; children *sob*... *Sighs* are the language of sorrow and *sobs* the convulsive throes of heart-felt distress' (Trusler 1794-5, 2.44). Borgquist holds strongly to the view 'that a reaction so uniform in its characteristics and so widespread over the human race is instinctive in its actions' (Borgquist 1906, 167), but will not confirm the universality of the sob, saying only that 'There is little explicit mention of the sob in the ethnological returns. Its absence has not been observed among savage peoples' (Borgquist 1906, 178). Borgquist will characterise the physiology of the sob as resulting from the dual function of the diaphragm, as involved both with respiration and with vomiting; a sob is the effect of a long intake of breath labouring against the convulsive efforts of the diaphragm to expel matter (Borgquist 1906, 195-6).

Lump

The sob seems to requisition a kind of visual or material form, a substance. It rises like a kind of knot, clot or blob, the 'lump in the throat'. Borgquist's informants explained that ' "it cracks the voice" ' even sometimes ' "entirely cuts off the voice" ' (Borgquist 1906, 175). Most saw the lump increasing or becoming more uncomfortable with the effort to suppress tears, while the flowing of tears by contrast had the effect of dissolving it – ' "must cry to

get rid of the lump” ’ (Borgquist 1906, 175). During the long heyday of the affective conditions described as hysteria, spleen and hypochondria, these symptoms of an irresistible interior rising and swelling, along with report of actually visible abdominal lumps or tightenings. It was believed by some (though by no means as many as historians of hysteria like us to think) that this was the result of a rising or otherwise vagrant womb. It was sometimes characterised as ‘the suffocation of the mother’, implying thereby, both the asphyxiating effect of the mother (*matrix*, or womb), and an effect of suffocation applied to or suffered by it. The agential uncertainty implied in that unfixed genitive ‘of’ in fact points us to a larger, engendering principle of uncertainty that is at work in the sob, that is the paradoxical sound in the voice, of the voice’s undoing or abatement. Cases of diabolical possession sometimes identified devils as the motive force of the lump, which could be observed running and pulsing round the body.

The sob is at once an undoing of speech by inarticulate crying and the interior ligature or constriction whereby speech deprives the sob of its natural expression. The sob is the substantial form of a kind of hollowness of vancy: thus it is often thought of as dry, empty, the lament for unvented lament: ‘I surely know my pride will go to the wall, my life will burst its bonds in exceeding pain, and my empty heart will sob out in music like a hollow reed, and the stone will melt in tears.’ (Tagore, *Gitanjali* 1913). Mark Twain complained about the facile lachrymosity of heroines in popular fiction, who are forever bursting into tears: ‘This kind keep a book damp all the time. They can't say a thing without crying. They cry so much about nothing that by and by when they have something to cry *about* they have gone dry; they sob, and fetch nothing; we are not moved. We are only glad.’ (Twain 1963, 405).

The Latin ‘singultus’ is unrelated to ‘singulus’, but seems to exert a kind of pressure on its use. Sobs are paradoxically singulative – paradoxically, because they tend to come in chains, but, as with chains of hiccups, they are chains of unique and uncoordinated eructations, that form no connection with each other. The French expression *Il a parlé entre deux sanglots* - he spoke between sobs, literally, between two sobs – dramatises this isolation clear. The singulative sob is in evidence in Whitman’s extraordinary use of the word to describe the swallowing of a ship by the ocean in the poem ‘Thought’:

of the steamship Arctic going down,
Of the veil’d tableau — Women gather’d together on deck,
pale, heroic, waiting the moment that draws so close — O the
moment!
A huge sob — a few bubbles — the white foam spirting up —

and then the women gone,
 Sinking there, while the passionless wet flows on — and I now
 pondering, Are those women indeed gone?
 Are souls drown'd and destroy'd so?
 Is only matter triumphant? (Whitman 1982, 567)

Since the whole point of the poem is to describe an unwitnessed and therefore unmourned tragedy, the word 'sob' consumes and countermands itself – it evokes a single, paradoxically dry gulp, giving way to the 'passionless wet' of the indifferently and undifferentiatedly heaving ocean. Indeed, we might describe the sob as essentially dry or desiccated, in that it is the sob which checks or interrupts the flow of tears. This makes Keats's early morning buds, which 'Had not yet lost those starry diadems/Caught from the early sobbing of the morn' in 'I Stood Tiptoe' or the 'sobbing rain' of 'Endymion' (Keats 1970, 86, 134), moistly approximate. On the other hand, though, the usage might be thought to be supported by the appearance of the word 'sob' as a form of the word 'sop', meaning to soak or saturate – John Evelyn refers to the 'sobbing rain' that produces moss, and Crooke to the 'sobby and waterish places of the body' (Hooke, 66).

Sob Sisters

The sob instates a complex calculus between the voluntary and the involuntary. One sobs in large part as one sneezes, without being able to command or control the process. But there have been those who seem to have been able to summon sobs as easily as others sniggers. The champion sobber in the notably lachrymose Middle Ages was the mystic Margery Kempe, who seems to have missed no opportunity to dissolve into gales of tears and sobs. These were, it seems, predominantly, sobs of rapture rather than grief or distress: 'sche schuld so wepyn and sobbyn that many men wer gretly awondyr, for thei wysten ful lytyl how homly ower Lord was in hyr sowle. Ne hyrself cowd nevyr telle the grace that sche felt, it was so heavenly, so hy aboven hyr reson and hyr bodyly wyttys' (Staley 1996, I.44-7) It is quite clear that this was a source of perplexity and annoyance to her neighbours: 'sche wept bittyrly, sche sobbyd boistowsly and cryed ful lowde and horybly that the pepil was oftyntymes aferd and gretly astoynded, demyng sche had ben vexyd wyth sum evyl spiryt, not levyng it was the werk of God but rathyr sum evyl spiryt, er a sodeyn sekenes, er ellys symulacyon and ypocrisy falsly feyned of hir owyn self' (Staley 1996, I.1929-33) She seems to have sobbed her way around every pilgrimage site in Europe and the Middle East, which so got on the wicks of her fellow-pilgrims that they insisted that she take her meals apart, in grizzling privacy. There is a strange dissonance between the voice of Christ, 'whos melydiows voys swetest of alle savowrys softly sowndyng in hir sowle, seyde, "I schal preche the and

teche the myselfe” ’ (Staley 1996, I.2308-10) and the convulsive effects that being so suffused with divine grace produces in her: “Than was hir sowle so delectably fed wyth the swet dalyawns of owr Lorde and so fulfilled of hys lofe that as a drunkyn man sche turnyd hir fyrst on the o syde and sithyn on the other wyth gret wepyng and gret sobbyng, unmythy to kepyn hirselfe in stabilnes for the unqwenchabyl fyer of lofe which brent ful sor in hir sowle’ (Staley 1996, I.2310-14).

Marjorie’s carefully cultivated ecstasies of sobbing have found a mass-media correlative in the cynically mechanical tugging of heart-strings in the twentieth century. The ‘sob-sister’ arrived on the scene in 1907, when the four female reporters who were covering the trial of millionaire Harry K. Thaw for the murder of his wife’s lover, were given this name because of their tendency to focus on the more pathetic and sentimental aspects of the case (Ross 1936, 65, Abramson 1990, Saltzman 2003). A piece of music entitled *Tabloid* by Ferde Grofe (New York: Robbins Music Corporation, 1934), is described on its inside cover as ‘an intensive study of the getting out of a daily periodical, set to music’ It includes ‘Run of the News’ and ‘Comic Strips’ and ‘Going to Press’. No 2 ‘Sob Sister is described thus:

“Sob Sister”, the second movement, is a ballad of bitterness. Its central theme tells of a heart that aches even as it mocks at cowardly emotion; of a laughing retort that is obviously manufactured gaiety. It is colorful, alive, vibrant with the emotions of a paradoxical image whose prototype can be found in any newspaper office. (Grofe 1934, n.p.)

From ‘sob-sister’ comes the parallel ‘sob-brother’, ‘sob-raiser’ and the pleasingly cynical ‘sob-squad’ (Hyde 1912, 236). As the century wore on, these were followed in short order by ‘sob-story’, ‘sob-act’ and ‘sob-tune’.

Tears in the Voice

There are close associations between music and acts of lamentation, whether it is in the stylised ululations of Africa and the Middle East, the groaningly bent notes of the blues or the operatic swoops of ‘While My Guitar Gently Weeps’. Not surprisingly, sobs have also found their way into music and song. Organs have stops designed to suggest or imitate the sound of weeping, in particular the ‘tremulant’, which, in medieval music, was used only in penitential seasons. ‘to represent the sighing and sobbing of men’ (quoted Farmer 1946, 281). The term was also used to evoke the effect of a sudden damping in playing the lute. In a manual of 1676, Thomas Mace urges players of the lute to

give each Crochet Its due Quantity; And [illeg] Prittiness; Cause Them to Sob, by Slacking your Stopping Hand, so soon as They are Struck; yet not to unstop Them, but only so much as may Dead the Sound on a sudden. This gives Great Pleasure in such Cases. (Mace 1676, 170)

The sob has a number of musical allotropes, for example the yodel and the catch in the voice characteristic of vocal styles in the Middle East and Eastern Europe. The sob is also the ur-form that lies behind the trills, leaps and catches of the voice characteristic of traditional Scottish and Irish and other Celtic singing, which either imitate the grace-notes of bagpipes or are their original. These may be the source for the more masked but still sob-like clucks that are *de rigueur* in American country singing. There is a version of this technique practised by opera and classical singers, and described in one contemporary account of the singing of Mario Lanza as ‘the famous “tears” in the voice, that small pretence learned from the sobbing of the nightingale’ (Kurt Klukist, quoted in Mannering 2005, 168). In fact, all of these forms of musical sobbing seem less like tears (drops) than tears (rips), and thus seem to suggest a passion redoubled by its suppression, and fracturing the smoothness and steadiness of the melody.

The sob also features strongly in forms of religious incantation, especially in the singing of Jewish cantors, who make liberal use of it. An account of popular religion, collected from oral testimony in coastal Georgia in the 1930s describes the climax of a performance by a preacher:

Noticing that the hour is growing late, the Bishop abruptly ends his talk. There follows a prayer, led by one of the deacons and chanted rather than spoken. At the end of each line the man's voice catches on a high sob verging on hysteria, and those in the congregation murmur an almost inaudible echo of the speaker's plea. The other deacons join in the recital and in the wild sobbing. At the conclusion of the prayer a high pitch of excitement is reached. (Georgia Writers' Project 1940, 47)

Jug Jug

The heightened apnoea that characterises the sob can also have strong sexual suggestiveness. A book of instructions for magical adepts explains that the ecstasy of intimacy with one's Holy Guardian Angel will often produce a kind of sexual rapture – but that this is disapproved of: 'The intensity of the consummation will more probably compel a sob or a cry, some natural physical gesture of animal sympathy with the spiritual spasm. This is to be criticised as incomplete self-control. Silence is nobler' (Anon).

There is, of course, considerable voluptuousness in the sob, as is apparent in Baudelaire's sumptuous, sensual evocation of the delights of Lesbos:

Lesbos, où les baisers sont comme les cascades
 Qui se jettent sans peur dans les gouffres sans fonds,
 Et courent, sanglotant et gloussant par saccades,
 Orageux et secrets, fourmillants et profonds;
 Lesbos, où les baisers sont comme les cascades!

Lesbos, where the kisses come in cascades
 That throw themselves fearless into bottomless gulfs
 And flow, sobbing and gurgling in spasms,
 Stormy and secret, teeming and deep;
 Lesbos, where the kisses come in cascades! (Baudelaire 1975,
 150; my translation)

As with many other terms for the breaking in of the voiceless to voice, the sob is often characterised as a kind of natural or animal utterance, which seems odd in the light of Alvin Borgquist's perhaps incautious assertion that the sob 'seems to be essentially human [and] seems to be always absent in the cries of animals' (Borgquist 1906, 178). Darwin notes that 'monkeys scream and pant but do not sob' (Darwin 1873, 157). One of the sounds that comes at the end of Wordsworth's 'Evening Walk' is 'The tremulous sob of the complaining owl'. Bram Stoker refers to the 'cooing sob of doves' in his *Lair of the White Worm*. Elsewhere, readers are urged to hear the coyote 'sob' (Voth 1905, 106). Among the most remarkable of the animals that seem to be capable of or drawn to sobbing are the turtles described by Thomas Blount in 1693:

I remember that in a place called the Camanas, which lyeth to the Lew-Ward of Jamaica, the Sea TORTOISE (of which there are Five Sorts) or TURTLES, as some call them, those Triple-Hearted Amphibious Creatures (for they have each of them three distinct Hearts) being entangled in a S[k]ain or Net, which was usually set for the taking of them, or else being turned on their Backs on Land (for then they cannot turn themselves on their Feet again) did always Sigh, Sob, shed Tears, and mightily seem to Lament, as being most sensible of their Destruction, and that they were in their Enemies hands. (William Hughes, Preface to *The American Physician*, quoted in Blount 1693, 349-50)

This belief may very well have suggested to Lewis Carroll the moping, melancholy figure of the Mock Turtle.

But, of all creatures, it is the nightingale that is most frequently said to sob. Like all birds, there is a kind of rupture in its phenomenal being, since the bird is most often heard rather than seen and nightingales are anyway rather inconspicuous; it is, as the Latin formula has it ‘vox praeterita nihil’. This is true of many birds, but there is a particular reason for the nightingale to be associated with the constricted lament of which sobbing is characteristic. In poetic tradition the nightingale is identified with Philomela, who was ravished by her brother-in-law, Tereus, who then cut out her tongue to prevent her blabbing. But Philomela manages, by weaving the story of her ravishment into a tapestry, to communicate it to her sister Procne, with whom she effects revenge, by killing Tereus’s son Itys and feeding the body to his father in a pie. Tereus flies into a murderous, and doubtless dyspeptic, fury and is about to slaughter the two women when the gods arbitrarily but elegantly transform everybody into birds: Procne into a nightingale, Philomela into a swallow, Tereus into a hoopoe. In Latin versions of the same story, Philomela becomes the nightingale. This is a distinct improvement, for it allows a Just-so Story conclusion: ‘and still today, when you hear the melancholy song of the nightingale, you can hear Philomela, sobbing out her woes’. Leonard Lutwack finds this twist of the tale rather unintelligible, though, since ‘the tongueless Philomela is hardly fit to sing the elaborate song of the nightingale’ and thus the songless swallow might seem better adapted to her condition (Lutwack 1994, 1). But the whole story seems to be about inarticulate utterance, about a melancholy expressed, not in direct utterance, but in the suffering attempt to give utterance, struggling against impediment. Suffering mutes and muffles articulation, which produces a further intensification of suffering, in the incapacity to give it voice; but that impeded voice then becomes the authentic voice of suffering. It is, in other words, the very structure of the sob in its relation to the voice that it breaks and remakes as broken. This is what makes hers an ‘inviolable voice’, as it becomes in T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*: it has taken violation into itself, it is an apotropaic self-violation. This is given a further twist in the many versions of the story in which the bird is represented as intensifying its pain by singing with its breast pressed against a thorn. It is a further confirmation of the paradoxical constitution of the sob as the simultaneous commanding and countermanding of voice.

‘Sobbing’ seems to be the standard metaphor for the nightingale’s song. Here, for example, is Frank S. Williams’s poem, ‘The Magpie’s Song’:

Where the dreaming Tiber wanders by the haunted Appian
Way,
Lo! the nightingale is uttering a sorrow-burdened lay!
While the olive trees are shaking, and the cypress boughs are
stirred:

Palpitates the moon's white bosom to the sorrow of the bird,
Sobbing, sobbing, sobbing; yet a sweeter song I know

Gerard Manley Hopkins's evocation of the bird's song has a woman hearing it from her bed as she thinks with apprehension of her lover at sea; although the 'mighty stops' of the bird's song are so forceful that they 'shook/My head to hear. He might have strung/A row of ripples in the brook' (Hopkins 1970, 30), there is mortal premonition embodied in the song, the liquid gurgles of which seem mockingly to prefigure the gasps of the drowning:

'I thought the air must cut and strain
The windpipe when he sucked his breath
And when he turned it back again
The music must be death.' (Hopkins 1970, 30)

Mathilde Blind also draw the nightingale into a drama of release and restraint (Blind 1891, 11)

As between clenching teeth I hissed
Our irretrievable farewell.
And through the smouldering glow of night,
Mixed with the shining morning light
Wind-wafted from some perfumed dell,
Above the Neva's surge and swell,
With lyric spasms, as from a throat
Which dying breathes a faltering note,
There faded o'er the silent vale
The last sob of a nightingale.

John Clare unusually evokes the sight of the bird, writing in his 'The Nightingale's Nest':

Her wings would tremble in her ecstasy,
And feathers stand on end, as 'were with joy,
And mouth wide open to release her heart
Of its out-sobbing songs.

Here the impediment of 'sobbing' is no more than implied, though it gives a pleasurable eddy in the outpouring from the wide-open mouth of the bird. W.H. Auden's evocation of the sobbing song in his 'Song of the Master and the Boatswain' evokes the sob of the nightingale as part of a hard-boiled biting back of meretricious melancholy (in Elizabethan slang, nightingales are Elizabethan slang for prostitutes)

The nightingales are sobbing in
 The orchards of our mothers,
 And hearts that we broke long ago
 Have long been breaking others;
 Tears are round, the sea is deep:
 Roll them overboard and sleep.

D.H. Lawrence could not believe that any of the poets who had written about the nightingale could ever actually have heard it ‘silverily shouting’. He reminds us of the ‘jug-jug-jug!’ used by medieval writers to represent ‘the rolling of the little balls of lightning in the nightingale’s throat...They say that with that jug! jug! jug! – that she is sobbing. How they hear it, is a mystery. How anyone who didn’t have his ears on upside down ever heard the nightingale “sobbing” I don’t know.’ (Lawrence 1992, 211-12). Lawrence suggests that the forlornness and lamentation that poets like Keats here is actually the poet’s own, in a ‘sadness that is half envy’ (Lawrence 1992, 212) at the ‘pure assertion’, of the nightingale’s ‘intensely and undilutedly male sound’ (Lawrence 1992, 212). Instead of the broken gulps heard by the poets, Lawrence hears, and rebroadcasts

A ringing, punching vividness and a pristine assertiveness that makes a man stand still. A kind of brilliant calling and interweaving of glittering exclamation such as must have been heard on the first day of creation, when the angels suddenly found themselves created, and shouting aloud before they knew it (Lawrence 1992, 212)

‘Perhaps’, he surmises, ‘that is the reason of it : why they all hear sobs in the bush, when the nightingale sings, while any honest-to-God listening person hears the ringing shouts of small cherubim’ (Lawrence 1992, 212). Of course, as always with Lawrence, there is his own projection: for this glorious sound has to be male, and the implicit criticism of the sob-story of the poets is that it is female, passive, suffering. Lawrence ends the essay celebrating the triumph of the cock who is ‘utterly unconscious of the little dim hen’ when he sings (Lawrence 1992, 216). In fact, Lawrence seems to have seen sobbing as the great threat to virility to be found in the depleted sentimentality of modern life. His poem ‘Now It’s Happened’ blames the Russian Revolution on the excess of soul and sentimentality to be found in Russian culture, concluding that ‘our goody-good men betray us/and our sainty-saints let us down,/and a sickly people will slay us/if we touch the sob-stuff crown/of such martyrs’ (Lawrence 1977, 537).

Interjection

It is as though sobbing were so much a surrender of the voice to some other mode of utterance, or the utterance of some harboured other that it the more easily becomes detached from a human subject or channel, and transferred to an outside source. But where the human is unhumanised by the sob, it is precisely the sob that humanises the inhuman world. Among the auguries of wind collected in his *Natural and Experimental History of Winds* Francis Bacon offers us the suggestion that ‘Crows as it were barking after a sobbing manner, if they continue in it, do presage winds, but if they catchingly swallow up their voice again, or croak a long time together, it signifies that we shall have some showers’ (Bacon 1671, 41). In the universal weeping of Shelley’s waterlogged lament ‘Adonais’, we are told that ‘The wild Winds flew round, sobbing in their dismay’ (Shelley 1970, 435).

Bells are particularly apt to be heard as sobbing. When Lawrence hears the five bells of a church gabble and clatter, he tells us that the church thereby ‘sobs and brags’ (Week-night Service). In another poem entitled ‘A Passing-Bell’ Lawrence catches the automatic or unconscious nature of the sob by running together wind and child: ‘The rain-bruised leaves are suddenly shaken, as a child/Asleep still shakes in the clutch of a sob’ (Lawrence 1977, 136).

Bells are probably prominent in the life of the sob because their physical form is so suggestive of the mouth, with the clapper (usually internal in British bells, often externally applied elsewhere in Europe) performing the office of the tongue. But bells also seem possessed of throats; even though there is nothing beneath or behind this throat producing the sound, bells nevertheless seem to suggest something rising or climbing to this throat.

Thus we have Whitman’s poem, ‘The Sobbing of the Bells’:

The sobbing of the bells, the sudden death-news everywhere,
The slumberers rouse, the rapport of the People,
(Full well they know that message in the darkness,
Full well return, respond within their breasts, their brains, the
sad reverberations,)
The passionate toll and clang — city to city, joining, sounding,
passing,
Those heart-beats of a Nation in the night. (Whitman 1982,
607)

Coleridge evokes a kind of disembodied sobbing at the beginning of his ‘Ode to Dejection’, a poem about the baulking or impossibility of poetry; longing for the good, boisterous inspiration of a storm, there is only ‘the

dull sobbing draft, that moans and rakes/Upon the strings of this Eolian lute' (Coleridge 1997, 307).

Transference is characteristic of the nightingale's song, or its effect. Rochester, telling Jane Eyre that she must leave Thornfield and go to Ireland, suddenly finds the key to unlock her reserve:

'Jane, do you hear that nightingale singing in the wood? Listen!
In listening, I sobbed convulsively; for I could repress what I
endured no longer; I was obliged to yield, and I was shaken
from head to foot with acute distress. (Brontë 1996, 283)

The sob seems never to be in its place. Walter Savage Landor's poem 'The Death of Artemidora' gives us a sob that seems suddenly to be snatched from the one who might have uttered it:

Again he spake of joy
Eternal. At that word, that sad word, joy,
Faithful and fond her bosom heav'd once more:
Her head fell back; and now a loud deep sob
Swell'd thro' the darken'd chamber; 'twas not hers.

We can perhaps return to the unhelpful brick wall offered by the OED etymology 'probably of imitative origin'. For what precisely does the word 'sob' imitate? Certainly, it is very far indeed from the Latin 'singultus' and its derivatives, which seem to place the sob firmly in the throat or glottis. We seem sure that we can hear the sound of the sob in the word for it, and can hear the sound of sobbing in a wide range of animal and material sounds, even though we may have no very clear idea of what that sound is. The sob is like the phenomenon known as 'referred pain', a pain experienced in a site adjacent to, or distant from the site of a lesion, sometimes because that site does not have the nerves that would make the sensation of pain possible. It is always felt to be somewhere else than where it is. Our sobs are always apart from as well as a part of ourselves. They take us apart, we find them in the voices of our unlikes, like bells and birds. In a similar way the sob always makes itself heard as something other than it is, for it is the sound of sound consuming itself. It is the jeopardy of that imaginary entity I have elsewhere had it in mind to call the voice-body – the phonoplasm or bodily imago we build out of every voice, the body with which every voice clothes itself, a body that is almost always at variance with the actual body from which the voice emanates. It perhaps needed a Whitman to get the indecorousness of the sob, its capacity to reform and deform the entire body, turning it into what we might call a 'sob-body' of pure convulsion, as in his poem 'Tears',

which never allows us actually to see or name its subject, which is therefore not a crying person, but the persona of crying itself:

O who is that ghost? that form in the dark, with tears?
 What shapeless lump is that, bent, crouch'd there on the sand?
 Streaming tears, sobbing tears, throes, choked with wild
 cries;
 O storm, embodied, rising, careering, with swift steps along the
 beach!
 O wild and dismal night storm, with wind! — O belching and
 desperate! (Whitman 1982, 397)

The unexpected 'belching' is just right, for the sob is eructive as well as interruptive.

But sobbing is also the making of the voice-body. It is what Agamben follows Aristotle in calling an *impotential*, the ability to be unable (Agamben 1999) , from which so many of the voice's resources are made. What rends the voice also renders it up, for the voice is nothing but the mixed economy of these injuries, indemnities and adulterations. What are voice-bodies made of? Breath, spit, gristle and desire in equal parts – in other words, scar-tissue. Byron finds in the fifteenth canto of his *Don Juan* an image of existence itself in this kind of inarticulate eruption or interruption of the voice:

All present life is but an Interjection,
 An 'Oh!' or "'Ah!' of joy or misery,
 Or a "'Ha! ha!' or "'Bah!' – a yawn, or 'Pooh!'
 Of which perhaps the latter is most true.

But, more or less, the whole's a syncopé
 Or a singultus – emblems of Emotion,
 The grand Antithesis to great Ennui,
 Wherewith we break our bubbles on the ocean. (Byron
 1986, 589)

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