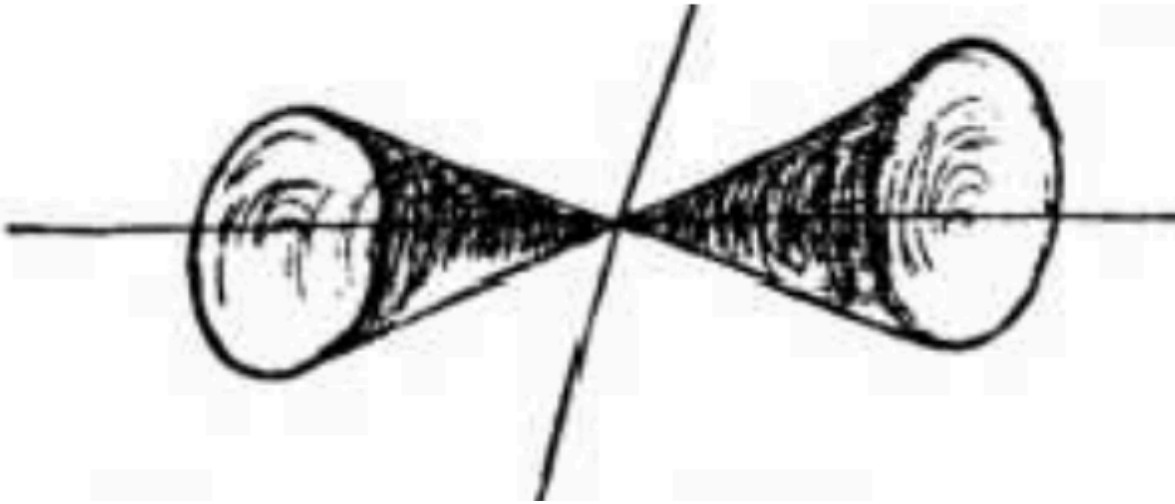




The Aural Center

Santiago Ferris

ENGL 346: Literary History

Professor Emily Vasiliauskas

SU 2722

Two outsides sit together. On one hand there is the ebbing and flowing weather of the soul, the speaking side of the bicameral mind. The gods, that unpredictably changing tide which is heard and inhabited. On the other is the listener's outsideness to their totemic self, which sits still amidst this flow, held down by gravity, only budging with "the greatest, most alpine of efforts."¹ The loneliness that remains even when fully present to oneself, a wilderness that can only be explored and made real with intention, and which we could go our entire lives without inspecting if we so pleased. This alien, inscrutable wilderness is the extent of our capacity to change ourselves. The ear, facing the first, experiences flow, while the eye, facing the second, works by breaks, always deciding, always narrating and fastening. It is easy to watch but hard to see, easy to hear but hard to listen; the eye needs a destination, the ear is itself a destination.

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Knausgaard produces an account of two outsides similar but different to mine: "The thoughts that hold together the I can be dissolved in the acts of reading and writing, though in two different ways, in the first instance by entering that which is alien and comes from without, and in the second instance by entering that which is alien and within us, which is language at our own disposal, in other words the language in which we say I."² Here, the alien inside is a language that constitutes us but which did not come from us. I think it may be the same thing as my inner alien, that which somehow experiences non-identity with everything it knows it is. The essence described by Deleuze's Proust is also an alien within, but, unlike Knausgaard, Deleuze does not hesitate to call it the true self, each subject's absolute internal difference – the inhuman

¹ Knausgaard, *My Struggle*, Book 6, 188.

² Knausgaard, 251.

essences our selves coil around, and which they are both individualized and outlived by.³ This inner alien, the soul's secret: eternal, immaterial, yet just as dead as the material.

I've noticed that many people outspokenly prefer one outside to the other. The Ongians East of Professor Vasiliauskas, closer to the windows, love and yearn for hearing, while the Western wing, our Idealists, closer to the exit, almost don't believe there is such a thing as hearing. I don't think it would be too outrageous to claim that one reason they love reading so much is that they get to do it with their eyes. They are loyal to the subject-object distinction and are staunch atheists of Ong's winged chimera – or rather, egg – of the two, the mythical spoken word. The Ongians think such a thing may have once existed, and that it's not necessarily the fact of, but the possibility of living in a postlapsarian divide that should be enough to produce in us an animating, productive and ethical nostalgia, one aimed towards “freeing ourselves of chirographic and typographic bias in our understanding of language.”⁴ Or maybe they think there is no use in crying over spilled milk, but important to know it was spilled, while the Idealists don't think milk was ever spilled in the first place, that milk exclusively exists on the carpet by a shattered glass. What they would say verbatim is “that is milk's condition of possibility.” Ironically, the Ongians raise their hand much less often and speak for shorter amounts of time than the Idealists, but the way the two groups carry themselves about outside the classroom does reflect their differing allegiances to the spoken word – as if the roles are only reversed inside the Mabie room. Maybe they consistently differ in their listening. When I compare these clans, though, I am really talking about two particular representatives, perfectly and irreconcilably opposite in opinion, gender, as well as social and literal standing.

³ Deleuze, *Proust and Signs*, pp. 43-44.

⁴ Ong, 77.

The freshmen on the Northern front, though farthest in age and space from Professor Vasiliauskas, are face-to-face with her. When the classic omitted-center arrangement of the Mabie room was collapsed into rows for thesis presentations, I noticed how much it has compelled students to place themselves exactly where they think they belong in relation to the professor. I am at the absolute tail-end of the Eastern wing, if not right outside of it. Come to think of it, I face the exit.

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The ears are two concavities pointing inwards towards the center of the head, where sound is collected, directed, and sometimes driven into, a central consciousness. The eyes are spherical, slightly pointy, left and right of center, both pointing towards a single object outside the body, forming a base which triangulates to a point before the I. Plato thought eyes worked not by accepting light, but by sending out beams. The two pairs of sense organs thus have very different relations to the outside; the ears pull a vast, three-dimensional outside, an active event-space, into the I, while the eyes pull the I into a frontal, quiescent outside, orienting consciousness forward. Ong points out that this difference in the two organs' relation to a center informed our astronomy, with oral cultures placing themselves at the "navel of the world," and textual cultures "before it," as with an atlas.⁵

Action, then, is the eye's natural state, it is always looking at something in particular, while passivity is the ear's. The eye can be subsumed into passive flow with movement, for example, by works of visual art, which gently guide the gaze with the laws of action and movement embodied in the lines and planes of the work, through film, which creates the illusion of movement, or through text, which most brusquely commands it to perform the repetitive movements demanded by the act of reading. Motion, things "going," takes place without

⁵ Ong, 73.

reference to an inside or an outside, action that is, like that of the eye itself, decentered. The visual world, then, is the recording surface of decentered action, whereas sound is the only recording surface of centered events; nothing but a sound could attest to an event that took place within a structure without exposing it.

The passive ear, on the other hand, can be called to action with the power of music, the name, or religious experience, the latter sometimes prompted by the eye's own failure to embody the voice. Fuss produces a great account of how Dickinson would wield the power of the lyric by concealing herself from her pianist and becoming an acousmètre: "Dickinson lay claim to poetic authority by transforming herself entirely into a voice. In so doing, she was enacting the most influential notion of lyric poetry of her time: John Stuart Mill's definition of the lyric as an utterance that is overheard."^{6 7} Though apt that she appeals to that last definition, Dickinson was not concealing herself with the intention of only being overheard, she was almost commanding. Overhearing a disembodied voice is one thing, but hearing a disembodied voice, meant for your ears but not your eyes, is something else. The acousmètre orients themselves into one, drives into one, but denies one the right to orient themselves towards them, to gaze into their eyes, into the cause, and turn the voice into a you. Whenever one's name is called, one immediately does everything in their power to embody the voice with the eyes, almost in a panic. At first, I considered looking at the speaker as bridling the voice and depriving it of its inherent religious power, but it could also be the other way around: looking at a speaker helps one listen – having nothing to look at simply makes it the Ear's job to attend by itself.⁸ Both are correct; watching the speaker strips their voice of its natural sublimity when it is practical and necessary for sustained, conventional communication. The acousmatic voice demands a kind of orientation

⁶ Fuss, 20.

⁷ Chion, *The Voice in Cinema*. This is just where I am borrowing the term acousmètre from.

⁸ It was Ky who reminded me that eye contact facilitates listening.

different from the eye's triangulating, particularising kind, a non-spatial, potentially unfulfillable one. What does it mean to listen closely, and is that what lyric poetry asks of the reader?

The power the acousmètre owes to their visual concealment shows that the worlds of centered and decentered activity are significantly related. Sounds escape from an internal, centered event, one which we can't ever see – even making eye contact with someone or watching the sound escape from their mouth does not constitute witnessing the speaking itself, which necessarily takes place behind a potentially visually observable wall. The eyes at least show us the thing the center of which has just privately acted. Sound, really, is always plosive, its cause always internal; even the sound of a clap is born the instant that the palms of one's hands come into contact and momentarily hide each other from the world. In other words, because centers are necessarily hidden, so is central activity. It is almost as though sound so fervently escapes from its cause precisely in order to afford it its privacy, and it is this desire to escape that we exploit with the ear. More intuitive, though, is to think of sound as desiring its own freedom from its cause. Chion uses Proust to distinguish between two different kinds of sounds, those emancipated from their cause, like “the double-tinkling —timid, oval, gilded— of the visitor's bell”, and those trapped in it, like the “large and noisy rattle which heralded and deafened [. . .] with its ferruginous, interminable, frozen sound,” the word rattle “indissolubly agglomerating sound and cause.”⁹ Contrary to Ong's association of sound with the present, sounds, unlike sights, are always encountered as belated envoys, or rather, fugitives, of an event in the past. Not necessarily messengers sent out to the world by the internal event, they are its unwitting children, ephemeral, airborne and uncontainable like fairies, who without the slightest effort or intention, but by their unmistakable essence, betray the birth and identity of their creator to everyone around.

⁹ Chion, *Sound: An Acological Treatise*, 130, citing Swann's Way.

This is a physical, prelinguistic description of sound, meant to illuminate what it is in relation to its cause, irrespective of its role in intentional communication. Voice complicates everything because it is sound as the purpose, or rather, teleological cause, of the internal physical event of speaking, not just its inevitable product. In fact, the voice is how the central consciousness attempts to tame sound, makes the communication of its central activity intentional. But don't the words we say sometimes spring from our mouths following the most outrageous thoughts without our say in the matter? Think about how little control we have over what we say and when we say it and the difference between voice and its ancestor in mere sound loses some of its importance; voice is still, in its essence, free from its speaker. Take into account, also, how tenuous the relationship is between what we say and what we mean and this freedom starts to look more like a tragic chasm for the speaker, forever grounded by gravity, in their hopes that they could borrow some freedom from these foundationally carefree, winged spirits, who will always have the last say in the terms of their fugue.

Speaking of pealing bells, in her reading of Dickinson's "I felt a Funeral, in my brain", Cameron describes Being as being "reduced to" an Ear receiving sound from a hopelessly far-up Heaven.¹⁰ We treat the ear as the less dignified of the two sensory organs, but it's doubtlessly more complex in its design than the eye, with its many outer concentric folds, inner chambers and twisting hallways, its minuscule labyrinth into which an entire space is pulled. It's no surprise the modern ear took much longer to evolve in land animals than the eye. That being said, Cameron is not giving the Ear a disservice by calling this a reduction, rather dignifying it as something that is not just a mode of perception, but a rudimentary consciousness. A different Dickinson poem, about a much less terrifying kind of hearing, elevates the Ear further:

The Spirit is the Conscious Ear -

¹⁰ Cameron, *Lyric Time*, 97.

We actually Hear

When We inspect - that's audible -

That is admitted - Here -

For other Services - as Sound -

There hangs a smaller Ear

Outside the Castle - that Contain -

The other - only - Hear - (718)

Likening the spirit to a conscious ear flips this on its head. Hearing does not need to be dignified as honorary consciousness; it has a higher claim to Being than it, consciousness its incidental quality. Dickinson also reduces seeing, “inspecting,” to another kind of hearing. All data, sensory or otherwise, has for its final destination a self which is most like the ear in function. This inner ear even supersedes the literal one as the truer ear, the outer ear living in the doghouse, hanging “Outside the Castle,” about as far from the center and exposed to the elements as an organ could be. Due to its greater externality, the outer ear affords less to its outside, sternly negotiating with, even impinging on and capturing its guests. Human ears are the fortress’ weathered line of defense. Delegated to the peripheral task of “servicing” sound – like it’s doing it a favor – this smaller organ’s function is to contain, while that of the Spirit, the Here’s, is to “only – Hear”; the singular inner ear at the comfy center alone enjoys the luxury of true hearing. “The other – only – Hear” also suggests that, from its position of central estrangement, all the Spirit hears is the Other. “When We inspect – that’s audible –” suggests

that the activity of consciousness itself is just another thing that is heard by the central ear, because it happens to make a detectable sound. Saying that consciousness is just something else that is heard establishes two degrees of separation between the conventional empirical self and the central spirit ear. The first is the already potentially surprising fact of this separation, the second is that what bridges it is sound, which, as I have discussed earlier, is a fickle bridge. Not only are we not consciousness, we are not even present with consciousness at its moment – we are only familiar with the sound it makes.¹¹ So there is a strong relationship between centrality and aurality; the bigger and more complex the structure, in other words, the greater the distance between the center and the circumference – the more spacious the amphitheatre – the more the center experiences. It is an organ whose function, placed where it can hear everything, is to admit only alterity. Centers are thus not only where sound is born, but also where it is received. Maybe even the ear is audible, and it mutters to itself, unbeknownst to itself or maybe anyone, in moments of inmost comprehension.

The more something can be said to inhabit a state of experience, the less things it might experience. One would be justified in thinking that this central ear, tucked deep inside the chambers of the castle, only hearing the news of what is happening around it, capable of nothing but experience, has few experiences. Obviously, that is its biggest problem. The usual, angsty framing of the lack of experience is that all the Self hears is the Self. “The other - only - Hear -” calls this condition out as insincere; you are not upset that you only hear yourself, you are upset that you only hear the Other. “There is a Zone whose even years” describes the possibility of an

¹¹ The Bhagavad Gita and Samkhya yoga’s view of the non-agential central self, which the empirical self (including not only the body but also consciousness and reason) wraps around, is very similar to this. In that tradition, however, this self (*purusa*) is always likened to an observer, not a listener.

encounter with the alterity already present in – or rather, which is – the everyday experience of noncoincidence.

Whether or not it is possible to close the distance to the moment of the heard events without compromising the center's ability to simply hear and not contain (without hurting it), in other words, whether or not estrangement is necessary for the subject to be capable of experience, is worth considering. But, as I said earlier, if we hear something, it is because it has already been concealed from us, because sound exploded out of the very force of its secrecy. With what right do we complain of our estrangement from the world of internal – therefore significant – events, the privacy of which has already been violated by sound? To be is to eavesdrop. The simpler, poetic answer to the condition of estrangement from the present is: thank God sound exists and is itself an event, one we perhaps do get to be present in the very moment of. One that is already worth our attention.

Say it again, Saxon!

Hush - Only to me! (333)

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Schaeffer's proposed mode of ethical listening is the divorce of sound from its cause, obviously facilitated by the acousmatic voice, a "reduced listening."¹² This is more difficult – and more possible – than simply forgetting it having a cause, perceiving sound as "virginal." The possibility of this is what the digital-analog binary suggests with its fantasy of a digital sound free from all the "rumblings, gurgles, moans, cries, and farts from which [analog] music has been

¹² Chion, 169.

produced.”¹³ To this end of listening to a sound as a “sound object,” to what it is beyond its cause, or even its effect, Chion thinks that even language gets in the way:

“Language does not particularly help us to listen in reduced listening mode, because, for a language that we understand, we carve spoken words into phonemes (which are not sonic) and not into sonic units. If our interlocutor pronounces a phrase that consists of many phonetic, semantic, and other elements that are familiar to us and does so in a context that facilitates our comprehension of them, then it is literally impossible to hear it as it is truly pronounced. We hear the text rather than the sounds.”¹⁴

We are almost incapable of describing sound without reference to its cause, or, in this case, its textual representation, because “naming sounds and characterizing them is the least of our worries and of our needs.”¹⁵ We only give them our attention so that we can ask them “who sent you?”, seldom giving thought to the pleasure that is meeting them. Of course, the language Chion is talking about is written language, with the chirographic and typographic bias that Ong argues need not be constitutive of language at large. It’s possible that oral cultures could attend to sound in this way whilst communicating, without recognizing phonemes, ceasing to listen and instead conjuring up a written word. By writing in his mother tongue as if he was translating it, Celan similarly fought against the deadening force of habit, attempting to prevent it from diverting attention from the alterity inherent in written language (“language at our own disposal”) as with sound. This kind of freedom of the voice from its cause and its effect is at work in lyric poetry at large, which can only do what it claims to do if it is granted such freedom both by its cause, the poet, and its effect, the reader.

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¹³ Chion, 104.

¹⁴ Chion, 133.

¹⁵ Chion, 169.

The world of sound represents for me such a vast and unexplored plane that I could make the essay solely about acoustics, but to end there would be fatal. This land of sonic beings is only the first wilderness from my introduction, the anthropomorphic world of centers, the news. The eyes yawn onto a dramatically larger wilderness of extremes, replete with motion, zig-zagging lightning bolts, diving birds of prey, greater distances and sublime landscapes:

The Meadows - mine -
The Mountains - mine -
All Forests - Stintless stars -
As much of noon, as I could take -
Between my finite eyes -
The Motions of the Dipping Birds - (336)

This is a more primordial, larger-than-life world, which came to exist earlier in the history of life with the evolution of photosensitivity. Compared to the sonic world, events here are almost random in their decenteredness, as with the undisciplined, bohemian particles of the Big Bang. Where sounds always come from things somewhat like us and somewhat near us, the inhuman largesse of the visual threatens our very subjectivity.

Whereas the news are greatly intersubjective, the world of the eye is greatly intrasubjective, one in which we are alone with ourselves and the world. That is, except for the moment of eye contact, one of the most intensely intersubjective experiences. When two gazes meet, not only do two attentions – two decisions – coincide in the present, they coincide on the fact of their coincidence. The longer it is held, the more this deictic power iterates on itself, and the sooner it becomes too much to bear. Knausgaard asserts that what sets us apart as a species is our ability to walk upright on two legs; something he doesn't mention is the impact of this adaptation on our faciality, and, by extension, our intersubjectivity. We are the only animals

(with the exception of owls) whose entire body, from head to toe, faces forward and is visible to another before us. It is not just our eyes that are parallel when standing face-to-face, but our torso, our limbs, and, in a state of nature, our genitals. We face forward because, unlike any other animal, our body faces the sky. The human body is a face, which makes us exceptionally present to each other as organisms. The immediacy of looking upon the Other's face assures us that, delayed as their voice is, they are still there, still listening, right now. The eye ameliorates the tragic gap between sound and its cause.

The only moment in which the eye inspects the you is when it runs into the beam of another sentry in the dark. Any other time, the eye only gazes at the self, or rather, at the surrounding electron-cloud of everything it could become. This is because it can only look at things on purpose. For some, like Knausgaard, my image is backwards, and they prefer a more narcissistic orientation in time: we are looking through the cloud of what we think we are for the alien which we really are. Knausgaard's project is a response to looking in the mirror and not recognizing the face on it; fastening the gaze means to fasten the gaze on oneself. Like reduced listening, it is severing the identity between the sense object and its cause, and dignifying the sense object as worth attending to. The cause of a sight, though, unlike with sound, rather than being an object acting on the self, is that self which chose to look at it. To look at something and try to take from it something other than what brought you to it.¹⁶

After class, Felix pointed out to me how infrequently we use "attend" instead of "pay attention." The idea that attention is a depletable resource, a costly combination of time and willpower, incentivizes one to divert the gaze under the pretense that we should save our vote for something more important, maybe something in the future. This is especially compelling if we

¹⁶ The evolution of correct posture, the seminal innovation, was the achievement of a similar ethical non-identity with the world. Perpendicularity is a geometric stable non-identity with the force of gravity.

think of the cause of the sense object, which always eludes us, as intrinsically more significant than its envoy. This also moves us away from the ear, whose sense objects are so much farther in time from their cause than the eyes'. So we wait to live our lives. Meanwhile, not only is attending to free, we can only attend to something we already have. "To attend to" is saturated with the idea of meeting a pending demand. To attend, one must be an adult, one already housing guests they are responsible for. The person concerned with paying or not paying attention is an investor with no attachments, only ever-decreasing purchasing power, whose world is a heavily price-gauged shopping mall.

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To be human is to have a center as well as a face. I have done the latter a great disservice by sparing it so few pages. During the Gita tutorial with Professor Chandra, I spent much of my time resisting a reading of the text as a cult of the center, in which right living is only a matter of good listening, which admits to no discussable, contestable choices (like those sneakily made by the text itself). If it were the case that only the core of the structure matters, that everything peripheral is peripheral, we would be sea urchin-like animals, nothing but protected centers. As beautiful as the center is, it is not all that makes us human, or our only responsibility. The eye harbors our responsibility to ourselves, in the realm of what Knausgaard calls "sincere narcissism," not actually narcissistic, but a moral responsibility that survives in the narcissist.

"The father of the arrow is the thought: how do I expand my reach? Over this river? This lake?

That mountain?" -- Paul Klee, *Pedagogical Sketchbook*, 3.38.