

## Titivillitium: The Tittle-Tattle of the Teeth

Steven Connor

A talk given at *Performed Voices: Whispering, Shadowing, Prompting*, Jerusalem, 30 January 2011

The voice is supposed to be suffused with spirit, and itself often have such an insufflating action. But the voice is not always quite itself, for there is much in the voice that is not altogether voice. Only that which has soul in it can give voice, says Aristotle, but then adds, almost in the same breath, there is more to voice than soul. For there are things in the voice that, while coeval with it, are not indigenous to it. The voice is not all Geist, it is full of poltergeists, noisy, paltering parasites and hangers-on, mouth-friends, vapours and minute-jacks. We must be on our guard against the encrustations and adulterations of this infinite interior malady.

This talk concerns just one class of such sounds, those known as the dentals, and, more specifically the sounds, and the ideas formed upon them, of the double, or geminate (twinned) /t/. There are languages, such as Italian, in which doubled consonants are actually sounded, but this is not for the most part the case in English, in which the function of the geminate is to indicate a shortening of the preceding vowel sound. That the *Ormulum* of 1180 should have proposed and itself enacted this as a systematic principle of English orthography indicates that this was already a recognisable pattern of word formation at this point. Doubled *t* is a kind of noise, and, we may say, a specifically 'dry' or toneless noise, a rattle or crackle, the monochrome of sound. In a popular BBC TV quiz show of the 1970s called *Face the Music*, the presenter Joseph Cooper would play a tune on a keyboard that produced no sound but a busy, bony clatter, from which contestants were supposed to recognise the tune. The emaciation of the word effected by the clustering of /t/s produces a particular kind of agitated inanimation.

There is a kind of Doppler effect brought about by the contraction of phonic space consequent upon the doubling of consonants. Just as the stretching of a given quantity of sound vibrations across a longer or shorter space when an ambulance goes by produces a variation in the pitch, so the doubling of the consonant shortens, and in the process, though less conspicuously, lifts the pitch, of the preceding vowel. We might note in passing the oddity of this effect, or the explanation of it. For it can scarcely be the case that the double consonant actually modifies a sound; rather, the eye, in reading, or, in speaking, what we might call the phonic eye, looks ahead to the doubled consonant in order to discount in advance the possibility of a long vowel. Here is a rapid shuttle forwards and backwards, a hiccup, doubletake or interpretative *sauter pour mieux reculer* rather than any simple retroaction. Such beat-skippings were known as 'syncopes', from Greek *syn-* and *kopein*, to strike, beat, or cut off, and ran together music and medicine, since a syncope was also a temporary cessation of the heart, inducing fainting or swoon. The syncope is a *lapsus linguae*, a palpitant *petit mort* of forgetfulness

amid the stream of speech. The crowded pitter-patter of iterated dentals paradoxically both protests against this ablation, and invites it,

So doubled /t/ is a noise that furnishes some shortfall or superflux of meaningful or expressive language. Language stalls or stutters, becomes cluttered. And yet this is not an absolute white noise but, so to speak, pink noise; an inflected noise, able to embody both the noise itself and the idea of noise. Thus it is drawn back into the orbit of signification. The particular way in which it seems to exceed or fall short of full meaning is indicative as well as merely active. It means a certain kind of unmeaning, it leaves the service of signification while remaining in its pay.

The double /t/ sound is implicated in many words which mean empty speech, where the percussive vibration of the sound is imagined as that of an empty bladder, a word that is akin to words like *blither*, *blather* and *blether*, and also *bluster*, which has come to mean to puff and roar pompously, but has been related to low German *blustern*, ‘to flutter or flap the wings in alarm like a frightened dove’. The medial dental of German words like *moder* and *fader* is often modified into mother and father, but /th/ can also alternate with /tt/, as in the sadly obsolete word ‘blatter’, used for example by Matthew Parker in his rendering of Psalm 94. 4, ‘They prate, they speak arrogantly’, as ‘They blatter out: euen what they list’ (Parker 1567, 264). Blatter is from Latin *blaterare*, to prate or babble, is applied also to the sounds made by dogs, frogs and camels (Lewis and Short 1951, 241-2)

Part of the voice’s versatility lies in its capacity to include and capitalise upon the sounds of its own detritus and demise, imitating the wheezing bagpipe, the raspberrying burst balloon, or the rattle-bag, this last the title of a poem by the fourteenth-century Welsh poet Dafydd ap Gwilym, used by Seamus Heaney and Ted Hughes as the title of an influential poetry anthology. The rattle-bag was a bag full of stones, which was shaken to drive off animals, or, on other accounts, surprisingly, to attract them. In Dafydd ap Gwilym’s poem the contraption is cursed by a young man whose lass has been frightened off by the sound just as the amorous going was getting good.

Under Christ, no sound in Christendom  
(Of a hundred foul names) was so harsh.  
A pouch at a stick's end resounding,

A ringing bell of round stones and gravel [*Cloch sain o grynfaïn a gro*].  
A crowd of English stones making [*Crwth cerrig Seisnig yn sôn*]  
A trembling sound in a bullock's skin.  
A cage of three thousand beetles, [*Cawell teirmil o chwilod*]  
A cauldron in tumult, a black scrotum [*Callor dygyfor, du god*].  
The keeper of a meadow, as old as grass.  
Dark-skinned, pregnant with splinters.  
Whose accent is hateful to an old roebuck,  
Devil's bell, with a stake in its haunch;  
A scarred, scabby, stone-bearing gravel-womb [*Greithgrest  
garegddwyn grothgro*]. (Gwilym 1981, 232-3)

This kind of sound is often used to signify the emptying of spirit or virtue from the voice, leaving a dry and mindless agitation, as in St Paul's warning to the Corinthians that 'Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not charity, I am become [as] sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal' [χαλκος ηχων η κυμβαλον αλαλαζον]. The 'tinkling' of the King James version is a dentalisation of the more liquid αλαλαζον, *alalazon*, a war cry, and may have been suggested by the Latin of the Vulgate, which gives *aes sonans aut cymbalum tinniens*. But *alalazon* is closer to Latin *ululatus*, a shrieking or howling, usually in lament, but also applied by Caesar to the war-whoops of the Gaels. This has been suggested by Latin *ulula*, itself the source both of the English words *owl* and *howl*, and related to the Greek ολολνζω, a screech-owl whose cry was of ill omen (Lewis and Short 1951, 1926). This association is shared with a number of Indo-Aryan words, such as Pali *uluka*, an owl, Panjabi *ulla*, which means both an owl and a fool, and Prakrit *ululu*, the sound of rejoicing (Turner 1962-85, 110)

The point in common between the tinny rattling of the cymbal and the howling of ululation is the rapid flapping of the tongue or glottis. Perhaps the material form that mediates between them would be the bell, which can intone the solemn summons of the Lord, whether to worship or to death, but can also seem to jangle emptily, its clapper the occasion of a mere, unmelodious clanging (this being the Revised Version rendering of αλαλαζον). Philip Larkin evokes the call to him of poetry as a 'lifted, rough-tongued bell', which Tim Trengove-Jones has suggestively linked with Larkin's stammer, finding in it 'a compelling physical awareness of the tongue's blended awkwardness and expertise' (Trengove-Jones 1990, 330).

There is a large class of words that tempt or permit the tongue to toy with the challenge, as well as possibility of stuttering failure, that are posed by rapid dental iteration. The trickiness of words like 'interpretative' is tamed by the simplification of American 'interpretive', though loses the hint of the painstaking and the meticulously discriminated that is there in the English word. Iterodentality always suggests and displays tongue-twisting expertise, a challenging manoeuvre smoothly pulled off. This coheres with the accident that English is formed from the coalescence and interpenetration of two language strains, the Germanic and the Latinate. They have their well-known differences of tone, register and lexis, with Germanic languages tending to furnish words for bodily or otherwise primary qualities (swear words in English are rightly known as 'Anglo-Saxon'), and Latinate words being strongly identified with learning, law, artifice and language itself, not least in the fact that the very word for language is lingual rather than guttural. In another essay, I have suggested that this forms a systematic contrast between the back of the mouth, embodied in the guttural or the glottal, and the front of the mouth, of which the dentals are the most pronounced form, and which represent language, so to speak, coming to light. We might almost see the speaking of English as involving the cohabitation of two mouths in the space of one, the muddy gutturals of the Caliban mouth alternating with the tight, bright, Ariel-like Tinkerbell tones of the Latinate tongue and teeth, tripping its light fantastick toe.

Sometimes these phonesthetic values crystallise into certain kinds of name. The Germanic growls and gargles that cohabit with Latinate articulation announce itself in the names of Grendel or the Gorgon. And the letter /t/ generated another phonesthetic personification, who is now largely forgotten, but was once celebrated and elaborated. We are fortunate in that his curriculum vitae has been constructed in very great detail by Margaret Jennings (1977), in a book-length article that is unlikely for some time to be superseded.

The first appearance of what is known as the recording demon seems to be somewhere in the 1220s, in an exemplum, or moral lesson from a sermon composed by Jacques de Vitry, a French preacher, leader of crusades and, late in his life, cardinal in Rome. The story goes like this:

I have heard that a certain holy man, when he was in the choir, saw a devil who seemed to be struggling under the weight of a bulging sack. When he urged the devil to tell him what he was carrying, he replied ‘These are the skipped syllables and words of the verses of the psalms [*sillabe et dictiones syncopate et versus psalmodie*] which these priests have stolen from God during Matins; rest assured that I am preserving them carefully to testify against them [*ad eorum accusationem*]’. (Crane 1890, 6).

The story was repeated in sermons and writings, but it was not for 60 years or so that the devil acquired a name, in a section of the *Tractatus de Penitentia* by the Franciscan scholar John of Wales of around 1285, which speaks of a devil who called himself ‘titivillum’ and who collected ‘morsels and fragments of the psalms’ (British Library, MS Royal 10, A, IX, fol. 40<sup>vb</sup>, quoted Jennings 1977, 16). John quotes two tag-lines that would come to constitute the signature tune of Titivillus for a couple of centuries thereafter: ‘Fragmina verborum tituillus colligit horum/Quibus die mille vicibus se sarcinat ille’ (Tititivullus gathers up their fragmented words, of which he puts in his bag a thousand a day)’

But Titivillus appears in another guise, or perhaps we might say, his figure converges with that of another demonic snapper-up of unconsidered trifles. As well as picking up the errors of the preacher, Titivillus keeps a record of all the tittering, gossiping and idle talk that occurs in the congregation – principally among its female members. The most developed account of this kind of devilish recording is also to be found among the exempla of Jacques de Vitry, who tells a story of a devil who is trying to write down all the idle chatter, but is unable to fit it all on the piece of parchment he is using. So he takes the parchment and attempts to stretch it with his teeth (Crane 1890, 100). Here, the parchment offers an equivalent to the materialisation of the words represented by the sack of Titivillus in other versions. In another version, the writing devil is engaged in writing down ‘all the laughinges that were betwene the women atte the masse’, along with ‘clatoring’ and ‘iangelynge’ (Caxton 1971, 49, 50) ; one wonders quite how the devil records laughing – *tittitittititti*, perhaps. This writing devil becomes identified with Titiviullus towards the end of the fourteenth century, in a poem that begins ‘Tutivillus, the devyl of

hell,/He wrytheth har names, sothe to tel/admissa extrahantes' (Wright and Halliwell, I.257).

And the devil acquired a third role as well, one that is not reviewed in Margaret Jennings's article, since it concerns the post-medieval afterlife of Titivillus, retrained as the devil who haunts printing houses, on the lookout now not for slips of the tongue but finger-bungles. Here, in the age of movable, and therefore removable type, the jots and tittles, the orts and orphans, the skipped and dropped letters are literally (and I suppose literally) there to be gathered up, from the floor on which they may fall unregarded from the butterfingers of the compositor. In his new role, Titivillus is true (that is untrue) to type. For one of the declensions of his own name is probably the result of a scribal error, or readerly eyeslip, in the rendering, in at least one early text, of the name of Titivillus, as Tintinillus, a mistake that one could imagine being made frequently, given the easy substitutability of *u*, *v* and *n* in medieval manuscript (Jennings 1977, 18n.29). Oddly, this is a mistake of the eye or hand that discloses an aural logic, associating the chatterings and whisperings that are the devil's object with jingling tintinnabulations, from Latin *tinnire*, ring, chink, clink, gingle, tinkle, tingle.

There may be a further modification of the tinnitant itinerant devil in an appearance of the general word 'tittifil', to mean hanger on, wastrel, vagabond, in a 1537 play called *Thersites*, at the heart of a list of tickling worms that have taken up residence in the belly of Telemachus – for Latin *tinea* is in fact a kind of worm

All the courte of conscience in cockoldst yres  
 Tynckers and tabberets typpers tauerners  
 Tyttyfylles, tryfullers, turners and trumppers  
 Tempters, traytours, trauaylers and thumpers  
 Thryftlesse, theuyshe, thycke and thereto thynne  
 the maladye of this wormes cause for too blynne (Ravisius Textor 1562,  
 14)

Now the devil stands for, and is himself propagated by, the spirit of imperfect transmission, or spontaneous mutativity. He is the parasite, the scrambler, the tinnitus, the white noise. He is both negative and positive, not just the obliterator of sense, but also at times the interpolator of spurious or ghostly material, in what have been called Satanic verses.

Indeed, the play of writing and speech seems to be closely imbricated with the play between the vowel-mouthed Germanic and the daylit consonantal Latinate. When French and Latin entered into cohabitation with Anglo-Saxon, it was predominantly as the language of law and writing, which, so to speak, took up symbolic residence between the tongue and the teeth rather than between the palate and the glottis. Speech hung around in the back of the mouth; language, formed from the Latin *lingua*, seemed to belong to the front and to be identified with the hairsplitting differentiations of the consonants.

These alternatives are dramatised wittily and riotously in the late fifteenth-century play *Mankind*, in which Titivillus has his most developed role. The

whole play may be read as a linguistic struggle, played out between the alternatives of measured and melodious morality, as embodied in the words and manner of Mercy, and the riotous nonsense and obscenity of the corrupting figure of Mischief and his larrikin followers, New Guise, Nowadays and Nought. The very first words that Mischief utters are an interruption, met by Mercy's reproach: '3e ben culpable/To interrupte thus my talkyng delectable'. Their arrival on the scene announces the descent of pious discourse into busy noise, enacted not just in their speech, but in the drubbing, or 'praty scottlynge' given to the belly of Nought. The face-off between corporeal English and spiritual Latin is brought to a neat focus in New Gyse's response to Mercy's self-important polysyllables of Mercy: 'Mercy ys my name by denomynacyon/I conseyue 3e haue but a lytyll fauour in my communycacyon'. 'Ey, ey!', complains New Gyse, 'yowr body ys full of Englysch Laten' (a notion which here approximates to the Sassenach sounds (*Seisnig yn sôn*) of Daffyd ap Gwilym's rattle-bag). He mocks Mercy's prissy and churchy speech with an obscene invitation:

I prey yow hertyly, worschyppull clerke,  
 To haue þis Englysch mad in Laten:  
 "I haue etun a dyschfull of curdys,  
 Ande I haue schetun yowr mowth full of turdys."  
 Now opyn yowr sachell wyth Laten wordys  
 Ande sey me þis in clerycall manere!

(I have long suspected a reminiscence of New Gyse's challenge in the interjection that appears in the midst of the dialogue between the two gossip washerwomen in James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*: 'Latin me that, my trinity scholar, out of eure sanscreed into oure erylant'). There is a nice chiasmic reversal to be noted here. The implication behind the mockery is that Latin lacks the robustness of the native tongue, and is too prettified and sanitised to deal with the reality of the body. The roisterers insist on the explosively incontinent body against the 'louely wordys' and 'mellyfluose doctryne' of Mercy, singing a pottymouthed burlesque of a Christmas carol and telling Mankind that 'I wolde yowr mowth and hys ars þat þis made/Wer maryede junctly together'. And yet New Gyse clearly also sees Latin as itself a sort of excrement, which is clogging up the body and mouth of Mercy – his earlier remark that 'yowr body ys full of Englysch Laten' equating pretty clearly to 'you are full of Latin shit'. The centuries-long tide of disgust for anything to do with the Roman church among Protestants sometimes expressed itself through a similar contempt for the empty wrangling of Latin scholasticism, as for example Peter Pett's mockery of arguments in 'barbarous Latine' about 'quiddity, esseity, entity and such titivilium, and to eus rationis, that did (as I may say) destroy the being of Reason (Pett 1688, 67). In *Mankind*, Latinate dentiality is answered by a kind of Germanic accidentality that is heard in the fizzling plosives of spitting, shitting sputtering, spattering, splattering, and, from the other end of things, squittering and piddling. Incontinent speech and simple incontinence are run together in Nought's words:

I am doynge of my nedynngys; be ware how 3e schott!  
 Fy, fy, fy! I haue fowll arayde my fote.  
 Be wyse for schotyng wyth yowr takyllys, for Gode wott

My fote ys fowly ouerschett.

Writing has often been seen as a kind of excremental supplement to speech, associated with materiality and mortality. As I have already suggested, Latin appears in this sense like a kind of writing in the mouth. Mischief sets up a mock trial of Mankind, with the figure of Nought acting as amanuensis. ‘Nought scribit’ is the suggestively laconic stage direction and, indeed, when it comes to reading the record, Mischief can make nothing of it: ‘Here ys blottybus in blottis,/Blottorum blottibus istis./I beschrew yowr erys, a fayer hande!’. The mock declension makes Latin nothing more than empty blather. In fact blotting and blattering are kinds of equivalent. Etienne de Bourbon wrote that the recording devil was there to take account of all those idle priests who ‘truncated verses, evacuated them of their sense, skipped pronunciations [and] obliterated letters’ [*truncat versus, a suo intellectu eviscerant, dictiones sincopant, litteras oblitterant*] (Marche, 1877, 185). His words remind us of the origin of obliterate in *oblitterare*, which has the sense of a writing over, a turning of writing on itself, which reduces literature to litter.

These themes are drawn together in the figure of Titivillus himself, who is summoned to the scene about half way through the play in order to maximise the mischief-making. Like any properly accredited devil, he announces himself in Latin: ‘Ego sum dominancium dominus and my name ys Titivillus./3e þat haue goode hors, to yow I sey caueatis!’ The figure of Titivillus had been on the scene for two or more centuries, so would have needed no glossing. But his name has already been whispered before he arrives on the scene, when Mankind sits down to make a record of the glorious redemption of which he has been told by Mercy: ‘Her wyll I sytt and tytyll in þis papyr/The incomparable astat of my promycyon’. Hanging the paper round his neck is the sign of his redemptive entitlement, but, from the point of view of Mischief and his gang, it is no more than a tittle, a scribble, a diddle or doodle. This is then amplified when Titivillus says that ‘I xall go to hys ere and tytyll þerin’. Whispering, the sound that a pen or pencil makes on the page, is a kind of writing in the mouth, that is at once excessive and deficient in spirit.

Language involves the interfusion of the principles that Michel Serres has called the hard and the soft, by which he means, not just the literal contrast of different modes of material composition, but also the interrelation of the sensible and the intelligible, the actual and the virtual – in other, more contemporary words, hardware and software (Connor 2009). The hard and the soft have, appropriately enough, two modes of meeting – a soft, in which they merge and enter into each other, and a hard in which they seem to repel and recoil from each other. Nowhere do the hard and the soft come up against each other with such versatility as in the meetings of teeth and tongue, the least and the most elastic portions of the speech apparatus. This literal hardness and softness rhymes with the more metaphorical interfusion of the hard and the soft in the structure of all utterance – empty and mindlessly mechanical repetition or redundancy of structure on the one hand, and the unpredictable, random, corporeal accidents of speech on the other.

The meaning of the teeth is hardness and discontinuity. Where the softer portions of the mouth, the tongue, the palate, the glottis, may be said to be

analogue in form, since they suggest continuously-varying qualities, the teeth are digital, even, as we have seen, prestidigital, because they seem to reduce sounds to equal quantities. The soft portions of the mouth approach and enter into the absolute ductility of the breath; they belong to the order of the continuous. The hardness of the teeth suggests the insentience and unresponsiveness of the mineral world. Such sounds suggest the brittle, which is hard, but liable to shatter, a granite that is only a touch away from transformation into grittiness. Perhaps one grinds one's teeth because they are so close to the condition of grit.

Edison used to monitor the sounds of the phonograph by biting its edge, recapitulating Beethoven's trick of amplifying sound by gripping a stick in his teeth and pressing it against a piano. This alternative route into awareness via the conduction of bone amplifies the mechanical cast of sounds, shifting the balance of the hard and the soft that is characteristic of all hearing and speech towards the hard.

The geminate /t/ can be said to decompose or atomise. At the same time, it seems to cluster and reduplicate, the effect being what we might call a compounded decomposition, or agitated aggregation, at once minced and massed.

Many of the words and sounds with which we have been concerned demonstrate the form of apophony known as ablaut reduplication, or the changing of vowel sounds with the retention of consonants. Language abounds with such sing-song alternations, which have a special use in signifying infantile actions or utterances, or states of confused or careless variation – chit-chat, knick-knack, mish-mash, mingle-mangle, jingle-jangle, tittle-tattle, pitter-patter, clitter-clatter, flip-flop, flim-flam, flutter-flutter, snicker-snacker, ping-pong. Oddly, these highly-structured contrasts are used to signify unstructured noise.

Ablaut reduplication is common in many languages, and with similar kinds of signification, for example in Japanese *kasa-koso*, rustle and *gata-goto*, rattle. The enacted suggestion is that in such utterances, language is merely idling, having been abandoned or surrendered to undirected movement. Hebrew does not seem to involve so much iterative play with dentals, but its aptness for palindromic structures readily generates expressions such as *al-te-kush-kayshe-al-ha-cum-cum* – don't keep on rattling the kettle, or, as we might say in English, stop banging on. The very words used to signify this phenomenon have the idea of a kind of turning – *apophony* and *Ablaut* both signify 'away from sound or voice', thus, we might say, a turning within voice away from the straight and narrow of voice. The kinds of rattling vacillation often enacted by words that have geminate dentals within them are enacted in the rattling between and across words.

Ablaut reduplication is a structuring principle across many languages, since it generates the variations of vowels within consonant structures that are an essential feature of inflections – *hic, haec, hoc*. Consonants often mark and make possible these vowel-differentiations by remaining themselves invariant. Consonants make possible the principle of spacing that allows meanings to be

distinguished and distributed across a field of different signifying possibilities. Expressions that enact the rapid shuttling of these alternatives collapse and cripple this spacing, creating a kind of continuous discontinuity, an unvarying variation, an agglutinated fluctuation. In them 'Vacant shuttles weave the wind', in T.S. Eliot's phrase.

There are many versions of the name of the demon I have called Titivillus. He appears also as Tutivillus, Titelinus, Titulinus, Titufullus, Tutenillus and Tytinillus, as well as having his name generalised into the form 'titivel', meaning a gossip or confusion-causing tittle-tattler. These variations have the effect of progressively cancelling the audible differences between the vowels, *i*, *e* and *u* becoming a hurried blur, the function of which is not exactly make a sound, but to act as the smallest hinge of sound required to make possible the vibration of the tongue.

Vowels, we may say, are identified with an idea of the continuous, the irreversible and the extensive. It is possible to slide, as a trombone slides across its full range of notes, between all the vowels in a single utterance. Vowels are thought of as the motive form of speech, pressing outwards from self to world, and pressing speech onwards from past to future. There is a long history of magical and even religious thinking associated with the difference between vowels and consonants. The orthodox view is that vowels are the numinous or spiritual dimension of language, that in it which most truly lives. The remarks of Benjamin Wells in 1882 may be taken as representative:

It has often been said that the consonants are the skeleton of a language, the vowels its flesh and blood. While the vowels are more subject to internal change and to influence from without than consonants, they reflect more clearly in their modification the spirit of a language. (Wells, 1882, 65)

Though their role is to interrupt this pure flow, most of the time consonants assist and accentuate this forming of the ideal thread or stream, marking out the differences that allow progression to be measured. Indeed, there is an alternative tradition within philology which uses the very hardness or immateriality of consonants as the source of secure knowledge about language formation and change. Walter Whiter's *Etymologicon Universale* of 1822 insisted on

the Principle of Uniformity, by which we are at once supplied with the most important maxim in discovering the origin of words. In these enquiries, the Consonants only are to be considered as the representatives of Words, and the Vowel Breathings are to be totally disregarded. (Whiter 1822-5, 1.8)

For one powerful tradition of mystical linguistics, the vowels are the ineffable breath, which can only be profaned by being represented in the body of speech. A recent reviver of this tradition is David Abram, who finds among various favoured premodern peoples – Aboriginal Australians, Lakota and Navajo Indians, and ancient Semites – a conception of the air as a distributed life force, circulating among and between living beings, an 'unseen presence

that flows not just within us but between all things, granting us life and speech even as it moves the swaying grasses and the gathering clouds' (Abram 1996, 249). Abram sees the severing or partitioning of this omnipresent mind-force as the sign of a mutilation of being practised by human beings on nature and on themselves. However, he lays the blame less on man in general than on the 'Greek scribes', who, by introducing symbols for the sacred vowels that were left unrepresented in Hebrew, effectively flattened breath into print: '*by transposing the invisible into the register of the visible, the Greek scribes effectively dissolved the primordial power of the air*' (Abram 1996, 252). This in its turn encouraged abstraction in all its forms, from the Platonic doctrine of Ideas to the unspeakable horrors of Christian and Cartesian dualism. Abram sees in a reawakened acknowledgement of 'our immersion in the invisible air' the possibility of an undoing of the alphabetic Fall (Abram 1996, 260).

The betrayal of the pneumatism by the Greek scribes who began to try to render the vowels in letters continues to be denounced by those who wish to revive the idea of the holiness of the breath, But when consonants rapidly reverberate, they seem to embody an alternative order, in which before and after simply go back and forth. As one late fifteenth century MS giving advice about the reading of psalms warns 'Numquam posterior versus prius incipiatur/Quam finis anterior perfecto fine fruatur', 'Never let a new verse be begun Until the previous one has been brought to its perfect end' (Wright and Halliwell 1845,I, 290-1). In a condition of rapid reverberation, consonants seem to embody an alternative order of the discontinuous, the iterative and the intensive. Rapidly reiterated dentals form a kind of stationary tremolo, that, moving back and forth, stalls and thickens time, gripping it in dental detention, rather than allowing it to progress. Such consonantal forms are characteristic of the 'idle speech' that was so often condemned in medieval writings, a usage that anticipates the mechanical meaning that the time acquired in the twentieth century, to signify a disengaged engine, oscillating emptily without doing any productive work. An engine, or a tongue that idles simply chugs, doodles or fiddle-faddles.

Articulated speech, speech in which vowels are given their expressive space by consonants, brings time under tension, giving it a shape and direction. Oscillating consonantal clusters, by contrast, merely mark time, making it something neutral, inert and homogenous. Denticity seems to body forth idle identity. Articulate breath is a something that is a something; voiceless articulation is a something that is a nothing. It is hard to bear the thought of a time that is merely a matter of 'moment upon moment, pattering down, like the millet grains of ... that old Greek', as Hamm puts it in Samuel Beckett's *Endgame* (Beckett 1986, 126), so that, hearing the indeterminate dittos of the clock's tick, tick, tick, or the clicking of the indicator light which we unconsciously force to sing the song 'tick-tock', as Frank Kermode notes: 'The clock's "tick-tock" I take to be a model of what we call a plot, an organisation which humanises time by giving it a form; and the interval between "tock" and "tick" represents purely successive, disorganised time of the sort we need to humanise' (Kermode 1968, 45). This can be seen as a kind of antisyncope, a hearing-in of a difference that is not there.

This impulse is to be found in the many forms of ablaut reduplication, which tend to move from high-pitched to low-pitched, from closed to open, and from frontal to posterior, with the short /i/ sound almost always being the leading sound of the reduplicate pair. Perhaps the reason that formulae like ‘tock-tick’ or ‘dong-ding’ feel so off-centred and constraining is that they do not supply the combination of widening (the opening of the vowel) with completion (the conclusive lowering of the pitch) which seems to offer satisfaction, while also perhaps mimicking the reassuring iambic lub-dub of the heart. These alternations strive to impart direction to the purposeless iteration of the indistinct, which keeps on folding time back on itself in its chattering repetitions, which merely turn difference back into itself.

### Signifying Nothing

In all of these stories there is a striking alternation between omission and preservation, deficit and superfluity. At the beginning of *Mankind*, Mischief responds indignantly to the careful moral winnowing of productive and unproductive speech, corn and chaff, offered in Mercy’s opening speech

I beseche yow hertyly, leue yowr calcacyon.  
 Leue yowr chaffe, leue yowr corn, leue yowr dalyacyon.  
 Yowr wytt ys lytyll, yowr hede ys mekyll, 3e are full of predycacyon.  
 But, ser, I prey þis questyon to claryfye:  
 Mysse-masche, dryff-draff,  
 Sume was corn and sume was chaffe,  
 Sume was corn and sume was Raffe;  
 Onschett yowr lokke and take an halpenye

There is play throughout with the alternatives of much and little. Mercy’s principle of ‘Few Wordys, few and well sett!’ is answered by New Gyse’s ‘Ser, yt ys þw new gyse and þe new jett/Many wordys and shortely sett,/Thys ys þe new gyse, euey-dele’.

Thomas Elyot’s 1538 dictionary said tersely that the word ‘titivillitium’ ‘sygnifyeth nothyng’ (Eliot 1538), n.p.) He might have added that the word, while not exactly full of sound and fury, certainly struts and frets sufficiently to make it an interesting oxymoron; it is a busy nothing, of nothing with much ado. The definition wavers, as does Shakespeare’s play, between signifying ‘nothing’ and not signifying at all. Ultimately, this is the comic conundrum that characterises the power of the diabolic as such, as canonically defined, namely that, since the devil gets any power he has only from the permission of God, he cannot really be taken seriously. This means that everything he does is really only a pretence, a nothingness. But this nothingness is not unreal, for it can take actual and terrifying forms, not least in the mistaken but powerful belief that the devil actually has the powers to which he pretends. This is to say that the devil is never more or less than theatrical. The earliest use of the word *titivillitium* is in Plautus’s comedy *Casina*, in which the character Olympio responds to the suggestion that humans must rely upon the gods, with the words ‘well, that saying you’ve thrown out is worthless’ [*Non ergo istuc verbum emissim titivillitio*] (II.5). This must presumably be the root of

all the denominations of writing devil, has been variously interpreted, and its meaning must certainly depend to an extent on its chiming with similar busy, bitty words like *titillatio*, a tickling, and *titubare*, to stagger or stammer, a word that came across into English as *titubate*, which may sometimes have given it associations with *masturbate*. The word *titivate*, which seems like a blending of *tillate* and *titubate*, a word meaning to stagger or stammer, means to take comically extravagant care in primping prettying oneself up. This word in fact derives from the Middle English *tid*, time, and thus has the core meaning of drawing out time in trifling or inessential adornment, though it has presumably been drawn in to the orbit of the titivillitious lexicon. A later derivation of *titivillus* hears in it *totus* and *vilis*, ‘completely worthless’, which has the virtue at least of blending totality and tittling.

The story of *Titiviullus* illustrates a striking seesaw, or (borrowing an obsolete dialect word for the same diversion) titter-totter, between losing and retention. Though one might expect *Titivillus* to approve and encourage the slurred psalming and idle chatter among the congregation, his role in carefully logging these instances of chitchat allies him with a principle of continence rather than the incontinence of his subjects. George Gascoigne’s chapter ‘Of hasty sayng of these holy houres and of ouerskypynge’ in his 1530 text *The Mirroure of Oure Lady* makes the economics of negligent enunciation quite explicit

For lyke as clyppers or falsers of the kynges money are punysshed by deth Ryght so they that clyppe away from the money of goddes seruyce eny wordes or letters or syllables & so false yt from the trew sentence or from the trewe maner of saynge therof deserue to be greuously punysshed agenste god. (Gascoigne 1530, xxv)

Most of the accounts of *Titivillus* make it clear that he is himself on piecework, required to cram his bag, or net, with a thousand such mislocutions a day – even more, in Gascoigne’s account: ‘I muste eche day he sayde brynge my master a thousande pokes full of faylynges & of neglygences in syllables and wordes’ (Gascoigne 1530, xxv).

Tittling is itself proliferative, since the tittler is a spreader of rumours and seeder of dissension. Ungoverned by the demands of truth or meaning, the empty language of tittle-tattle is the nothing that comes of nothing, the nothingness of language given over to the agitated idling that is the mere wagging of tongues. The condemnations of the evils of tittle-tattle tend themselves to multiply into long lists. And the more this nothingness broods and breeds on itself, the more sinister it can come to seem, precisely because of its parody of the powers of generation, its lifeless simulation of real vigour. This is why the list of the devils who torment Edgar in disguise on the heath includes ‘Flibbertigibbet’, which is associated in the definition of ‘coquette’ in Cotgrave’s 1611 dictionary with the *titivil*: ‘a pratling, or proud gossip;...a cocket, or tatling houswife; a *titifill*, a *flebergebit*’ (Cotgrave 1611, n.p). Like *Titivillus*, *Flibbertigibbet* is an onomatopoeic rendering of the sound of unmeaning chatter that hardens, in Samuel Harsnett’s 1603 *Declaration of Popish Impostures*, from which Shakespeare drew it, into the name of a devil (Harsnett 1603, 49) – though Harsnett’s text is an hysterical denunciation of

the hysterical practice of conjuring up devils from mere tongue-wagging. The titillation or tickling with which titillivilation blends is itself a somatic enactment of the principle that 'Mony a mickle makes a muckle', or that the minimal can flip easily into the maximal, pleasure into torment.

Perhaps it is the word 'it' which in English embodies this coincidence of the contraries of maximal and minimal. 'It' is a kind of phonemic atom, its meaning centring on the dot with which it is uniquely provided in the Roman alphabet. Originally, the Greek iota, from which the modern letter 'i' derives, was adopted from Phoenician *yodh*. Early Christian manuscript took over the convention that the *i* was the only letter that did not rest upon the level of the line, but hovered as though weightlessly above it, which is still true of Hebrew *yodh*. Lower-case *i* is also the only letter, bar one, in the Roman alphabet that has a dot or tittle above it, this arising in medieval periods in order to distinguish the *i* from adjacent *l*. The other dotted letter, *j*, remained interchangeable with *i*. The *i* thus reduces to what an eighteenth-century book on shorthand called a 'Tittle or touch of the Pen' (Tanner 1712, 4). The iota itself shortens to the word *jot*, in a cross-language rhyme with *yodh*. It seems appropriate that, in mathematics, *i* should be the symbol of the imaginary number, the square root of -1. Algebraically, *I* is defined by a formula,  $i^2 = -1$ , which means that both *i* and  $-i$  are square roots of -1.

The *yodh* has a particularly important mystical significance in Kabbalistic tradition. Yitzchak Ginsburgh explicates the letter *yodh* as a kind of contraction of the alternatives of the all and the nothing

Subsequent to the initial *tzimtzum*, the contraction of G-d's Infinite light in order to make "place" for Creation, there remained within the empty void a single, potential point or "impression." The secret of this point is the power of the Infinite to contain finite phenomena within Himself and express them to apparent external reality. Finite manifestation begins from a zero-dimensional point, thereafter developing into a one-dimensional line and two-dimensional surface... The initial point, the essential power of the yud, is the "little that holds much." The "much" refers to the simple Infinity of G-d hidden within the initial point of revelation, which reflects itself as the Infinite potential of the point to develop and express itself in all the manifold finite phenomena of time and space. (Ginsburgh 1992, 154)

This notion that the least is a kind of concentrated version of the most appears in one of the earliest recorded uses of the English word tittle, in the 1395 rendering of Matthew 5.18 in the Wycliffe Bible, 'Forsothe Y seie to you, til heuene and erthe passe, o lettir or o titel shal not passe fro the lawe, til alle thingis be doon', which becomes in the 1611 King James Bible "Till heauen and earth passe, one iote or one tittle, shall in no wise passe from the law, till all be fulfilled'.

Language never comes closer to its essence in such moments where it rocks or oscillates between something and nothing. For language itself is ultimately made of nothing, or the next to nothing of the squeak and plabber of air pushed through a damp pipe. Formed in and through language as we are, the

tittle-tattle of the teeth tells a tale of our own essential founding upon the principle of hardly anything at all.

## References

Abram, David (196). *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World*. New York: Vintage Books.

Beckett, Samuel (1986). *Complete Dramatic Works*. London: Faber.

Caxton, William (1971). *The Book of the Knight of the Tower*. Ed. M.Y. Offord. London: Early English Text Society

Connor, Steven (2009). 'Michel Serres: The Hard and the Soft.' Online at <http://www.stevenconnor.com/hardsoft/>

Cotgrave, Randle (1611). *A Dictionarie of the French and English Tongues*. London: Adam Islip.

Crane, Thomas F., ed. (1890). *The Exempla or Illustrative Stories from the Sermones Vulgares of Jacques de Vitry*. London: David Nutt.

Elyot, Thomas, Sir (1538). *The Dictionary of Syr Thomas Eliot Knyght*. London: Thomas Bertheletus.

Gascoigne, Thomas (1530). *Here After Folowith the Boke Callyd the Myrroure of Oure Lady Very Necessary for All Relygyous Persones*. London: Richarde Fawkes.

Ginsburgh, Yitzchak (1992). *The Hebrew Letters: Channels of Creative Consciousness*. Ed. Avraham ArieH Trugman and Moshe Yaakov Wisnefsky. Cedarhurst: Linda Pinsky Publications.

Gwilym, Dafydd ap (1981). *The Poems*. Trans. Richard Morgan Loomis. Binghamton, NY: Center for Medieval and Early Renaissance Studies.

Harsnett, Samuel (1603). *A Declaration of Egregious Popish Impostures ...* London: James Roberts.

Jennings, Margaret (1977). 'Tutivillus: The Literary Career of the Recording Demon.' *Studies in Philology*, 74 (1977): 1-95.

Kermode, Frank (1968). *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.

Marche, A. Lecoy de la (1877). *Anecdotes historiques légendes et apologues tirés du recueil inédit d'Etienne de Bourbon*. Paris: Librairie Renouard.

Lewis, Charlton T. and Short, Charles (1951). *A Latin Dictionary*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Parker, Matthew (1567). *The Whole Psalter Translated into English Metre... The First Quinquagene*. London: John Daye.

Pett, Sir Peter (1688). *The happy future state of England, or, A discourse by way of a letter to the late Earl of Anglesey*. London: n.p.

Ravisius Textor, Joannes (1562). *A New Enterlude Called Thersytes*. London: John Tysdale.

Tanner, Francis (1712). *The Plainest, Easiest, and Prettiest method Of Writing Short-Hand, Ever Yet Published*. London: W. Lewis.

Trengove-Jones, Tim (1990). 'Larkin's Stammer.' *Essays In Criticism*, 40, 322-38

Turner, R. L. (1962-1985). *A Comparative Dictionary of Indo-Aryan Languages*. London: Oxford University Press.

Wells, Benjamin W. 'The Ablaut in English.' *Transactions of the American Philological Association*, 13 (1882): 65-88.

White, Walter (1822-5). *Etymologicon Universale: or, Universal Etymological Dictionary. On a New Plan. In Which It Is Shewn, That Consonants Are Alone to be Regarded in Discovering the Affinities of words, and That the Vowels are to be Wholly Rejected...* 3 Vols. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Wright, Thomas and James Orchard Halliwell (1845). *Reliquiae Antiquae: Scraps From Ancient Manuscripts, Illustrating Chiefly Early English Literature and the English Language*. 2 Vols. London: John Russell Smith.