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## The Shrimp-Mirror-Stitch, or Voice in Psychoanalysis

### Abstract:

The paper is an attempt at a systematic review and a tentative synthesis of the philosophically most relevant theories of voice that are to be found within the psychoanalytic tradition. Beginning with some reflections borrowed from Thomas Ogden, the author proceeds to examine two lines of thinking about voice: the ‘paternal’ line which discusses voice mostly in relation to the superego and the orientation of the self and the ‘maternal’ line which discusses voice in relation to the processes of subjective constitution. Having analyzed selected insights of such authors as Freud, Reik, Isakower and Lacan within the paternal line and Lacan, Anzieu, Rosolato, Vasse, and Abraham&Török within the maternal one, the author attempts to show the common features of many of these diverse takes, focusing especially on the processes of internalization of external voices and on the strange status of voice as both most intimate and alien to us. The closing discussion of Mladen Dolar’s theory opens the way to a synthetic view of voice as the paradoxical kernel of human subjectivity.

### Keywords:

voice, psychoanalysis, subjectivity, body, acoustic mirror

WAS NÄHT  
an dieser Stimme? Woran  
näht diese  
Stimme  
diessseits, jenseits?

Paul Celan<sup>1</sup>

In the opening pages of his fine essay devoted to “A Question of Voice in Poetry and Psychoanalysis” one of the most eminent contemporary psychoanalysts, Thomas Ogden, writes quite frankly: “By focusing on voice in this paper, I have no illusion that I am introducing something new to the analytic discourse. Analysts have been listening to the way people sound from the time that Breuer invited Freud to listen to the strange, bewildering, disturbing sounds of the female patients whom he had been attempting to treat.”<sup>2</sup> According to Ogden, this focus on “the way people sound” has strengthened radically in more recent developments of psychoanalysis (the paper was published in 1998): “psychoanalysts over the past two decades have been moving in the direction of attending as closely to the way the analysand is speaking as to what the analysand is saying.”<sup>3</sup> However, Ogden suggests that psychoanalysis – being a relatively young tradition – it should learn from people who have been listening to voices for centuries (i.e. poets, novelists and playwrights). Therefore, much of the paper is devoted to his careful readings of two poems (one by Robert Frost, one by Wallace Stevens), which result in a considerable broadening and deepening of understanding of the nature of voice.

Only having completed these readings, Ogden offers certain formulations concerning the role of voice in the analytic situation. Referring to the suggestive neologism “oversound” coined by Frost in his poem, Ogden sketches an interesting dialectic according to which the voice of the analyst and the voice of the patient together form, but also – paradoxically, but logically – are formed by the intersubjective experience of the so-called “analytic third”:

Similarly [to the experience of reading poetry, when the voice of the poet and the voice of the reader interact – A.L.], in an analytic setting, analyst and analysand together generate conditions in which each speaks with a voice arising from the unconscious conjunction of the two individuals. The voice of the analyst and the voice of the analysand under these circumstances are not the same voice, but the two voices are spoken, to a significant degree, from a common area of jointly (but asymmetrically) constructed unconscious experience. I have spoken of this intersubjective experience generated by the unconscious interplay of analyst and analysand as the “analytic third.” In a sense, the “oversound” in the voices of analyst and analysand is the sound of the voice of the analytic third “upon their voices crossed” [as Frost puts it –A.L.]. The analytic third is experienced by analyst and analysand in the context of the personality system, personal history, sensory awareness, and so on of each individual. As a result, analyst and analysand each speak with a unique voice; at the same time, each of the two voices is informed by (has an “oversound” derived from) the unconscious experience in and of the analytic third.<sup>4</sup>

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1) Celan, *Die Gedichte*, 487–88. “What stitches / on this voice? What does it / stitch on, this / voice, / this side, that side.”

2) Ogden, “A Question of Voice in Poetry and Psychoanalysis,” 428.

3) *Ibid.*, 426.

4) *Ibid.*, 444–45.

It is in the entanglement of voices within the intersubjective medium that the individual voice may emerge in its very uniqueness, now perceived not as something given, but as something that needs to be created in its originary nature: “the analysand may never have heard the sound of his/her own voice before the initial analytic meeting.”<sup>5</sup> Thus, moving beyond the analytic setting, Ogden may conclude with a few general statements about the nature of voice as such and even attempt its very definition, derived from his readings of the two poems and his reflection on the analytic situation. He writes:

Individuality of voice is not a given; it is an achievement. Uniqueness of voice might be thought of as an individual shape created in the medium of the use of language. This “shape” is one that is made not simply in the medium of language, but in the medium of the use of language: voice is an action, not a potential, more verb than noun. The individual voice is not resting dormant waiting for its moment to be heard. It exists only as an event in motion, being created in the moment. We do not know what our voice will sound like in any situation until we hear it, whether that be in what we say, in what we write, or in what we read aloud ... It is misleading to say that voice is “an expression” of the self since this suggests that there is a self “inside” that is speaking through the individual (almost as a ventriloquist speaks through a dummy), giving audible form to itself. To my mind, it is more accurate to say that voice is an experience of self coming into being in the act of speaking or writing.<sup>6</sup>

I find these formulations very accurate, but still rather general. In what follows, I shall attempt to learn more about the nature of voice by examining the very tradition that Ogden is working in. For even though he does not mention it, the psychoanalytic tradition, relatively young as it is, has quite a lot to say on this topic. Thus, if psychoanalysts can learn about voice by listening to poets, philosophers will do well by lending their ear to psychoanalysts themselves (and, of course, to poets, too). For even though the psychoanalytic approaches to voice are diverse and sometimes even opposed to each other, an attractive philosophical stance seems to emerge from this tradition of thinking, one that perceives voice as essential for the very constitution of human subjectivity.

## 1. The Shrimp, or the Paternal

Most of the early psychoanalytic reflections on voice seem to link it to the question of the superego and so, more often than not, to the paternal dimension. This line begins with Sigmund Freud himself, who inaugurated it in the third part of his seminal essay on narcissism where he introduced the idea of the ego ideal, which he was to later replace by the notion of superego. The ego ideal is defined as the image of what I would like to be like, an image invested in and supported in its very existence by part of my narcissistic libido. The agency we call conscience (which seems to be an active, judging aspect of the image itself or its “watchman”), permanently measures us against the ego ideal. Thus, it produces the feeling of both being watched and being talked to by a voice or voices, a feeling which in pathological cases may result in paranoid and hallucinatory effects. Freud is quick to identify the reason why the voice plays such a central role in the workings of conscience and in the paranoid mechanisms as well. Diverging from his usual patrocenrism – to which, however, he will keep on returning in his thinking about conscience – he points to the key role of both parents:

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5) Ibid., 445–46.

6) Ibid., 445.

For what prompted the subject to form an ego ideal, on whose behalf his conscience acts as watchman, arose from the critical influence of his parents (conveyed to him by the medium of the voice), to whom were added, as time went on, those who trained and taught him and the innumerable and indefinable host of all the other people in his environment – his fellow-men – and public opinion.<sup>7</sup>

A more complex and ambiguous vision of the role played by the voice in the constitution of the mental agencies emerges from the later treatise on “The Ego and the Id.” Here, at first at least, Freud seems to be more interested in voices and “the heard” as the source of ego itself, rather than the superego (which receives its proper name in this very text). For here are the main stations in Freud’s deduction based on his early analysis of aphasia: an idea turns preconscious “through becoming connected with the word-presentations corresponding to it,” these “word-presentations are residues of memories,” and “verbal residues are derived primarily from auditory perceptions ... word is after all the mnemonic residue of a word that has been heard,” the ego itself starts from the system of perceptions as its “nucleus” and includes the preconscious which is based on the “mnemonic residues.”<sup>8</sup> Finally, once Freud has introduced the idea of the id, the ego can be fully defined as “that part of the id which has been modified by the direct influence of the external world through the medium of the perception-consciousness” and (on the famously odd picture), appears wearing the comic “cap of hearing” (*Hörkappe*). It wears it “awry,” shifted to the left, corresponding to Freud’s knowledge of where the realm responsible for hearing is located in the brain.<sup>9</sup>

But is the ego formed only through the auditory perceptions or, rather, through all of them? The latter possibility would be suggested by the fact that just a page later the ego is famously defined as primarily “a bodily ego,” a “projection” of the whole surface of our body.<sup>10</sup> Perhaps, then, the ego is formed out of all perceptions, but only when mediated through the auditory sphere, only when connected to verbal mnemonic residues. This hypothesis seems plausible, but Freud’s text leaves us somewhat in the dark.

The next question is how the superego, conceived as the heir of the vocal conscience, that watchman of the ego ideal, fits into the whole scheme. In “The Ego and the Id” the superego is defined as a modification of the ego, which results from the primary identification with the father. Due to the Oedipal drama, the identification gets entangled in the double bind of injunctions (“You ought to be like ... your father” / “You may not be ... like your father”!)<sup>11</sup> and so, as a legacy of the Oedipus complex, the inner tribunal of the superego is formed. The impossibility of meeting the demands of the tribunal inevitably produces the terrible phenomenon of the unconscious sense of guilt. When discussing this phenomenon, Freud does point to the origin of the superego in the acoustic, but this genesis is again related to the whole ego of which the superego is only a modification. The superego being established within the Oedipal drama of identification and forbidden desires, is composed of acoustic traces that are, however, supported by the libidinal forces of the id, rather than by the force of external instruction. Freud writes:

In all these situations the super-ego displays its independence of the conscious ego and its intimate relations with the unconscious id. Having regard, now, to the importance we have ascribed

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7) Freud, “On Narcissism: An Introduction,” 96.

8) Freud, “The Ego and the Id,” 20, 21, and 23.

9) *Ibid.*, 25.

10) *Ibid.*, 26.

11) *Ibid.*, 34.

to preconscious verbal residues in the ego, the question arises whether it can be the case that the super-ego, in so far as it is unconscious, consists in such word-presentations and, if it does not, what else it consists in. Our tentative answer will be that *it is as impossible for the super-ego as for the ego to disclaim its origin from things heard*: for it is a part of the ego and remains accessible to consciousness by way of these word-presentations (concepts, abstractions). But the cathectic energy does not reach these contents of the super-ego from auditory perception (instruction or reading) but from sources in the id.<sup>12</sup>

It would be really good to know how one should relate the bodily, the acoustic, the ego and the superego within this complex conceptual universe. Perhaps the bodily ego turns into a fully-fledged and organized one only through the mediation of the superego, an agency of vocal origin, which is established due to the primary identification with the father, aporetically but crucially cut by the Oedipal prohibition (be this / do not be this). Possibly, but it is hard to tell.

However this may be, Freud's most immediate disciples and heirs followed the line which linked voice to conscience/the superego. Thus, in his essay on the "Psycho-analysis of the Unconscious Sense of Guilt," Theodor Reik focused on the "inner voice" of conscience that his son was hearing in his soul and meditated upon quite intensely for some time. Reik assimilated the boy's discoveries to Freud's then-recent theory of the superego, emphasizing its paternal and vocal origin, and thus offered no new theoretical moves. However, he did record the striking words of the boy who, when trying to define the awkward status of the inner voice, said: "It's a feeling in yourself and the voice of someone else."<sup>13</sup> Also, he offered a simple (and perhaps too simple) way to relate acoustic hallucinations to the voice of the superego: "the voices heard by paranoiacs furnish another example of just such an outward expression of the inner voice, which once actually took the form of real voices."<sup>14</sup>

More interestingly, in his famous study of the "shofar," Reik claimed to have discovered the very origins of music in general and the source of the truly uncanny power of the Jewish ritual horn in particular in the voice of the primal father murdered by his sons according to Freud's scenario from the *Totem and Taboo*. The voice is charged with the immense power derived from the sense of guilt which triggers the "belated obedience" of the sons. On this reading, the sound of the shofar would be an imitation of the paternal/divine voice, a result of identification with and introjection of the voice, parallel to the totemic meal during which the paternal flesh is being incorporated. Blowing the shofar would thus combine the moment of repeated crime and a confession of guilt. Here is the most powerful passage from Reik's wild speculation:

We now understand why the priest blows the shofar. It implies his identification with God, which he proclaims by imitating the divine voice, just as these sons of the primitive horde who murdered the father gradually indicated the father's nature and forms of expression. Just as the sons' defiance and desire were re-expressed again and again in the totem meal in which hate and love towards the totem were fused in one act, so also is the same ambivalence expressed in the compulsive imitation of the paternal voice, which has become the voice of God... . We now also understand this

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12) Ibid, 53; the emphasis is mine. Interestingly enough, in the German original it is only the super-ego that cannot deny its genesis from the heard. See Freud, "Das Ich und das Es," 319.

13) Reik, "Psycho-analysis of the Unconscious Sense of Guilt," 440. It is Darian Leader's discussion that drew my attention to Reik's paper. Leader, "Psychoanalysis and the Voice," 1.

14) Ibid., 445.

feature: the sudden resounding tone of the shofar which calls to mind the bellowing of a bull at the slaughter, and which is the voice of the totemistic father substitute, unconsciously recalls to every hearer that old outrage and awakens his hidden guilty conscience, which, in consequence of the child's repressed hostile wishes towards the father, slumbers in each individual and admonishes him to repent and improve... . In the unconscious mental life of the listeners, it represents the anxiety and the last death-struggle of the father-god – if the metaphor be not too forced, one may say, his swan-song.<sup>15</sup>

The idea of imitation and internalization of the voice linked explicitly to the notion of the superego, though this time free of the explicit reference to the paternal, returns also in the equally speculative and inspired paper by Otto Isakower titled “On the Exceptional Position of the Auditory Sphere.” Rather eccentrically, Isakower founds his argument on the phenomenon on otoliths (or statoliths), small foreign bodies deliberately incorporated by a number of animal species and used as crucial part of their system of orientation. Isakower refers to a vicious experiment in which a shrimp (of the *Palaemon* genus) was offered bits of iron-dust which the poor creature used as its statolith: exposed to the magnetic force which attracted the bit of iron within it, the shrimp acted as if the direction from which the force came was the ground or “the below.” Isakower is fascinated by the fact that the sense of orientation and equilibrium, in order to function, requires the incorporation of a piece of the external world. He also points to how in higher animals the sense of orientation is combined and situated together with the sense of hearing. Thus, he can proceed to the discussion of the role that hearing in general and the speech we hear in particular plays in organizing the ego and its relations with the world. Finally, he comes up with the idea that the superego is a “psychical organ of equilibrium” and that it is based on a linguistic statolith (i.e. on what is heard and thus incorporated through the ear). Thus, Isakower is able to tidy up the Freudian house at least a bit, even if the relation between the constitution of the ego and that of the superego still remain rather uncertain on this view:

We know that the child is not capable by itself of constructing new words, to say nothing of a language, but that he has to build up his speech from linguistic material which is presented to him ready made. But this very fact sets in motion the process of developing an observing and criticizing institution. The following formula then suggests itself: just as the nucleus of the ego is the body-ego, so the human auditory sphere, as modified in the direction of a capacity for language, is to be regarded as the nucleus of the super-ego.<sup>16</sup>

Isakower also suggests that this is, ultimately, what Freud himself must have meant by the funny *Hörkappe* that he had his ego wear awry. For, as Isakower rightly points out, when Freud reproduced his (in)famous image of human psyche in the new cycle of his introductory lecture in psychoanalysis, the “cap of hearing” was replaced by the superego.<sup>17</sup>

Finally, the connection between voice and the superego, with a rather unambiguous link to the paternal order, re-emerges in Jacques Lacan. It is rather well known that Lacan identified voice as the fifth and final form of the object *a* which, together with the gaze, he added to the traditional list of partial objects: (the oral, the anal, and the phallic). However, as it can be seen from the rightly famous and passionate section on the gaze in the

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15) Reik, *Ritual: Psycho-Analytic Studies*, 258–59.

16) Isakower, “On the Exceptional Position of the Auditory Sphere,” 345–46.

17) Freud, *New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-analysis*, 111.

seminar on the four fundamental concepts of psychoanalysis, Lacan seemed to have been more interested in the ocular than in the auditory, after all. And so, when he is to discuss the voice in his earlier seminar on *Anxiety* where the five forms of the object *a* are properly introduced, his analysis is rather vague and digressive and only sometimes hints at what is crucial. Lacan does discuss Reik and Isakower: he does make the by-then-standard connection between voice and the commands of the superego, he does repeat the idea that the voice is not so much assimilated as it is incorporated, he does link it explicitly to the “paternal function,” but most of the time he leaves it to his readers to develop his hints. In a key passage though, he seems to be revealing some of his deepest intentions. Here it is:

The simplest intrusion of the voice is what in linguistic terms is called its phatic function – which is thought to lie at the level of simply making contact, when actually something very different is involved – resonates in a void that is the void of the Other as such, properly speaking ex-nihilo. The voice responds to what is said, but it cannot answer for it. In other words, for it to respond, we must incorporate the voice as the otherness of what is said. It is precisely for this reason and no other that, detached from us, our voice appears to us with a foreign sound. It is proper to the structure of the Other to constitute a certain void, the void of its lack of guarantee. Truth comes into the world with the signifier, prior to any control. This truth is felt, it is reflected back only by echoes in the real. Now, the voice resonates in this void as a voice that is distinct from sonorities. It is not a modulated voice, but an articulated one. The voice at issue here is the voice as an imperative, a voice that demands obedience or conviction.<sup>18</sup>

For all its convoluted nature, this is a very important passage. Here, Lacan tries to put his finger on the very source of the categorically commanding status of the paternal superego. If the command is, indeed, to be categorical, it cannot be just one more internalized, articulated precept hammered into our brains by repetitive training. Rather, the commanding voice has to reach us from the place of the void, the lack in the order of signifiers, from the position of the murdered, and cut-off, but all the more effective Father. This incorporated voice is identified here as something that always transcends the level of language, as something both most ours and most foreign, and as something insistently present in its internalized absence. Only as such an elusive impossible object small *a* (an object that cannot be thematically given and that escapes the order of sign), the voice of the paternal superego can function as the abysmal, categorical fundament of that order.<sup>19</sup>

And yet it would be wrong to suggest that Lacan’s discussion of voice is limited to the paternal/superego line that runs from Freud through Reik and Isakower. Famously, in his seminar XX (*Encore*), Lacan introduced the idea of llanguage (*lalangue*), which roughly – as his translator, Bruce Fink, explains – “has to do with the acoustic level of language.”<sup>20</sup> It is by referring to this idea that Lacan wanted to distinguish his teaching from structuralism and its understanding of language, for “language is merely what scientific discourse elaborates to account for what I call llanguage.”<sup>21</sup> Ultimately, it is llanguage in its ungraspable nature which escapes all structuralist systematizations that is the element of the unconscious. And if it is correct to link the idea of llanguage to the notion of voice, then with this idea Lacan’s thinking on the vocal shifts *from the paternal to the maternal line*. For here is what we read in *Encore*: “Llanguage serves purposes that are altogether different

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18) Lacan, *Anxiety*, 275–76.

19) On the superego, voice and the object *a*, see also the brief discussion in Lacan, *On the Names-of-the-Father*, 71–72.

20) Lacan, *On Feminine Sexuality, the Limits of Love and Knowledge*, 44n.

21) *Ibid*, 138.

from that of communication. That is what the experience of the unconscious has shown us, insofar as it is made of language, which, as you know, I write with two l's to designate what each of us deals with, our so-called mother tongue (*lalangue dite maternelle*), which isn't called that by accident."<sup>22</sup> Also within this maternal line the voice is regarded as both external and internal, both foreign and intimate – as extimate – as an internalized alien element that both defines us and escapes us, or defines-us-by-escaping. This time, however, what is at stake is not so much the voice as the elusive source of order, but rather – more essentially – the voice as the elusive condition of our very existence as subjects.

## 2. The Mirror, or the Maternal

The line of psychoanalytic reflection, which links voice to the maternal rather than to the paternal, forms a sustained and internally diversified sub-tradition. It is surely not limited to the theory of the semiotic and the maternal *khora* developed by Julia Kristeva which I mention only in passing as it requires a separate discussion.<sup>23</sup> No review of this line, however, can omit the approach to voice in the work of Didier Anzieu. His reflections on this issue are embedded within the context of his theory of the skin-ego, which is a conscious development of Freud's idea of the bodily ego mentioned above. The skin-ego is the early form of the ego, which builds itself upon the experience of the actual skin. Clearly influenced by Donald Winnicott's suggestive idea of the environment-mother and his notion of holding, Anzieu shows how the early maternal care and the actual bodily contact is crucial for the development of the psychic wrapping that enables the ego to mature.

It is within the framework of this theory that Anzieu develops his notion of "the wrapping of sound."<sup>24</sup> The general idea is simple: the baby needs to be literally wrapped in the maternal voice in order to develop the feeling of trust in its own existence and begin its journey toward separate living. Thus, the "bath of sounds" in which the baby is immersed emerges here as a key element of Winnicottian "holding" and as a necessary condition for the later development of the skin-ego. What is crucial, however, is that from the very beginning this acoustic bath is co-constituted by the baby's activity and its acoustic interaction with the environment-mother: "Earlier still, the Self was formed as a wrapping of sound, through the experience of the 'bath of sounds' which accompanied breastfeeding. The bath of sounds prefigures the Skin-ego with its double surface, facing inwards and outwards, since this wrapping is made up of sounds emitted by both the baby and its environment."<sup>25</sup> But if this is so, then the wrapping is also a mirror in which the baby is constantly reassured of its existence, a mirror of sound that precedes the visual one which, according to Winnicott's famous revision of Lacan, the baby finds in the face of the mother.<sup>26</sup> Here is Anzieu's most elegant summary of his idea of the mirror of sound:

Winnicott lists babbling among the transitional phenomena, putting it on a par with other activities of this type.<sup>27</sup> But a baby will only stimulate itself by making sounds while listening to them

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22) Ibid.

23) Kristeva, *The Kristeva Reader*, 89–136.

24) Anzieu, *The Skin-Ego*, 173–91.

25) Ibid., 184.

26) Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, 149–59.

27) Ibid., 5. The reference is to Winnicott's classical theory of transitional phenomena and transitional objects which the baby plays with in order to cope with the spatiotemporal distance that is growing between the baby and the mother: "The object is a symbol of the union of the baby and the mother... The use of an object symbolizes the union of two now separate things, baby and mother, at



if it has been prepared by an environment that has immersed it early enough in a bath of sounds of the right quality and volume. Before the gaze and smile of the mother who feeds and cares for it reflect back to the child an image of itself that it can perceive visually and internalize in order to reinforce its Self and begin to develop its Ego, the bath of melody (the mother's voice, the songs she sings, the music she lets it hear) offers it a first mirror of sound, which it exploits first by cries – which the mother's voice reacts to with soothing noises – then by gurgles, and finally by playing with phonemic articulation.<sup>28</sup>

The suggestive idea of the mirror of sound or the acoustic mirror appears also in Guy Rosolato's paper titled "The Voice: Between Body and Language." Rosolato's version of the mirror is much less interesting than the one offered by Anzieu – by "acoustic mirror" he means only that we constantly hear ourselves<sup>29</sup> – and in general there is a lot of mess in his essay, but it also contains a number of exciting insights expressed in a highly condensed form. Rosolato points out that "the voice is the body's most powerful emanation"<sup>30</sup> and that at a very early stage the baby becomes aware of this power which it exerts in narcissistic excitation of its otherwise rather powerless body. However, this outward movement of the vocal emanation of power is balanced by the centripetal movement of internalization of the maternal voice, which is crucial for development and the establishment of the self. The child begins to exert its own voice on the model of the maternal one, thus practicing "an introjection of the 'nutritive' voice."<sup>31</sup> Such an introjection, however, is possible only if the child is surrounded by an hospitable maternal-vocal environment. This leads Rosolato to an elegant speculation on the origin of music, which is radically opposed to the paternal speculation offered by Reik on the same topic:

If the maternal voice contributes to creating an agreeable milieu for the child, one which surrounds, sustains and cushions him, it can also – in the case of a massive refusal – become a purely aggressive and piercing penetration against which the child is unable to deploy the slightest defense. It could be claimed that the maternal voice is the primary model of auditory pleasure and that music has its roots and its nostalgia in an original atmosphere – which could be referred to as sound matrix, a murmuring house – or *music of the spheres*.<sup>32</sup>

It should be noted that when compared to Anzieu's "bath," this model seems to lack the crucial moment of a child's own verbal activity as co-responsible for the creation of the wrapping in the act of echo-mirroring. In Rosolato, the child does imitate and introject the comforting murmurs of the maternal house and thus builds its body-self, but it does not seem to contribute to the building of the house as such. Moreover, it is rather unclear how we are to relate the voice of narcissistic omnipotence to the one that results from imitation of the maternal murmur. Is the latter just a result of a counter-narcissistic trimming, transformation of the former? Perhaps. These weaknesses aside, in one respect Rosolato's model is more attractive than the one offered by Anzieu. For whereas Anzieu, following the benign Winnicottian tradition, plays down the moments of loss, cut, and separation in human constitution, Rosolato points to the crucial role these moments play in

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the point in time and space of the initiation of their state of separateness." Ibid., 130.

28) Anzieu, *The Skin-Ego*, 186.

29) Rosolato, "The Voice: Between Body and Language," 109.

30) Ibid., 108.

31) Ibid., 110.

32) Ibid.

proper understanding of the nature of voice. Immediately after the longer passage quoted above he writes: “But this genesis [of music – A.L.] should not be oversimplified. The reviviscence of *the* voice always supposes a divergence, an irreversible path as far as the lost object is concerned.”<sup>33</sup> Here, then, the maternal rather than the paternal voice figures as the Lacanian object *a* which emerges from the original separation, and as something that is constituted retroactively as cut off and lost, with the paternal voice acting (according to the standard Oedipal scenario) as the agent of the cut. The recognition of the cut and the subsequent understanding of the difference between the child’s and the mother’s voice opens us to the relative independence, but also to the pleasures of music that are conditioned by the separation. For here is Rosolato one last time: “Harmonic and polyphonic deployment can be heard as a succession of tensions and releases, of unison and of divergence between the different parts which are layered and opposed in their chord, only subsequently resolving themselves in their simplest unity. Harmony thus bears the full dramatization of the separation and the reunion of bodies.”<sup>34</sup>

Both Anzieu’s and Rosolato’s approaches to the maternal voice are discussed in Kaja Silverman’s influential book titled *The Acoustic Mirror*. Silverman perceives them as representatives of a sexist fantasy of the maternal voice as an element of an impersonal passivity which surrounds the child with its envelopes and needs to be cut by the paternal word. According to Silverman, in Anzieu and Rosolato the fantasy takes on its idyllic and soothing form. Its complimentary daemonic version is represented in Silverman’s argument by the film theorist Michel Chion, who writes in his book on the voice in cinema: “In the beginning, in the uterine darkness, was the voice, the Mother’s voice... . We can imagine the voice of the Mother weaving around the child a network of connections it’s tempting to call *umbilical net*. A rather horrifying expression to be sure, in its evocation of spiders – and in fact, this original vocal connection will remain ambivalent.”<sup>35</sup>

Silverman directs her criticism mostly (and rightly) against Chion and is much more merciful to Rosolato (from whom she borrows the very title of her book), not only because of his soothing vision of the “murmuring house,” but also because she does appreciate his crucial acknowledgement of separation between the mother and the child. Ironically, she misses the fact that it is Anzieu’s understanding of the acoustic mirror rather than Rosolato’s that is closer to her own. Moreover, she does not recognize the interaction between the baby and the mother in the constitution of Anzieu’s bath (and thus the activity of both the child and the mother). Most valuably, though, Silverman develops her version of the maternal acoustic mirror as crucial for a child’s development: “the mother’s voice initially functions as the acoustic mirror in which the child discovers its identity and voice [and] ‘finds’ its ‘own’ voice by introjecting the mother’s voice.”<sup>36</sup> Moreover, the mirror is here understood along the lines of the mother’s role not so much as a passive, impersonal, undifferentiated milieu (idyllic or daemonic), but as an active figure of differentiation, naming and narrating: “Hers is the voice ... that first charts space, delimits objects, explains and defines the external world... . It must not be forgotten that the maternal voice is also what first ruptures plenitude and introduces difference ... the voice which first charts out and names the world for the infant subject, and which itself provides the first axis of Otherness.”<sup>37</sup>

In order to support this idea, Silverman refers to Denis Vasse and his book *L’ombilic et la voix*, for whom the maternal voice is “constantly reopening the opening which the imaginary object tends to fill.”<sup>38</sup> Incidentally,

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33) Ibid. The emphasis is Rosolato’s own.

34) Ibid.

35) Chion, *The Voice in Cinema*, 61.

36) Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror*, 81.

37) Ibid., 76 and 86.

38) Ibid, 86. The quote is from Vasse, *L’ombilic et la voix*, 13–14.

it is from Vasse that Michel Chion borrows the association between the umbilical chord and the maternal voice, an association which in Chion's argument results in his speculation on the daemonic "umbilical net" that was the object of Silverman's criticism. Vasse's own understanding of the connection seems to be much more dialectical and interesting. Indeed, though quoted approvingly by Chion, Vasse's argument is, indeed, much closer to Silverman's. For him, not only is the maternal voice capable of permanent re-openings, but also does the voice in general operate as communication within the open gap between separated bodies. The closing of the umbilicus is paralleled by the opening of the screaming mouth. Thus, the voice is both a replacement for and the opposite of the umbilical chord:

The voice is inscribed in the umbilical rupture, ... the definitive rupture from another body... . From then on, bodily contact with the mother becomes mediated by the voice... . The umbilicus means closure, the voice is subversion of closure. Whether it names or calls, the voice traverses closure without breaking it in the process. On the contrary, the voice *signifies* closure as the place of a subject that cannot be reduced to corporeal localization... . All in a single act, it attests to the limit and escapes it.<sup>39</sup>

The idea of voice as resonating necessarily within the gap of separation leads us, finally, to one more superb speculation concerning the maternal voice and its introjection which goes still further than the authors discussed above in its acknowledgement of how voice is linked to loss. In the now-classical essay titled "Mourning *or* Melancholia" Nicolas Abraham and Maria Török introduce the distinction between the process of introjection (roughly: coming to terms with a loss) and the fantasy of incorporation (a taking in of an image of the lost object in order to neutralize the work of mourning while pretending to have completed it). Abraham and Török trace the mechanism of introjection back to its origins in the way the child comes to terms with the loss of the maternal breast. Here is the whole impressively lucid and suggestive deduction, which deserves to be quoted in full:

Without going into detail, suffice it to say that the initial stages of introjection merge in infancy when the mouth's emptiness is experienced alongside the mother's simultaneous presence. The emptiness is first experienced in the form of cries and sobs, delayed fullness, then as calling, ways of requesting presence, as language. Further experience include filling the oral void by producing sound and by exploring the empty cavity with the tongue in response to sounds perceived from the outside. Finally, the early satisfactions of the mouth, as yet filled with the maternal object, are partially and gradually replaced by the novel satisfactions of a mouth now empty of that object but filled with words pertaining to the subject. The transition from a mouth filled with the breast to a mouth filled with words occurs by virtue of the intervening experiences of the empty mouth. Learning to fill the emptiness of the mouth with the words is the initial model for introjection.<sup>40</sup>

Now, the necessary condition for this successful transition is the presence of the maternal voice. Once the transition has been accomplished, the need for the maternal presence is replaced by the need for a linguistic community. It would be a mistake, though, to suggest, that the community simply represents the maternal. Much more

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39) Vasse as quoted in Chion, *The Voice in Cinema*, 61–62. The emphasis in the original.

40) Abraham and Torok, *The Shell and the Kernel*, 127–28.

interestingly – I would say: magnificently – Abraham and Török sketch here the politics of a community of separated individuals that, in the absence of the maternal, sustain and support each other by vocal exchange. Thus, here is the second part of their grand speculation:

However, without the constant assistance of a mother endowed with language, introjection could not take place. Not unlike the permanence of Descartes's God, the mother's constancy is the guarantor of the meaning of words. Once this guarantee has been acquired, and only then, can words replace the mother's presence and also give rise to fresh introjections. The absence of objects and the empty mouth are transformed into words; at last even the experiences related to words are converted into other words. So the wants of the original oral vacancy are remedied by being turned into verbal relationships with the speaking community at large. Introjecting a desire, a pain, a situation means channeling them through language into a communion of empty mouths. This is how the literal ingestion of foods becomes introjection when viewed figuratively. The passage from food to language in the mouth presupposes the successful replacement of the object's presence with the self's cognizance of its absence. Since language acts and makes up for absence by representing, by giving figurative shape to presence, it can only be comprehended or shared in a "community of empty mouths."<sup>41</sup>

### 3. The Excluded Middle, or The Stitch of Voice

Let us look back at the path we have travelled. We have seen how psychoanalytic tradition focused first on voice in its relation to the constitution of the superego or the processes of regulating or ordering of the ego itself, mechanisms which it usually linked to the paternal position. Already within this line, from the very start, we observed a crucial reference to the processes of internalization or implantation. The focus on these processes sharpened once the paternal line of reflection on voice was replaced by the maternal one, a line which traced the dynamics of vocal holding and vocal mirroring, as well as more radically, the dynamics of the vocal work of mourning. Seen from a distance, the paternal and the maternal tunes that dominate within the two lines, respectively, become less essential. What seems to be much more important is the fact that whereas the earlier tradition perceives voice and the mechanisms of vocal implantation as processes of regulation and orientation, the later line goes further and shows the key role that voice plays in the very constitution of the separated subjectivity. Once we remember that Freud himself at least at a point tried to deduce the ego itself from what has been heard, we can, ultimately, perceive the later ("mirror") line as simply continuing and deepening the reflection of the earlier ("shrimp") line. Perceived from this angle, the fractured but single tradition of reflection points not only to the key position of voice in our being as subjects, but also to its strange status of something that is both our most own and inextricably involved in a complex process of mirroring and implantation.

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41) Ibid., 128. It has been drawn to my attention that this splendid reasoning, as well as much of my own argument, while focusing on empty and filled mouths, omits the crucial question of the ear. Responding to this keen remark, one should note that, indeed, what is at stake is not simply a transition from a mouth filled with breast to a mouth filled with words, but a transition from a mouth filled with breast to a mouth-and-ear system of hearing and responding, a system which not only implies the inter-subjective exchange, but also the intra-subjective split and co-ordination between two very different cavities. One can be a member of the community of the empty mouths, (i.e. a subject that fills his or her mouth with words, those strange entities that essentially include emptiness), only as the mournful, internally split ear-mouth-being, which receives sounds through the ear and then echoes, inflects, and responds to them, and never as the infant mouth-being that can fill itself completely with the maternal breast.

This highly paradoxical status of voice is brilliantly clarified in the influential book by Mladen Dolar. Drawing inspiration mostly from Lacan, but not necessarily following the letter of his teaching, Dolar seeks to define and characterize what he calls the object voice. The object voice is distinguished both from the signifying layer of language and from the fetishized voice as an object of aesthetic delight.<sup>42</sup> Voice as an aesthetic fetish is founded on the denial of loss, the denial of the separation, and of the castration that founds our being in language. The object voice exists only if we preserve our separation while questioning the completeness of the human world it establishes, the coherence of the symbolic order. This aspect – Dolar compares it to the invisible thread on which signs are strung<sup>43</sup> – shows itself in moments of crisis of both meaning and the beautiful appearance, in moments of rupture in the continuity and succession of meaningful or simply pretty signs.

According to Dolar, the object voice is a liminal, borderline concept in many ways. It has the peculiar status of an excluded middle, a paradoxical intersection that belongs to none of the intersecting sets. Thus, as “something spiritual” but “made of breath,” voice is a kind of intersection of language and body, and yet something that cannot be included into any of these two. Voice stitches the body and language together, and at the same time keeps them apart, because it is something intimately alien, and extimate to both.<sup>44</sup> Thus, voice appear to be the very opposite of Cartesian pineal gland, the anti-gland as such. This is only logical; we are speaking bodies precisely because our pineal gland is not the third eye which would offer us full knowledge and full power over ourselves and the world. We have a voice precisely because we are bodies, that is we are cut-off, non-sovereign, and de-centered entities. This also means that we are dependent creatures and the very nature of the voice also bears witness to this fundamental dependence. For the voice is a moment of excluded middle not only in the relation between body and language, but also in the relation between subject and Other; as both expression and echo, as both the elusive “kernel of our subjectivity” and as something that “stands at the axis of our social bonds,”<sup>45</sup> the voice marks both the moment of our ownness in the otherness and the moment of otherness in ourselves.<sup>46</sup> Thus, voice is also both natural and artificial, a natural sound that does not emerge organically from our body, an “acousmatic” emission whose source can never be finally identified and revealed, and an oddest noise which we produce as so many ventriloquists: “Every emission of the voice is by its very essence *ventriloquism*. Ventriloquism pertains to voice as such, to its inherently acousmatic character.”<sup>47</sup>

It is as the strange, denaturalized beings, marked by what we could call “the stitch of voice,” that we participate in the mournful “community of empty mouths,” of the separated, de-centered creatures that sustain each other in exchange. Our true voice – the very core of what we are, which accounts for our liminal status – emerges in moments of crisis, in twists of the conversation, in reading poetry, and in the analytic setting. And yet in those very twists and breaks we may also, from time to time, in our own voice, in the voice of the other person, in the “oversound” of the exchange, catch for a moment an echo of a voice (the voice) that was lost – or, paradoxically, but more precisely – that was never really there, but which resonates only within the space of the original loss. It is this most elusive presence that makes our conversations not only mournful, but also – sometimes – marked with joy.

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42) Dolar, *Voice and Nothing More*, 4, 30–31.

43) *Ibid.*, 23.

44) *Ibid.*, 60, 73.

45) *Ibid.*, 14.

46) *Ibid.*, 103.

47) *Ibid.*, 70. The emphasis is Dolar’s own. On the acousmatic voice see Michel Chion, *The Voice in Cinema*, 17–29.

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