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Listening

Hearing is a physiological phenomenon; *listening* is a psychological act. It is possible to describe the physical conditions of hearing (its mechanisms) by recourse to acoustics and to the physiology of the ear; but listening cannot be defined only by its object or, one might say, by its goal. Along the scale of living beings (the ancient naturalists' *scala viventium*), and throughout human history, listening's object, considered in its most general type, varies or has varied. Therefore, simplifying to the extreme, we shall propose three types of listening.

According to the first, a living being orients its hearing (the exercise of its physiological faculty of hearing) to certain *indices*; on this level, nothing distinguishes animal from man: the wolf listens for a (possible) noise of its prey, the hare for a (possible) noise of its hunter, the child and the lover for the approaching footsteps which might be the mother's or the beloved's. This first listening might be called an *alert*. The second is a *deciphering*; what the ear tries to intercept are certain *signs*. Here, no doubt, begins the human: I listen the way I read, i.e., according to certain codes. Finally, the third listening, whose approach is entirely modern (which does not mean

it supplants the other two), does not aim at—or await—certain determined, classified signs: not what is said or emitted, but who speaks, who emits: such listening is supposed to develop in an inter-subjective space where “I am listening” also means “listen to me”; what it seizes upon—in order to transform and restore to the endless interplay of transference—is a general “signifying” no longer conceivable without the determination of the unconscious.

I

There is no sense which humanity does not share with the animal world. Still, it is quite apparent that phylogenetic development and, within human history itself, technological development have modified (and will modify further) the hierarchy of the five senses. Anthropologists report that a living being's nutritive behavior is linked to touch, taste, smell, and affective behavior to touch, smell, sight; hearing seems essentially linked to evaluation of the spatio-temporal situation (to which humanity adds sight, animals smell). Based on hearing, listening (from an anthropological viewpoint) is the very sense of space and of time, by the perception of degrees of remoteness and of regular returns of phonic stimulus. For the mammal, its territory is marked out by odors and sounds; for the human being—and this is a phenomenon often underestimated—the appropriation of space is also a matter of sound: domestic space, that of the house, the apartment—the approximate equivalent of animal territory—is a space of familiar, *recognized* noises whose ensemble forms a kind of household symphony: differentiated slamming of doors, raised voices, kitchen noises, gurgle of pipes, murmurs from outdoors: Kafka has described very precisely (is not literature an incomparable storehouse of

knowledge?) this domiciliary symphony in his journal: "I am sitting in my room, i.e., the noise headquarters of the whole apartment; I hear all the doors slamming, etc."; and we know the anguish of the hospitalized child who no longer hears the familiar noises of the maternal refuge. It is against the auditive background that *listening* occurs, as if it were the exercise of a function of *intelligence*, i.e., of selection. If the auditive background invades the whole of phonic space (if the ambient noise is too loud), then selection or intelligence of space is no longer possible, listening is injured; the ecological phenomenon which is today called pollution—and which is becoming a black myth of our technological civilization—is precisely the intolerable corruption of human space, insofar as humanity needs to *recognize itself* in that space: pollution damages the senses by which the living being, from animal to man, recognizes its territory, its habitat: sight, smell, hearing. And indeed there is an audio-pollution which everyone, from hippie to pensioner, feels (through certain myths of nature) is deleterious to the living being's very intelligence, which is, *stricto sensu*, its power of communicating effectively with its *Umwelt*: pollution prevents listening.

It is doubtless by this notion of territory (or of appropriated, familiar, domestic space) that we can best grasp the function of listening, insofar as territory can be essentially defined as the space of security (and as such, as space to be defended): listening is that preliminary attention which permits intercepting whatever might disturb the territorial system; it is a mode of defense against surprise; its object (what it is oriented toward) is menace or, conversely, need; the raw material of listening is the index, because it either reveals danger or promises the satisfaction of need. From this double function, defensive and predatory, there remain, in civilized listening, certain traces: think of all those horror films which rely on our listening for the alien, on our bewildered expectation of the

irregular noise which will disturb our aural comfort, the security of the house: at this stage, listening has as its essential partner the unaccustomed, i.e., danger or windfall; and conversely, when listening is oriented toward assuaging fantasy, it immediately becomes hallucinated: I believe I am really hearing what I would like to hear as a promise of pleasure.

Morphologically, on the species level, the ear seems made for this capture of the fleeting index: it is motionless, fixed, poised like that of an animal on the alert; like a funnel leading to the interior, it receives the greatest possible number of impressions and channels them toward a supervisory center of selection and decision; the folds and detours of its shell seem eager to multiply the individual's contact with the world yet to reduce this very multiplicity by submitting it to a filtering trajectory; for it is essential—and this is the role of such initial listening—that what was confused and undifferentiated become distinct and pertinent—that all nature assume the special form of danger or prey; listening is the very operation of this metamorphosis.

2

Long before writing was invented, even before parietal figuration was practiced, something was produced which may fundamentally distinguish man from animal: the intentional reproduction of a rhythm: there have been found on cave walls of the Mousterian epoch certain rhythmic incisions—and everything suggests that these first rhythmic representations coincide with the appearance of the first human habitations. Of course, we *know* nothing about the birth of phonic rhythm; but it would be logical to speculate (let us not reject the delirium of origins) that to produce a rhythm (incisions or beats) and to build a house are contemporary activities: human-

ity's operational characteristic is an extensively repeated rhythmic percussion, as is attested by broken-stone "choppers" and hammered polyhedral "balls": by rhythm, the pre-anthropoc creature enters the humanity of the Australanthropes.

By rhythm, too, listening ceases to be a purely supervisory activity and becomes creation. Without rhythm, no language is possible: the sign is based on an oscillation, that of the *marked* and the *non-marked*, which we call a paradigm. The best legend which accounts for the birth of language is the Freudian story of the child who mimes his mother's absence and presence as a game during which he throws away and pulls back a spool attached to a thread: he thereby creates the first symbolic game, but he also creates rhythm. Let us imagine this child listening for noises which can tell him of the mother's desired return: he is in the first stage of listening, that of indices; but when he stops directly supervising the appearance of the index and begins miming its regular return himself, he is making the awaited index into a sign: he shifts to the second stage of listening, which is that of meaning: what is listened for is no longer the *possible* (the prey, the threat, or the object of desire which occurs without warning), it is the *secret*: that which, concealed in reality, can reach human consciousness only through a code, which serves simultaneously to encipher and to decipher that reality.

Listening is henceforth linked (in a thousand varied, indirect forms) to a hermeneutics: to listen is to adopt an attitude of decoding what is obscure, blurred, or mute, in order to make available to consciousness the "underside" of meaning (what is experienced, postulated, intentionalized as hidden). The communication implied by this second listening is religious: it *ligatures* the listening subject to the hidden world of the gods, who, as everyone knows, speak a language of which only a few enigmatic fragments reach men, though it is vital—cruelly enough—for them to understand this language.

To *listen* is the evangelical verb par excellence: listening to the divine word is what faith amounts to, for it is by such listening that man is linked to God: Luther's Reformation was largely made in the name of listening: the Protestant church is exclusively a site of listening, and the Counter-Reformation itself, in order not to be left behind, placed the pulpit in the center of the church (in Jesuit buildings) and made the faithful into "listeners" (to a discourse which itself revives the old rhetoric as an art of "forcing" listening).

By a single impulse, this second listening is religious *and* deciphering: it intentionalizes at once the sacred and the secret (to listen in order to decipher history, society, the body, is *still*, under various lay alibis, a religious attitude). What is it that listening, then, seeks to decipher? Essentially, it would appear, two things: the future (insofar as it belongs to the gods) or transgression (insofar as transgression is engendered by God's gaze).

By her noises, Nature shudders with meaning: at least this is how, according to Hegel, the ancient Greeks listened to her. The oaks of Dodona, by the murmur of their boughs, uttered prophecies, and in other civilizations as well (derived more directly from ethnography) noises have been the immediate raw materials of a divination, cledonomanancy: to listen is, in an institutional manner, to try to find out what is happening (it is impossible to note all the traces of this archaic finality in our secular existence).

But, also, listening is *taking soundings*. As soon as religion is internalized, what is plumbed by listening is intimacy, the heart's secret: Sin. A history and a phenomenology of interiority (which we perhaps lack) should here join a history and a phenomenology of listening. For at the very heart of a civilization of Sin (our Judeo-Christian civilization, different from civilizations of Shame), interiority has developed steadily. What the first Christians listen to are still exterior voices, those of

demons or angels; it is only gradually that the object of listening is internalized to the point of becoming pure conscience. For centuries, all that was required of the guilty person, whose penitence involved the acknowledgment of his sins, was only that he make public confession: private listening by a priest was regarded as an abuse and was roundly condemned by bishops. Auricular confession, from mouth to ear, in the secrecy of the confessional, did not exist in the Patristic age; it was born (around the seventh century) from the excesses of public confession and from the advances of individualist conscience: "for a public sin, public confession; for a private sin, private confession": limited listening, walled in and virtually clandestine ("one to one"), has thus constituted a "progress" (in the modern sense of the word), since it has assured the protection of the individual—of his rights to be an individual—against group control; private listening to sin has thus developed (at least originally) in the margins of the ecclesiastical institution: among the monks, successors of the martyrs, or among heretics like the Cathars, or even in less institutionalized religions like Buddhism, where private listening, "brother to brother," is practiced regularly.

Thus formed by the very history of the Christian religion, listening brings two subjects into relation; even when it is a crowd (a political assembly, for example) which must put itself in a listening situation, this is in order to receive a message from only one person, who seeks to make the singularity (the emphasis) of this message heard. The injunction to listen is the total interpellation of one subject by another: it places above everything else the quasi-physical contact of these subjects (by voice and ear): it creates transference: "*listen to me*" means *touch me, know that I exist*; in Jakobson's terminology, "*listen to me*" is a phatic expression, an operator of individual communication; the archetypal instrument of modern listening, the telephone, collects the two partners into an ideal (and

under certain circumstances, an intolerable) inter-subjectivity, because this instrument has abolished all senses except that of hearing: the order of listening which any telephonic communication inaugurates invites the Other to collect his whole body in his voice and announces that I am collecting all of myself in my ear. Just as the first listening transforms noise into index, this second listening metamorphoses man into a dual subject: interpellation leads to an interlocution in which the listener's silence will be as active as the locutor's speech: *listening speaks*, one might say: it is at this (either historical or structural) stage that psychoanalytic listening intervenes.

3

The unconscious, structured like a language, is the object of a special and at the same time exemplary listening: that of the psychoanalyst.

"The analyst must bend his own unconscious," Freud writes, "like a receptive organ toward the emerging unconscious of the patient, must be as the receiver of the telephone to the disc. As the receiver transmutes the electric vibrations induced by the sound waves back again into sound waves, so is the physician's unconscious mind able to reconstruct the patient's unconscious which has directed his associations, from the communications derived from it." It is, in effect, from unconscious to unconscious that psychoanalytic listening functions, from a speaking unconscious to another which is presumed to hear. What is thus spoken emanates from an unconscious knowledge transferred to another subject, whose knowledge is presumed. It is this latter subject that Freud addresses, attempting to establish something he regards as the corollary to the fundamental psychoanalytic rule imposed upon the patient: "We

must make no effort to concentrate the attention on anything in particular, but to maintain in regard to all that one hears the same measure of calm quiet attentiveness—of ‘evenly hovering’ attention as I once before described it. In this way a strain which could not be kept up for several hours daily and a danger inseparable from deliberate attentiveness are avoided. For as soon as attention is deliberately concentrated in a certain degree, one begins to select from the material before one; one point will be fixed in the mind with particular clearness and some other consequently disregarded, and in this selection one’s expectations or one’s inclinations will be followed. This is just what must not be done; if one’s expectations are followed in this selection, there is the danger of never finding anything but what is already known, and if one follows one’s inclinations, anything which is to be perceived will most certainly be falsified. It must not be forgotten that the meaning of the things one hears, at all events for the most part, is only recognizable later on. It will be seen, therefore, that the principle of evenly distributed attention is the necessary corollary to the demand on the patient to communicate everything that occurs to him without criticism or selection. If the physician behaves otherwise, he is throwing aside most of the advantage to be gained by the patient’s obedience to the ‘fundamental rule of psychoanalysis.’ For the physician the rule may be expressed thus: All conscious exertion is to be withheld from the capacity for attention, and one’s ‘unconscious memory’ is to be given full play; or to express it in terms of technique pure and simple: one has simply to listen and not to trouble to keep in mind anything in particular.”*

An ideal rule, by which it is difficult if not impossible to abide. Freud himself derogates from it. Either because of his

* Sigmund Freud, “Recommendations for Physicians on the Psychoanalytic Method of Treatment,” 1912. Translated by Joan Rivière.

concern for an aspect of theory, as in the case of Dora (seeking to prove the importance of her incestuous feelings toward her father, Freud neglects the role played by Dora's homosexual feelings for Frau K.). It was also a theoretical concern which influenced the course of the Wolf Man's treatment, when Freud's expectations were so imperious (he was eager to offer additional proofs in his argument with Jung) that all material concerning the primal scene was obtained under pressure of a limit-date he himself had set. Or else because his own unconscious representations interfered in the conduct of therapy (in the Wolf Man's treatment, Freud associates the color of a butterfly's wings with that of a woman's garment—worn by a girl he himself had been in love with at the age of seventeen).

The originality of psychoanalytic listening is to be found in that oscillating movement which links neutrality and commitment, suspension of orientation and theory: "The rigor of unconscious desire, the logic of desire, are revealed only to someone who respects both these apparently contradictory requirements, order and singularity" (S. Leclaire). This oscillation (which reminds us of the movement generating sound) engenders for the psychoanalyst something like a resonance permitting him to "cock an ear" toward the essential: the essential being not to miss (and to make the patient miss) "access to the singular and sensitive insistence of a major element of his unconscious." What is thus designated as a major element offering itself to the psychoanalyst's listening is a term, a word, a group of letters referring to body movement: a signifier.

In this hostelry of the signifier where the subject can be heard, the principal body movement is the one the voice originates from. The voice, in relation to silence, is like writing (in the graphic sense) on blank paper. Listening to the voice inaugurates the relation to the Other: the voice by which we recognize others (like writing on an envelope) indicates to us

their way of being, their joy or their pain, their condition; it bears an image of their body and, beyond, a whole psychology (as when we speak of a warm voice, a white voice, etc.). Sometimes an interlocutor's voice strikes us more than the content of his discourse, and we catch ourselves listening to the modulations and harmonics of that voice without hearing what it is saying to us. This dissociation is no doubt partly responsible for the feeling of strangeness (sometimes of antipathy) which each of us feels on hearing his own voice: reaching us after traversing the masses and cavities of our own anatomy, it affords us a distorted image of ourselves, as if we were to glimpse our profile in a three-way mirror.

"The act of hearing is not the same, depending on whether it aims at the coherence of the verbal chain . . . or accommodates itself in speech to phonic modulation, to some goal of acoustic analysis, tonal, phonetic, even of musical power."* The singing voice, that very specific space in which a tongue encounters a voice and permits those who know how to listen to it to hear what we can call its "grain"—the singing voice is not the breath but indeed that materiality of the body emerging from the throat, a site where the phonic metal hardens and takes shape.

Corporality of speech, the voice is located at the articulation of body and discourse, and it is in this interspace that listening's back-and-forth movement might be made. "To listen to someone, to hear his voice, requires on the listener's part an attention open to the interspace of body and discourse and which contracts neither at the impression of the voice nor at the expression of the discourse. What such listening offers is precisely what the speaking subject does not say: the unconscious texture which associates his body-as-site with his discourse: an active texture which reactualizes, in the subject's speech, the totality

* Jacques Lacan, *Ecrits*, 1966.

of his history" (Denis Vasse). Here is the project of psychoanalysis: to reconstruct the subject's history in his speech. From this point of view, the psychoanalyst's listening is a posture oriented toward origins, insofar as these origins are not considered as historical. The psychoanalyst, attempting to grasp the signifiers, learns to "speak" the language which is his patient's unconscious, just as the child, plunged into the bath of language, grasps the sounds, the syllables, the consonances, the words, and learns to speak. Listening is this means of trapping signifiers by which the *infans* becomes a speaking being.

To hear the language which is the other's unconscious, to help him to reconstruct his history, to lay bare his unconscious desire: the psychoanalyst's listening leads to a recognition: that of the other's desire. Listening, then, involves a risk: it cannot be constructed under the shelter of a theoretical apparatus, the analysand is not a scientific object from whom the analyst, deep in his armchair, can project himself with objectivity. The psychoanalytic relation is effected between two subjects. The recognition of the other's desire can therefore not be established in neutrality, kindness, or liberality: to recognize this desire implies that one enters it, ultimately finding oneself there. Listening will exist only on condition of accepting the risk, and if it must be set aside in order for there to be *analysis*, it is by no means with the help of a theoretical shield. The psychoanalyst cannot, like Ulysses bound to his mast, "enjoy the spectacle of the sirens without risks and without accepting its consequences . . . There was something marvelous in that song, secret, simple, and everyday, which had to be immediately recognized . . . a song from the abyss which, once heard, opened an abyss in each word and lured one to vanish into it."* The myth of Ulysses and the sirens does not tell us what a successful listening might be; we can sketch it a

* Maurice Blanchot, *Le Livre à venir*, 1959.

contrario between the reefs the navigator-psychoanalyst must avoid at all costs: plugging one's ears like the men of the crew, employing deception and giving evidence of cowardice like Ulysses, or answering the sirens' invitation and vanishing. What is thereby revealed is a listening no longer immediate but displaced, conducted in the space of another navigation, "which is that of narrative, the song no longer immediate but recounted." Narrative, a mediate, delayed construction: Freud does just this in writing up his "cases." Councilor Schreber, Dora, Little Hans, and the Wolf Man are so many narratives (someone has even alluded to "Freud the novelist"); in writing them as such (the strictly medical observations are not written in narrative form), Freud did not act by chance, but according to the very theory of the new listening: it has concerned itself with images.

In dreams, the sense of hearing is never solicited. The dream is a strictly visual phenomenon, and it is by the sense of sight that what is addressed to the ear will be perceived: a matter, one might say, of acoustic images. Thus, in the Wolf Man's dream the wolves' "ears were cocked like those of dogs when they are alert to something." The "something" toward which the wolves' ears are cocked is obviously a sound, a noise, a cry. But, beyond this "translation" the dream makes between listening and looking, links of complementarity are formed. If Little Hans is afraid of horses, it is not only that he is afraid of being bitten: "I was afraid," he says, "because the horse was making a row with his feet." The "row" (in German: *Krawall*) is not only the disordered movements which the horse, lying on the ground, makes as it kicks, but also all the noise these movements occasion. (The German term *Krawall* is translated as "tumult, riot, row"—all words associating visual and acoustic images.)