

The Chronopher

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Vehicle

A chronopher is literally a time carrier, or, in the words of *Chambers' Journal*, a 'time-distributing apparatus... the function of which is to distribute in many directions the signals received from Greenwich' ('Greenwich Time' 1867, 98). The name was given to a device invented by Samuel Alfred Varley, or, according to other accounts, his more famous brother Cromwell Varley, the engineer of the first transatlantic cable. The device seems to have been in use from 1852 by the Electric Telegraph Company to relay the accurate time from Greenwich Observatory to over 1000 towns and railway stations. The *New York Times* wrote admiringly of the chronopher in 1871 as an 'instrument from which all England is supplied with the correct time', and explained its workings: 'At 9.58 o'clock every morning all other work is suspended, in order that there may be no interference with what is called the "time current," which, precisely at the striking of the clock, flashes the intelligence to the sixteen stations with which it is in communication', and added that 'Time guns at Newcastle and at Shields are also fired at 1 P.M. by batteries connected with the chronopher'. Later, subscribers were able to pay for the service to be sent to their own offices and homes. It has provoked a limerick from Rory Ewins

A chronopher carries the time
From a source to the furthestmost clime
Using pulses of power.
When wondering the hour,
We hail its electrical chime. (Ewins n.d.)

Of course, the chronopher can carry time to many different places near-simultaneously, because the electrical impulse travels at close to the speed of light. The time that is in this way transmitted does not itself take any appreciable time.

In adopting this term to describe the operations of the voice, I must of course adapt it considerably. The voice is a comparable, but much more complex, multidirectional distributor of time. The voice is not simply exposed to time, nor does time simply flow through it, as water through water. It is a valve, sluice or stopcock, a transducer that changes time's voltage and velocity; a kind of signal box, which effects conversions of time. Unlike the telegraphic chronopher, it takes time, delaying and diversifying it as it relays it. I will want to speak of the ways in which the voice takes time up into itself, and then emits it once again, in the process speeding and retarding it, giving it phrasing, phrasing, colour, periodicity and contour.

Going On

There are two kinds of voice-time. First, there is the voice in time, the time to which the voice is open, and that it itself opens. And then there is the voice of time, the voice that is composed and compounded of time. The first is the exposure to time, the second is the precipitate of it. I will speak of these two aspects as though they were opposites, as indeed they are, but ultimately what we name as the voice is their plaiting together, their complexion.

First of all, then, let us try to say how the voice puts the body into time. Guy Rosolato says the voice is the body's greatest power of emanation, its way of putting itself into space, and acting at a distance (Rosolato 1974, 76). For a bird rehearsing its song the range of its audibility defines its presumptive territory. But the voice is also a broaching of and launching into time as well as the cinching or lynchpin of space. It is the excursion as well as its orbit, its setting off, its letting go, its lasting out. When I speak, my body becomes a potential, a projective and a sequential thing, not a given thing, opening itself, and me its vehicle, to ongoingness. Without my voice, I am a mere chugging apparatus of oscillations, the palindromes of the breath, the iambic thump of the heart, the peristaltic squeezings of the intestine, left-right, lub-dub, in and out, out and back, movements that have a direction only in the long term, once the pulse starts to falter and fade, the breath begins to toil. When I start to speak, I have all at once put off abidingness, or enduring, mere being in myself. When I speak, I start going. [What I say goes](#), I once said (Connor 2000, 3-43), but this going is an on-going. Giving the body over to time, the voice also gives time to the body, affording it ease, extension, ventilation, peace.

My voice gets out in front of my body, nudges and tugs my body out in front of itself (in most creatures, with rare exceptions, like crickets and flies, which were reputed to sing from the anus, the organ of voice is a bodily promontory, out in front of the eyes and ears, and only just behind the nose), so that, casting for a future, mine own precipice I go. The voice draws itself out of itself, with the impossible, spontaneously generative effusion of a conjuror's scarf. My voice pulls me into alignment with time, it tunes me to it, but by spilling me and itself out into time, pouring my preterition out. 'The individual', Beckett writes in *Proust*, 'is the seat of a constant process of decantation, decantation from the vessel containing the fluid of future time, sluggish, pale and monochrome, to the vessel containing the fluid of past time, agitated and multicoloured by the phenomena of its hours' (Beckett 1970, 15)

We often speak as though we thought of the exercise of the voice as an affirmation: as making a mark, taking a stand, establishing a point or position, emerging from obscurity, setting out, being there. But the voice is more an evacuation than an affirmation. I cannot speak without being willing to lose myself in speaking, without being willing to empty myself into the voiding that is the welling out from me of my voice. The voice does not issue from a point, from which it merely departs or takes its leave. That point, the imaginary omphalos of speech, is a back-formation, the reflux of what at first exceeds it. My voice does not vouch for me, even when I seem to be its subject, when it seems so full of things to say about me. My voice is beyond me, though to be sure it is my *plus ultra*. Uttering is outering, the giving forth of something which, far from expressing something previously inner, is actually drawn to, even drawn out

of, the utter, the infinitively outermost. For there is in the voice always something intransitive, something, in the words of Emmanuel Levinas, that is

not the communication of a said, which would immediately cover over and extinguish or absorb the said, but saying holding open its openness, without excuses, evasions or alibis, delivering itself without saying anything said. Saying saying saying itself, without thematizing it, but exposing it again. Saying is thus to make signs of this very signifyingness of the exposure; it is to expose the exposure instead of remaining in it as an act of exposing. (Levinas 1997, 143).

For Levinas, this opening is orientated, or it is, in that little stake-raising shimmy of which philosophers like Levinas are so fond, orientation itself. For Levinas, the saying of the voice is a laying of itself open to the other. Now, others can join their voices to mine to assist and intensify this ecstatic evacuation, but to see the other as the occasion or end of this opening out is also a way of extinguishing or extirpating the saying. The other is not the aim of this saying any more than it can legitimately be its object. The voice is not for the other any more than it is of the other. The other, the other's voice, may be instead a relay, an amplifier or accelerator of the push towards escape velocity of the voice, a participant in and imparter of the pure velocity that the voice strives and aspires to be. We feel the voice is being propelled, often violently so, from behind, pushed by the urgent piston of intention, of what one means to say, of what one absolutely must ('Miss! Me, Miss!') give voice to. But really the voice is pulled forward by its own impetus, like the kite that soars away out of sight and unreels the line from the fist of the flier, the coils of harpoon-line that snake and skitter across the deck, George Meredith's lark ascending – 'so thirsty of his voice... /Shrill, irreflective...on the jet sustained/Without a break, without a fall' (Meredith 1912, 221-2). The voice is engined by the ache of what incessantly must come next, by the void of the as-yet unsaid. Voice and void rhyme so closely because *void* is formed from popular Latin *vocitum*, a corruption of *vacuus*, and *vocitare*, to make empty. An accidental assonance it may be, but it points us to the fact that vocalising vacates.

No writer has dramatised this better than Beckett in *The Unnamable*, in which the speaker/inditer spends much of his time trying to catch up with his own voice, like a skater whose feet keep flying forward beneath him, and denying that it is his when he seems to be on the point of coinciding with it. The voice is always ahead of itself and on its own heels:

Forward! That's soon said. But where is forward? And why? The dirty pack of fake maniacs, they know I don't know, they know I forget all I say as fast as they say it. These little pauses are a poor trick too. When they go silent, so do I. A second later, I'm a second behind them, I remember a second, for the space of a second, that is to say long enough to blurt it out, as received, while receiving the next, which is none of my business either. Not an instant I can call my own and they want me to know where next to turn. Ah I know what I'd know, and where I'd turn, if I had a head that worked. Let them tell me again what I'm doing, if they want me to look as if I were doing it. Always the same old dodges, ever since they took it into their heads that my existence is only a matter of time. (Beckett 1973, 371-2)

Let us turn down once and for all the invitation to lay ourselves open to nonlinear processes, and gladly rather than sadly decline the conventional consolation of

thinking that there could ever be anything nonlinear, or any alternative to living on the line, for creatures of the kind we are, constituted by the conundrum we live out of always exceeding yet never adding up to ourselves. There are, of course, different kinds of line, and different ways of travelling and complicating it, but let us not mistake them for alternatives to linearity as such. Circles, in particular, those routinely-touted alternatives to lines, are entirely and conspicuously linear, a circle being a line that comes back to itself, or appears to. In reality, of course, every apparent circle is a spiral, for the spot one comes back to has slipped away downstream while we were away. We may execute every kind of hornpipe or arabesque as the moving pavement of time slides underneath us, but we can only ever variegate its passage, which is to say, we can only manage temporarily to retard, but never in the long run absolutely to countermand, the fact of passage. Time's current, sucking and plucking at us, is a kind of horizontal gravity. You cannot really dance or juggle in zero gravity, where there is nothing to hold out against; similarly you cannot shape up to time without the contrary cadence that simultaneously shoves you on and pulls you back. Scansion, the making and marking out of the tensions that arc across a line of poetry, comes from *scandere*, to climb.

More than anything else, it is the voice that spins out the thread of existence, that puts us on the line. Time has only two directions, as we head upstream through it and it pours downstream through us. All the inflections and perturbations of time that we tell ourselves we practise, the dallings, recurrences, resiliings, festinations, procrastinations, protentions and precludings, are in fact fussy eddies in that stream, flutterings of that pulse, funambulations on that wire. What happens must always happen next. The technologies of sound capture and recall insistently image this condition. [‘Man is a rope’](#), writes Nietzsche (Nietzsche 2003, 43-4), and the voice is the paying out of the line that runs through us. Perhaps this is why the voice so often comes to be imaged in the form of a ribbon, a tape, a groove, whether inscribed on a cylinder or a disk, a scroll, a piano roll. Radio interviews that employ telephones are still said to be conducted ‘down the line’, as time was channelled along railway lines by the chronopher. It is right that we should speak so often of storylines and spinning yarns and stringing things out, for the thought of living in time has got itself entangled with the cat's cradle of ropes and cables and wires and filiations that for thousands of years governed our technology and our most intimate understanding of tensions and connections.

This is why there really can be no unsaying of anything, as Beckett discovers in his *Worstward Ho* (1983). The text attempts to proceed by means of renunciations and revokings, but every effort to gainsay or unutter what has already been said can only take place in the dual tense of what might be called progressive retrospect, signified by the repeated instruction ‘on back’. The exposure to the ongoingness of time, an ongoingness which emerges through the exercise and excursion of the voice itself, etiolates the voice, distancing it from itself, stretching and attenuating its filaments, as the stretching of the interval between us and the retreating ambulance bends its siren into the blue notes of the Doppler effect. There are no strains of the voice without this straining, this tension, this coming-apart way of hanging together.

The voice comes out of nowhere, and so breaks into time, slashing at its dull, humming homogeneity. But it also gives it scansion, finding in its very passage a pulse and a pacing, a form of persistence. There is the joke about the order of monks, whose vow of absolute silence can be broken only once a year, and by one monk only, after their

austere Christmas meal. One year, the monk whose turn it is to have his say croaks, in a voice hoarse and halting from lack of use, 'I think the food here is terrible.' A year passes, and another monk rises to speak after the meal. 'Oh', he quavers, 'it's not so bad'. A third year passes, and it falls to another monk to speak. 'Will you two stop BICKERING!'.

The voice tunes and textures time. It does not need words, though it will often have recourse to them. Most of us recognise the internal monologue or stream of consciousness that is featured in novels, but few of us acknowledge or would even recognise the external monologue that most of us fall into whenever we are alone or imagine ourselves to be unoverheard. A wonderful example of it is given in Michael Hordern's portrayal of the dotty Professor Parkin in Jonathan Miller's 1968 TV adaptation of the M.R. James ghost story, 'Oh Whistle and I'll Come to You My Lad'. There can scarcely be more than a couple of pages of actual scripted dialogue in the whole screenplay. But there is an almost unbroken stream of vocalisation, in the mutters, bumbings, burrings and bubblings of the voice with which Michael Hordern, playing Professor Parkin, accompanies the actions of eating, sleeping, eating, reading and walking. It is as though without this descant there might be nothing for mere being to cling to, so that one would be dissolved like water in water in the featureless, colourless fluid of simple ongoingness. At the end of the story, after the spirit that he has called up by ill-advisedly tooting on an ancient pipe picked up on the shore, he is reduced to a pure vociferation, of growls and howls and hoots.

Going Out

No matter how sealed and slipstream-time-tight I may think my voice, as I part the ocean of time with its leading edge, time leaks and seeps into it, slowly weighing it down and silting it up. The voice admits time as well as emitting it. The more time has got into a voice, the less a pure thing of time it any longer is. My voice, like any voice that has picked up some antiquity, is by now encrusted, barnacled with its accents and accidents. Not only does it seem to give out time in its wake, like a vapour trail, as it moves forward, it also renewedly releases its stored past into the present, playing back its past-times, detonating its little time-bombs.

Young people's voices are much more absorbent than those of older people, much more therefore a kind of ear or receiving dish than a loudspeaker. The young listen out with their voices, dowsing and divining with the the aerial of their diction, moving the dial up and down the wavebands, tuning themselves to what they hear around them through versicle and antiphon. They are pick-ups; they pick up extraneous sounds like a river picks up sediments from its bed, or a phone picks up a signal. Up to the age of twenty, young people's voices readily take on the tonal and timbral colour of their socio-vocal landscape. After that age, people's accents tend to become more fixed, which is to say, less sensitive, and, though they never become entirely static, tend to change more sluggishly or grudgingly.

What is an accent? An accent is an accident that has befallen a voice. Your accent is that in your voice which you cannot hear, and yet it is the effect of an accretion of habits and leanings picked up through unconscious hearing or listening. An accent is what you cannot hear of what your voice seems to have made out for itself. The voice is

amnesic, scarcely able, when unassisted by rote or script, to keep its syntax intact for the elapsing of a sentence. But, for all this incapacity to keep itself in mind, the voice is also thickly mnemonic, freighted with the traces of its past, making it a thesaurus of lilt and fissures, idiosyncrasies and ellipses.

The era of recordings allows us to distribute accents not just in space but also in time. For, once it has got out of step with its surroundings, an accent becomes a kind of stockpile or stopped clock, a recording and playback device. The voice of Princess Elizabeth at the age of 14, speaking on the BBC programme 'Children's Hour' seems to speak to us from an ancient time; her voice being both trillingly new-minted and yet also, to our ears, thickly peppered with the vocal stigmata of her aristocratic belonging.

Accent is from Latin *accentum*, literally *ad-cantum*, song added to speech, this being a literal Latin translation of the Greek *prosodia*. The marking of accents encourages us to think of them as something added to a zero-degree or invariant form, and that therefore one could approximate to in one's own voice, as it may be in the RP English, or *echt Deutsch*, that it might utter. As a boy, I do not remember of what age, though I do remember it as the decision of a moment, as I lay in bed, just entering sleep, I made the resolution to undertake the task of unmaking and remaking my voice, in which I had begun to hear the drawling a's and tightened r's of a Sussex accent. I wanted a voice that was purged of place, that might sound as though it came from nowhere. No doubt, like the immigrant everyone is when it comes to language, when one comes to language, comes to apprehension of the fact that one has already come to it, in some lost time, I wanted to perfect my second language because I wanted control over it, for I feared that its distinguishing marks would betray me as a barbarian, a botcher of the shibboleth. Yes, I wanted the angelic equanimity of those for whom language was no obstacle to stumble over, not a burden to be shoved and barged into tractability, but was radiantly consonant with their thought.

Indeed, this [white voice](#) exists; but it is not something that can ever be picked out or mimicked, or not by the ear of mere cartilage and bone. Just as white light is the sum-total of all light frequencies, and white noise is the aggregation of all sound frequencies, so the white voice must be thought of as the vocation of language as such – something like the 'neuter' of which Maurice Blanchot speaks. As Blanchot, whose very name denominates his bleached perennial theme, himself writes, 'There are no white spaces unless there is black, no silence unless speech and noise are produced, in order to cease' (Blanchot 2007, 12). Whiteness is not emptiness, but crowding, congregation, the approach to the maximal. As Michel Serres has argued, there are two states of the white. There is the snowfall candour of that which is as yet unmarked, without determinate direction. And then, at the other end of time, there is the whiteness of the full, of maximised possibility (Serres 1995, 31-45, 118).

There is a long tradition which associates speaking and walking, accent and gait. Just as walking is a compromise between forward impulse and the pull of gravity, so speaking is a compromise between the fundamental openness of speech – speech as essentially improvised, adhoc, unprecedented, unrehearsed, unheard-of – and the drag of what the voice carries. Lispings and stammering have often been thought of as, and associated with, limping. Some things can go without saying, but there is no saying that is not a manner of going.

Accent is a way of being off-centre, out of kilter. It joins us to the leaning or lateralisation of the world, so beautifully evoked by Michel Serres:

The stars turn and advance, oriented, like particles around the nucleus of an atom. Crystals and molecules are lateralized, with highly refined symmetries and asymmetries. Direction or orientation comes neither from men nor from their preferences, from their inclinations, but from the inanimate world that precedes the living and from the living that precedes culture. Things lean to one side: force fields, boreal auroras, twisting turbulences, cyclones, spots on the planet Jupiter... the universal was born, it is said, from spontaneous symmetry breaking... Direction traverses the immensity of the sky, enters the box of details, and rides on the arrow of time. Then it passes to the shellfish, levogyres, dextrogyres, to the crustaceans that display a large claw next to the smaller one, heterocercal in that regard, then to all bodies – to ours, our eyes, the flanges of our nostrils, the cowlick, and to the somewhat disrupted balance of the female bosom: at least statistically speaking, the left breast is bigger than the right. Direction traverses our bodies and settles in fabricated objects. The left-hander finds his way with difficulty in the forest of right-handed technology.... Orientation can thus be said to be originary, invariable, irreducible, so constantly physical that it becomes metaphysical. (Serres 1997, 14, 15)

An accent is always an anachronism, a hangover from an earlier time. It exerts a kind of temporal drag on the voice, even as it gives it its definition, the traction of a particular locality. Like the kibe or carbuncle, the encysting of the past in the voice gives it its bearing, its carriage.

Voice coaches, voice mystics and other fetishists and fantasists, and they are legion, tell us that we should seek to free the voice of its inhibitions, unbutton its knots, nodules and contusions. On and on and over and over, the same dreary news of the voice's misadventures is broadcast:

Imagine the column of air travelling up through the body through the breath support muscles. The foundation support you have been developing should be able to propel or project the voice into the mouth and out into the air. However, what can happen is that your support power suddenly meets blocks and constrictions in the throat and mouth. It is in these areas that we hold and distort our potential power and freedom. The stream of supported air finds itself fully or partially trapped as it tries to place itself in the face... The voice naturally wants to travel in an arc – up and out – so these blocks are actually trapping and suppressing the voice and words in the body. (Rodenburg 2000, 67)

It is not that the voice is not in fact subject to blockage and impediment, it is that it is nothing but such a musculature of torsions and constrictions; an unimpeded voice would be like air in air, or water in water. The voice is always under duress, is always taking the strain. Voice coaches want actors to imagine that their voices are charged with inexhaustible power, even though voice is quite literally an exhausting, borne as it is on exhalation, which means literally a dragging or a hauling out. The voice is always, even when at its most strident or virile, tiring. It is always just a few seconds away from the end of its tether, it is a going out, which holds out, for the renewed and

protracted time being, against the chronic fatigue that gathers in it, like lactic acid in the muscles, as it speaks.

Chronic fatigue is the accumulation of time in the voice, an accumulation that bids fair to remove it eventually from time altogether. The arc of the voice will always drag it back down to earth, a declension that is implicit in the steepest slope of its parabola. This is why fatigue is not simply the contrary of the voice, against which the voice must strive as an alien principle and which it might hope to expunge. We may think of the fatigue that is always gathering in the voice in Sartrean terms as the way in which I transitively 'exist' my body: the for-itself 'loses itself in fatigue... in order that this in-itself may exist to the fullest. And since it is the body which the for-itself exists as its own, this passion of the body coincides for the for-itself with the project of "making the in-itself exist" ' (Sartre 1984, 456). The fatigue of the voice is not its antagonist, but its very modality; its untimeliness is the very existing of its temporality. The way my voice exists its and my fatigue neither overcomes nor merely undergoes it. Let us say perhaps that it is a way of putting it into play, of bearing it out. This taking in of fatigue and thereby its quasi-reversal, though the fatigue remains nothing less than an insuperable fact, is one of the most striking of the ways in which the voice makes itself the subject of time as well as being subject to it. I exist my voice's fatigue in the way I may be said to pass the time.

The ebbing or elderly voice may strike us as full of 'character' even though its throat is clogged with the already said, elsewhere, elsewhen. It is itself precisely because it is a convocation, an admixture. Its image is no longer that of a gushing flood, but of a delta, a dendritic tangle that divagates in all directions, a bronchial tree choked up with turns of phrase. The signal box of the voice is almost saturated by noise, obliterated by the blizzard of hiss and rumble, scrambled by the carrier wave it is. It is like the body of the old man evoked by Michel Serres:

The old man's interest lies in his determinateness, his body has as a whole become memory, his skin is worn away, like, at the Ganges delta, or the earth or the map. Each somewhat sluggish arm of the delta is encumbered with gravel that can recount the details of upstream. His body is saturated with singularities. The *belle noiseuse* is a naked old lady. The chaos of colors, forms, shades, is perhaps only due to the progressive invasion of space by the monuments of history. The entire volume of the old body is occupied by archives, museums, traces, narratives, as if it had filled up with circumstances...The Ganges has filled up with gravel and sand, messages no longer go through, the channels are saturated with noise, the *belle noiseuse* is drowned in this sound, she is immersed like Achilles in the waters of oblivion, except for her heel, her foot, her fragility. Old age fades away, determined by the rumour of its memory, fixed by the *noise* of its history. (Serres 1995, 33)

Luce Irigaray finds in the mucous membrane an image of the other within us, of the 'shared outpouring...the loss of boundaries which takes place for both lovers when they cross the boundary of the skin into the mucous membranes of the body, leaving the circle which encloses my solitude to meet in a shared space' (Irigaray 1991, 180). But when it gargles in the throat and the chest, the mucous membrane is both premonitory of the death-rattle and a reminiscence of the *ruagh* which, for Michel Serres is '[t]he first utterance of Genesis, at the dawn of the world, above the hubbub... *ruagh*, a hoarse, alliterative breath, on the soft palate, at the back of the throat, before

language, in front of the root of the tongue, where the gasping intake of breath acknowledges the divine; *ruagh*, breath, breathing, wind, breeze of the spirit, at its last gasp, dominating the wild beating of the heart' (Serres 2008, 314). This is the 'difficult technique of returning to zero. A path toward nakedness, indetermination, non-existence' (Serres 1995, 39). Here, the voice stands out against time in its very way of being inundated by it.

So there are two voices, the one evacuated by time, and evacuating us into it, and the other saturated by time. The first voice speeds us into time, gives us up, skidding, frictionless, to the purest defluxion. The second lames and hobbles us, making us wheezy and timelagged. But the voice is the compounding or convocation of these two times, the time to which it surrenders, and the time that it itself captures, which continually transform one into the other. This is the most complex form and function of the chronopher-voice - that it distributes time between these two alternatives, altering where it alteration finds, commuting time to space, pouring space out into time, folding passage back into persistence, eroding every sediment with its syncopated glissade.

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