

## Sadistic Listening

[Steven Connor](#)

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Listening has an unblemished reputation. Let me count the ways. We seem thoroughly persuaded that looking is active while listening is passive. So looking is always liable to become a violating, objectifying and diminishing action, while listening is thought of not only as harmless but as positively nurturing and concerned. Looking is proscriptive, listening is permissive. When you look at something, you put it in its place; when you listen to something, you let it be where it is. To be listened to is not just to be given the chance to speak for yourself, it is to be allowed the essential openness that Jean-Luc Nancy sees as constitutive of the resonant subject: 'While the subject of the target is always already given, posed in itself to its *point of view*, the subject of listening is always still yet to come, spaced, traversed, and called by itself, *sounded* by itself' (Nancy 2007, 21). Looking is full of the violent certainty that distance gives, according to Salomé Voegelin, while listening is full of the gentle, tactful hesitation that comes from being in a condition of 'involved participation' with its subject (Voegelin 2010, xii).

Typically, of course, being a good listener has been thought of as female, the assumption being that women, deprived of the authority of the voice, have become delicately expert in the more passive and pacific arts of the ear. *Sentire* is sensitivity itself. Suspects and heart patients are kept 'under observation' rather than 'under audition'. The sign that an academic wants their work to be thought of as sensitive and generously fair-minded is that they will describe it, not as inspecting or analysing some issue, but as 'attending to it', where attending suggests *entendre*, patiently waiting upon something rather than submitting it to imperious and precipitate analysis. Reading, it seems, is increasingly conducted by ultrasound rather than amniocentesis.

I don't imagine that it will be easy, in the face of all this, to blacken the unimpeachably good name of listening, but I feel like trying.

There is certainly oppressiveness in being forced to listen. If sound is power, then listening seems like submission, even, as Fred Kraus (2004) suggests, a kind of masochistic submission to that power. The mighty-feeble superego commands and demands obedience, through the ear. In Tom Shadyac's *Bruce Almighty* (2003) one of the ways in which Jim Carrey's Bruce is persuaded that it is not as easy to be God as he might think is by having his ears opened to the endless stream of prayers that God (Morgan Freeman) has to respond to. But the focus on the powers of assertion involved in giving voice makes us insufficiently alive to the power that inheres in the attentive listener, and the often unpleasant pleasure that may be taken in such listening. For to listen is often to demand and extract witness, and to force utterance into testimony. ('You are not obliged to say anything, but anything you do say...'). Up until recently at least, we have seemed much less concerned about being overheard than about being overseen. But we might be much more alert to the persisting and propagating force of what might be called, but tellingly isn't, since it isn't called anything, *surveillance*. We may think of the ordeal to which King Lear submits his daughters, of cramming his needy, greedy ear with sentimental sonority. Lear's remark at the end of the play, as he bears Cordelia's hanged body on to the stage, that 'Her voice was ever soft,/Gentle

and low, an excellent thing in woman' (*King Lear* V.iii.246-7) has been heard as a motto for the historical muting and mutilation of the female voice. But we may be entitled to remember in it Kent's assurance to Lear in the opening scene of the play that vocal subduing is a way of refusing the speak-up subjugation after which power lusts: 'Thy youngest daughter does not love thee least,/Nor are those empty-hearted whose low sounds/Reverb no hollowness' (*King Lear* I.i, 146-8).

There is no direct visual equivalent that I can think of to being 'given a hearing'. I may, of course, be allowed to 'appear' before a court, but that appearing is really equivalent to speaking. But, because hearing is given, it can be taken away. There can be a mercy or a benediction in the averting of a gaze, or angry resentment in the demand for it. 'Get your eyes off me!' one might say, or 'who do you think you're looking at'. It is common to hear the complaint 'you never listen to a word I say', but who has ever heard anyone complain of being constantly listened to? Our language does not easily let us say 'get your ears off me', but I want you to be as persuaded as I am that it should.

Listening, for example, the listening of the child to the story that must be told as it has always been told before, is often hungry and imperious in the manner of Lear. The woman whose voice suddenly breaks into 'A Game of Chess' in Eliot's *The Waste Land* is heard demanding the position of listener:

"My nerves are bad to-night. Yes, bad. Stay with me.  
Speak to me. Why do you never speak? Speak.  
What are you thinking of? What thinking? What?  
I never know what you are thinking. Think." (Eliot 1969, 65)

Extraordinarily, she first demands speech to which she may listen, and then, like Pozzo of Lucky in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, demands that her unheard non-interlocutor not only speak, but 'think', which may simply mean, 'tell me what you are thinking', but may also mean 'put your thoughts into some form that I may hear as some kind of articulate proposition'. Isn't there always a jolt of panic when somebody says 'what are you thinking?' or 'a penny for your thoughts'? For what such a demand assumes and requires is that thinking may or must be given an audible form, extorted into and as uttering. When Eliot's unseen addressee does wearily reply, *vox praeterea nihil*, it is with a series of statements that suggest the Cordelia-like effort to duck away from her auditory craving: 'I think we are in rat's alley/Where the dead men lost their bones' (Eliot 1969, 65). The interchange continues, with the interrogative listening demanding that diffuse noise be squeezed into the condition of something knowable, nameable, something that may not only be heard, but heard *as*:

What is that noise?"  
The wind under the door.  
"What is that noise now? What is the wind doing?"  
Nothing again nothing.  
"Do  
You know nothing? Do you see nothing? Do you remember  
Nothing?" (Eliot 1969, 65)

Where Eliot's loquacious listener does all the talking in pursuit of her auditory gratification D.H. Lawrence's 1916 poem 'Listening' describes something like the reverse of this extortion. The speaker of the poem speaks of the listening silence of the woman to whom he speaks:

I listen to the stillness of you,  
 My dear, among it all;  
 I feel your silence touch my words as I talk,  
 And hold them in thrall. (Lawrence 1993, 110)

One hopes and expects that a listener will be enthralled, but there is something unexpected and unpleasant in the way in which, rather than touching the one listening, his words are being touched and held by the silence of the listening. As the poem proceeds, Lawrence begins to associate the personal silence of his auditor, not as a sounding-board, providing a mirror or archive which will permit the mediated return of the speaking self to itself, but as a pure aperture, which assimilates everything while registering nothing:

My words fly off a forge  
 The length of a spark;  
 I see the silence easily sip them  
 Up in the dark.

The lark sings loud and glad,  
 Yet I am not loth  
 That silence should take the song and the bird  
 And lose them both. (Lawrence 1993, 110)

Why is the speaker 'not loth'? Perhaps because in this kind of absolute listening without a listener, a listening that swallows everything that enters its empty black ear, there is a kind of escape from fixation, or enthralling of being listened to, with all the demand that giving voice involves that one give voice, or oneself to one's voice.

If Beckett's work gives us memorable examples of the persecutory eye, it also has its ears peeled for auditory inquisition. Longing for 'silence at last, not a murmur, no air, no one listening' (Beckett 2010, 128), Beckett's monologists are compelled to speak endlessly, without being able to keep track of what they are saying, in the hope that they will somehow chance upon the thing that is required to be said. The stream of speech often seems to be striving not to pay any heed to itself, to be simply a stream of speech, but the conviction of being listened to produces in the voice a concomitant compulsion to hearken to itself. Speaking produces the apparatus of self-torturing:

But when it falters and when it stops, but it falters every instant, it stops every instant, yes, but when it stops for a good few moments, a good few moments, what are a good few moments, what then, murmurs, then it must be murmurs, and listening, someone listening, no need of an ear, no need of a mouth, the voice listens, as when it speaks, listens to its silence, that makes a murmur, that makes a voice, a small voice, the same voice only small, it sticks in the throat, there's the throat again, there's the mouth again, it fills the ear, there's the ear again, then I vomit, someone vomits, someone starts vomiting again, that must be how it happens (Beckett 2010, 128)

It is the unseen emitters of sound who are thought to have the power, in films like *M*, or *The Wizard of Oz* for example. But what is one to make of the many forms of auditory fetishism, which seek to exert power in listening? I am, for example, very fond of the sound of women's shoes (I mean that literally – there really don't have to be women in them, it's just that is the

best way by far to get them to make their nice noise). It is hard, at least for me, to see this as a particularly sinister predilection, unlike, say, being addicted to more voyeuristic things – the glint of a stiletto or the swing of a skirt – which may mean that you end up surreptitiously pursuing people. If all men and the women prepared to admit it have followed somebody who has taken their interest (Barbara Pym and Sophie Calle are the examples of female stalkers who come to mind), I have discovered that aural stalking is best done from in front, since the brisk click-clack, click-scrrr-clack is much more tenderly affecting when you cannot see its source. Now you know about it, of course, you might be keeping an eye out for my preposterous out-in-front pursuit (but how would you complain about it? ‘I’m being followed’ sounds very menacing’, but ‘I’m being’ – what? – ‘preceded’? not very). In order to turn what seems to be an essentially passive and contingent liking for this sound into a full-blown obsession, I would need to build up a collection of recordings over which to pant and slaver.

And yes, it is recording that changes everything, making listening more than ever an action rather than a state or an event. Recording makes listening transitive, and therefore powerful. Daniel Paul Schreber believed, in the manner typical of certain psychotics suffering from systematic delusions of persecution, that his thoughts were being recorded, by an obscure, impersonal ‘Aufschreibesystem’ or ‘writing-down system’, in a manner that predicts the predicament, aptest of terms, of Beckett’s speaker in *The Unnamable*. He was, of course, completely right, though misguided in his speculations as to who or what was doing the writing-down.

I cannot say with certainty who does the writing down. As I cannot imagine God’s omnipotence lacks all intelligence, I presume that the writing-down is done by creatures given human shape on distant celestial bodies after the manner of the fleeting-improvised-men, but lacking all intelligence; their hands are led automatically, as it were, by passing rays for the purpose of making them write-down, so that later rays can again look at what has been written. (Schreber 2000, 123)

It is not really the angels who are doing this transcribing, it is Schreber himself. It is Schreber himself who listens in on himself, and listens in on that listening in. The point about Schreber’s writing-down system is that it is automatic, operating independently even of the voices and hands do the writing. The writing-down system is both an element in the complex apparatus of Schreber’s delusions, and the entire apparatus itself, in that it is comprehended in his compendious memoir, which is the biggest writing-down system of all (though commentary like this keeps expanding the circles of listening-in). If Schreber the patient is assailed by voices, he is keeping a record of them, he is listening in on himself listening. He is both subject and object of the writing-down system, the aim of which, he oddly says, is to defend against novelty:

It was believed that my store of thoughts could be exhausted by being written-down, so that eventually the time would come when new ideas could no longer appear in me; this of course is quite absurd, because human thinking is quite inexhaustible; for instance reading a book or a newspaper always stimulates new thoughts. This was the trick: as soon as an idea I had had before and which was (already) written down, recurred – such a recurrence is of course quite unavoidable in the case of many thoughts, for instance the thought in the morning “Now I will wash” or when playing the piano “This is a beautiful passage,” etc. – as soon as such a budding thought was

spotted in me, the approaching rays were sent down with the phrase, “We have already got this,” *scilicet* written-down; in a manner hard to describe the rays were thereby made unreceptive to the power of attraction of such a thought. (Schreber 2000, 127-8)

Listening is here a system of deterrence, a way of not having to hear, of setting at naught whatever might be said by affirming that everything has always already been said somewhere else. A voice that was not listened to could imagine itself to be ‘quite inexhaustible’; a voice subject to this intense and unabated listening, a listening redoubled by writing, is turned back wholly on itself. The promise of being listened to is that you will give voice to something unheard-of; the threat to the speaker is that the listener will have heard it all before.

Writers on sound often make a point of the difference between hearing and listening. To hear is merely to be exposed to sound, to be in the way of hearing. To listen, by contrast, is to take action, it is to orientate or put yourself at an angle to what you hear. This is perhaps why listening usually takes oblique cases nowadays; one listens to, listens for, or out for, or in on. In fact, listening only lost its transitive instance during the nineteenth century. Antipholus in Shakespeare’s *Comedy of Errors* says to Dromio, who has misunderstood him, that he will ‘teach your ears to list me with more heed’ (*Comedy of Errors* IV.i.1055); ‘List a brief tale’, says Edgar in *King Lear* (*King Lear* V.iii.3341). To hear is to be the object of what one hears in the sense of being its occasion, what it literally comes up against. To listen is to construe that hearing as an object, it is to make a decision regarding the nature of what one hears. It is to double hearing over on itself, making something of what you have heard and of your hearing of it. Hearing is supposed to be greedily unselective or injudicious, while listening has the reputation of being more focussed on its object than on itself. But the self-emptying of listening, that making of oneself all ears, is in fact closely and continuously self-attentive. This is why it is so unexpectedly hard to focus on what somebody is saying if you are trying hard to listen to them, as, for example, when conducting an interview. One says to oneself, I must not think about the next question, I must stay focussed on what is actually being said here and now, a concentration that as often as not means you find yourself absented in the self-admiring intensity of your intentness.

Listening is thought to involve a kind of refinement or amplification of here-and-now sensitivity, but the fact that listening is a kind of performance turns what is being listened to also into performance, deporting it into what it will have been. This is why TV interviews depend so much on what are known as ‘noddies’, in which the interviewer is shown nodding, pursing the lips in agreement, or smiling sympathetically. This technique evolved to allow conversations to be filmed with one camera, the noddies being filmed afterwards and then edited in. It seems that utterance requires confirmation of being listened to be regarded as credible, or even, perhaps, intelligible. But surely the expression ‘noddy’ seems as neat as it does because it is so easy to do it in your sleep. It is not surprising that these signs of listening can on occasion be completely detached, as for example when the BBC had to admit that Alan Yentob had been shown sagely nodding in response to interviews at which he had not been present (Dowell 2007).

Hearing takes place in the present, or rather in the no-time of a time that does not catch up with itself. It is not unconscious exactly, but it is a kind of awareness that is not aware of itself. Hearing is characterised by sudden absence or cessation, as when one hears the air-conditioning blissfully subside or the refrigerator whinny into silence, in Seamus Heaney’s

memorable phrase (Heaney 1998, 176). Listening, by contrast, always draws what is being heard into some kind of temporal scansion. The kind of attentiveness of which listening consists in expectation, and brings time under tension. Listening is always in part inquisition, for it is always asking the question of what may be coming next. Being listened to makes you listen to yourself, brings you to your own attention. Teachers and priests and doctors and judges all know this, though the benign reputation of listening means that they usually keep the knowledge of it from themselves, by telling themselves that they have to be good, patient listeners, to allow their subjects free space in which to say the things they have it in mind to say, in their own words. 'In your own words'; are you ever more convinced of the impossibility of ever having your own words than when your listener requires you to own, to own up to, the words you speak?

Listening makes of sound an address. To address is to direct, both come from Latin *dirigere*, to subject to rule. Sound propagates, like a gas. Listened to, sound suddenly seems to stand up straight, to go in straight lines. By listening for something, I make what I listen for something for me, intended for my attention. At the same time, I force the one to whom I listen to pay attention to my attentiveness. By so doing, I denature utterance into declaration. By listening, I give the speaker to whom I listen responsibility; by embodying responsiveness for them, without actually responding, and so making them responsible for their own words. I make it impossible for them not to have meant to say what they said, and not to have meant everything that they said, including, of course, all the things they neglected to say. Listening makes even, and even especially, your silence incriminating. The worst thing about being listened to is that it subjects me to what I have said, subjects me to having to be the subject of that saying.

This is what makes symptomatic listening the most sadistic of all. Symptomatic listening listens out, not just for what you say, but for how you say it. This may appear to be a generous remission of the pressure to construe speaking as pure and self-governing declaration, for this kind of listening cares about more than what I merely say in my speech. But it is just the opposite of this. To listen to my saying as well as, or instead of, what my saying says, is to make even the manner of that saying say something. The accidental is pitilessly remitted into intelligibility. Tuning in to discordant elements in my speech brings the whole affair into tune, especially the speaker, who is like a puppet drawn out of its slovenly condition of collapse into tense uprightness by the tightening of its strings. Emmanuel Levinas promises us that attention to the instance of utterance rather than its content – the saying rather than the said, in his terms – is a kind of pure, primary ethics: 'Saying has to be reached in its existence antecedent to the said, or else the said has to be reduced to it. We must fix this antecedence. What does saying signify before signifying a said?' (Levinas 1991, 46) I have come to find this kind of injunction chilling rather than thrilling. If there is a form of auditory extortion worse than reducing every utterance to a declaration, it is the kind of listening that will not allow even the occasion or event of my saying in general to be other than a saying, or hide its blushes behind the veil of a said.

Listening of this kind, is, of course, at the heart of psychoanalysis. It is psychoanalysis that has developed the most powerful understanding of interpretation practised through and as a mode of listening. Freud famously removed himself from the visual field of the analysand, and encouraged a practice of resisting the patient's demand for interpretation. It is as though the analyst provides a subjunctive space in which the patient, or the patient's own words, must seem to listen to themselves, or listen to their being listened to. The fantasy of power

involved in listening reaches a kind of climax in Theodore Reik's *Listening With the Third Ear* (1949). Reik insists throughout on the refusal of every kind of explicitness. To listen is to wait, to be suspended for as long as possible in the virtuality of the analytic relation.

The analyst hears not only what is in the words; he hears also what the words do not say. He listens with the "third ear," hearing not only what the patient speaks but also his own inner voices, what emerges from his own unconscious depths. Mahler once remarked: "The most important thing in music is not in the score." In psychoanalysis, too, what is spoken is not the most important thing. It appears to us more important to recognize what speech conceals and what silence reveals. (Reik 1949, 125-6)

We may see Reik's notion of psychoanalytic listening a kind of irresponsible responsiveness. It is irresponsible precisely because of its refusal of manifest meaning, its deliberate deafness to whatever appeal there may be for a response. Instead it relies upon intuition and attentiveness to make out its interpretations, which are protected from scrutiny, challenge and demur, immunised against the violence of being an interpretation, by being held in suspension. One enthusiastic explicator of Reik's ideas suggests that this kind of listening operates in a space of 'primal intersubjectivity, a dark dreamlife of interacting fantasies' (Arnold 2006, 760). The fantasy here is the voluptuous one of the eavesdropper, the one who installs themselves as the unheard hearer, the invisible addressee who alone can make sense of what is being said. What the eavesdropper hears with such handrubbing relish is the deafness of the speaker, and the power that such a fantasy of deafness gives. The cult of intuitive listening allows the fantasy of power and the power of fantasy to hide in plain sight.

Reik's notion of the 'third ear' is derived from a remark of Nietzsche's, made in the course of a rant about music and race in *Beyond Good and Evil*: 'What torture German books are for anyone with a third ear! How reluctantly he stands by the slowly revolving quagmire of toneless tones and rhythms without dance that the Germans call a "book" ' (Nietzsche 2002, 138). As we might expect, there is little that is passive in Nietzsche's idea of listening, despite its focus on the 'subtle and patient ear' [*feines geduldiges Ohr*] (Nietzsche 2002, 138). The third ear, which is attentive to the musical movement of writing as well as its meaning, is in fact the double of the subtle, self-overhearing mastery of the writer. Nietzsche compares two writers, one who appears numbly tone-deaf, the other whose hearing has a scimitar-like precision and decisiveness:

the one whose words drip down with coldness and hesitation, as if from the roof of a damp cave (he counts on their dull sound and resonance) and another who handles his language like a supple rapier and, from his fingers to his toes, feels the dangerous joy of the quivering, over-sharpened sword that wants to bite, sizzle, cut. — (Nietzsche 2002, 139)

Nietzsche mocks modern Germans who are unable to read as though out loud. They 'do not read for the ear but only with the eye, keeping their ears in a drawer in the meantime' (Nietzsche 2002, 139), in contrast to the ancients, who read 'aloud to themselves, and moreover in a loud voice' (Nietzsche 2002, 139) [*sich selbst etwas vor, und zwar mit lauter Stimme*]. Nietzsche characteristically sees healthy virility in this ancient appreciation of rhetoric, which was as physiological as it is psychological and 'depended in part on the astonishing development and subtle requirements of the ear and larynx, and also, in part, on the strength, endurance, and power of the ancient lung' (Nietzsche 2002, 140). The only German writers who do not suffer from this auditory asthma, but are possessed of the third

ear, are preachers, since only they ‘knew the weight of a word or syllable, the extent to which a sentence stumbled, sprang, rang, ran, or ran away. They were the only ones with a conscience in their ears [*Gewissen in seinen Ohren*], which was often enough an evil conscience’ (Nietzsche 2002, 140). Everything else in German writing is ‘merely “literature” – something that had not grown in Germany and for that reason did not grow and is not growing into German hearts like the Bible did’ (Nietzsche 2002, 140). Nietzsche’s virile self-listening may seem a long way from Reik’s intimate inhabitation of intersubjective space; but the concept of the third ear that links them depends upon the deafening of those who are subjected to the operations of listening, while themselves being reduced to the emitters of sound that they cannot themselves properly hear.

Don Ihde sees listening as a process that allows things to come into their being. And yet Ihde also recognises that ‘the phenomena do not just “speak out” themselves – they “speak to” a question addressed them [sic]’ (Ihde 2007, 219). He is quickly at pains to make it clear that this questioning is one that ‘opens one to the emergence of the phenomena “from themselves” (Ihde 2007, 219), but perhaps he has already let too much slip. ‘For the human listener there is a multiplicity of senses in which *there is word in the wind*’, he says (Ihde 2007, 4). This is because

all sounds are in a broad sense “voices,” the voices of things, of others, of the gods, and of myself. In this broad sense one may speak of the voices of significant sound as the “voices of language.” At least this broad sense may be suggestive in contrast to those philosophies and forms of thought that seek to reduce sounds to bare sounds or to mere acoustic tokens of an abstract listening that fails to hear the otherness revealed by voice. A phenomenology of sound and voice moves in the opposite direction, toward full significance, toward a listening to the voiced character of the sounds of the World. (Ihde 2007, 147)

All this letting be sounds very hospitable, but there is a kind of force that is exercised through it. For it is not at all self-evident that raising significant sound to the condition of ‘voice’ is an entirely innocent or harmless procedure. It may not be the worst kind of violence we do, but there is certainly a kind of violence in construing sound as voice.

The chapter called ‘Listening’ in Ihde’s *Listening and Voice* centres on the experience of listening to music. The more we listen to music, says Ihde, the more we begin to notice everything that complicates and obstructs the realisation of ‘music presence’ (Ihde 2007, 222). Listening involves the places of a sound against a background of silence. Indeed, though Ihde does not say this, if ‘silence is the primordial ground of music’ (Ihde 2007, 223), then music, considered not as that to which we listen most intently, but that which our intensest listening institutes as a particular kind of object, music therefore as the apotheosis of the ‘to-be-listened-to’, may be the name for whatever seems or screams to be heard against this primordial background of silence. As usual with phenomenological arguments of this kind, it is hard to understand what can possibly be ‘primordial’ about this immensely tangled, overlaid and in every way ‘late’ way of conceiving things, and how we could possibly know, but let us let that particular sleeping dog snore on. This background or horizon of silence enjoined by listening to music, or listening to something as music, which in our time has come to constitute music itself, is identical for Ihde with the notion that music appears to come out of nowhere: ‘In the musical world as perhaps in no other it is possible to create



something from nothing' (Ihde 2007, 223). The musical world is one in which sound is suspended over an abyss of absolute silence.

Ihde makes no distinction between the composer, performer and listener, who all play the music in corresponding ways. One may at any point cease to play, or cease to listen, for example by lifting the arm of a record-player (Ihde 2007, 223). It may seem as though such a claim as it applies to the listener rather than the performer is dependent upon a world in which recording and playback technologies allow us to start up and stop our listening at will. Actually, though, it sounds as though Ihde sees listening as already itself a kind of recording and playback mechanism, that the record-player is the imaginary machine that governs the action of listening. Listening is always, it seems, a kind of playing:

In the musical world as perhaps in no other it is possible to create something from nothing.

Even the listener in the case of the recorded piece has the possibility of rejecting the music by lifting up the arm of the player. In this act lies the power to make a particular strain of sound stop. But higher in the scale of creation lies the sheer potentiality of silence. Through the creation of music humans can manipulate the mysteries of being and becoming, of actuality and potentiality, and through the vehicle of music they can legislate the schedule of a phenomenon's passage from its total being to its absolute annihilation. In the tones of music the 'matter' of sound waxes and wanes at the player's discretion. And when it passes there is no residue. (Ihde 2007, 223)

It is this all-or-nothing that represents the violence or sadism of listening. Eddie Izzard has a wonderful [routine](#) in which he dramatises the mildness of Anglicanism by imagining going to tea with a vicar who, in a variant of Monty Python's Spanish Inquisition, offers his puzzled parishioner a choice between 'Cake or Death'. For Ihde, listening allows, or perhaps just straightforwardly is, the fantasy of sound or silence, the fantasy of a sound that is either full and self-creating, or entirely off. Listening is what allows one to pull the switch on sound. In the last words he ever wrote for the theatre, Beckett has V, the sadistic choreographer of extorted speech in *What Where* pull the plug on this on/off absolutism: 'Make sense who may. I switch off' (Beckett 1986: 476).

I hope I have drawn some attention to the ways in which the activity of listening is intensely active, and often demandingly and deformingly so. But however active and questioning it may be shown to be, active listening need not be sadistic, as it must at least sometimes be if I am to earn my title. Sadism involves the taking of gratification from the spectacle of suffering. Indeed, spectacle seems to be bound up with sadism, since being reduced to a spectacle is suffering itself.

Nowhere is the sadism of listening more in evidence than in the relations of performance, and never more intensely than in the complex relations brought about by laughter. The performer who becomes addicted to applause and approbation is really addicted to the fantasy of being able to determine how they will be listened to. The comedian is addicted to the periodic laughter that is the proof that they have the audience's ear – and a joke is a machine for ensuring total listening compliance on the part of an audience, or performing at least the fantasy of it.

But these relations are always liable to go wrong, and most especially in the conditions of exposure that come about when a performer is suddenly subject to laughter, that catches them up in a sadomasochistic circuit, in which they seem helplessly compelled to laugh at their own helplessness. Laughter is deadly serious. As Nicholas Ridout reminds us in his discussion of involuntary laughter, to force someone to lose their composure is to corpse them. This usage has undergone an interesting move. Originally, to corpse meant to dry, or forget your lines – the idea being that you were somehow stuck in your place. *The Graphic* explained in 1886 that ‘an actor who forgets his words is said to “stick” or be “corpsed” ’ (G.L.A. 1886). But the word quickly became transitive, since the effect of forgetting your lines is also to make stiffs of the rest of the cast. So you corpse someone by making them helpless with laughter (which, of course, on stage, you are not permitted to release, which only makes the need for release more intense). When you corpse, or are corpsed, you do not dry, you dissolve or collapse. Nicholas Ridout tells us that:

corpsing might be considered, momentarily, as though it were, like stage fright, a symptom of the specific conditions in which the actor finds himself on the modern stage.. Like stage fright, corpsing occurs on occasions when the self is operating with particular self-consciousness as the agent of a discourse of discipline or control.. . In corpsing the score and the audience are woven together in the same disciplinary structure, with the additional devastating twist of the insistent voice that forbids laughter thereby making its outbreak all the more inevitable. (Ridout 2006, 142)

But in this kind of helpless infarct of laughter there is also, of course, in Ridout’s phrase, ‘an infection of the corpse’ (Ridout 2006, 143). This accords with the strange logic to be found in Bergson’s account of laughter, whereby laughter deploys death on the side of life. To reduce your fellow-actor to giggles is to reduce them to the condition of a corpse. But to fail to make an audience laugh is yourself ‘to die’.

One of the most well-known instances of recent corpsing in Britain was the collapse into giggles of the BBC news announcer Charlotte Green, when she was reading a piece regarding the earliest recording of the human voice

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kKBWsy5A2bA>

These were her words:

American historians have discovered what they think is the earliest recording of the human voice, made on a device which scratched sound waves on to paper blackened by smoke. It was made in 1860, seventeen years before Thomas Edison first demonstrated the gramophone, and featured an excerpt from a French song, ‘Au Clair de la Lune’. The award-winning screen writer Abby Mann, has died at the age of 80. He won an Academy award in 1961 for *Judgement at Nuremberg*. Abby – excuse me, sorry – Abby Mann also won several Emmys, including one in 1973 for a film which featured a police detective called Kojak, the character on whom a long-running TV series was eventually based.

The recording in question was retrieved from a patent application for a device called the phonautograph, deposited by a typesetter and inventor Édouard-Léon Scott de Martinville in the late 1850s. The device was intended to make visual traces of sound, rather than to play it back, but audio historians at Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory in Berkeley had

managed to convert the visual traces into sound. The recording broadcast on BBC was almost certainly mistakenly smurfed, that is, played at twice the speed it should have been. It seems to have been the remark, made during the playing of the recording, that it sounded like a bee trapped in a jar, that set Charlotte Green off. Oddly enough, one of the other phonautograms that had been decoded was later discovered to be 'La Chanson de l'Abeille' from the comic opera *La Reine Topaze*. I wonder whether there would have been anything to laugh at if there had not been a potential parody of Charlotte Green's deep, yet crystalline voice in the voice played. The resurrected voice corpses the divine Charlotte, by providing a kind of defaced image of it. In impeccably Bergsonian wise, the *élan vital* seems to break through in protest against this. But it does so precisely through an infection of corpse, reducing Green's rich sonority to a series of puppet-like squeaks and gasps, that seem like a parody of the voice that has seemed like a parody of hers. And this shuddering, spreading, imperious corpse of laughter is, as always, hungry to assimilate everything. The immediately following news item that Charlotte Green has to read out is about as bad as it could possibly be, for it concerns, not the rebirth of a voice, but a death. The hilarity seems to be fed from the appalling terror and temptation of infecting even the solemnity of the mass death of the Holocaust, written about by a Jewish screen writer, with infantile giggles. All of this becomes more hilarious, and more appalling, and then therefore more hilarious, *usw*, for the fact this it is being listened to by millions of listeners. The fact that most of these listeners found the crack-up charming rather than offensive may be a collective defence or revolt against the imperium of the ear that is also a triumphant assertion of its powers and imperious pleasures.

The example of the helpless exposure involved in laughter both brings my argument to a triumphantly clinching conclusion and may set the whole thing by the ears. As Miss Whiplash of Croydon remarked to me about this paper, while applying the iodine, 'you say "sadistic" as though you thought it was a bad thing.' That irresistible desire to be and not be corpsed by the laughter that is both commanded and countermanded by the condition of being listened-to, is it not the tender-excruciating 'touch of death' that Cleopatra sees as 'like a lover's pinch, which hurts but is desired' (*Antony and Cleopatra* 5.2)? I would have more interest in getting to the bottom of this than I do, did I not suspect that it hath no bottom.

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