

Read aloud at 4am

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Rising from the dead of night

Half-human, staring back from the mirror, amphibian-eyed, a splice in the rhythm of day following night following day following night. Muttering a dream-language: a remnant of the half-human's other half. The witching hour is past; this is the bewitching hour, four o'clock, when no-one in their right mind is fully conscious.

Times have their own logic, a chrono-logy. Radio or newspaper over breakfast, the second coffee switches on synapses for Spinoza perhaps. Or perhaps not. (Heidegger at high noon, and Nietzsche at night....) Do we read *Riffs* with a mid-morning roll or over a third coffee? Email over lunch, reports and writing in the afternoon; novels in the evening and poetry before sleep? Who Tweets (about former beauty queens) at 4am...?

Reasonings are in time and of time and – at best – out of time. Ancient customs of chants and scriptural readings attest to these rhythms, including the unsleeping vigilance of the Early Church's all-night *nocturns*, part of the canonical hours. Is there a gloaming significance in the chanting and singing of this breviary, the traditions of Jewish scriptural recitation, the muezzin's calls and the night-time *isha* prayer, or the Orthodox *Horologion*? The emerging day and its ratiocination is coaxed through the voice; thoughts becoming song.

The moment of waking comes as a surprise, a jolt. The morning finds Gregor Samsa transformed into an insect in Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*, just as Kovalyov discovers before breakfast his alarming facial castration in Gogol's *The Nose*. The miraculous accident of the self must be repeated each day, pieced together and performed anew from memory. Perhaps this is why most suicides occur between midnight and six, a supposition underlying Robert Ashley's *That Morning Thing* (1967-8) after three women friends independently took their own lives.¹ Interviewed before its West Coast premiere at Mills College in 1969, Ashley draws out his idea:

“... The image of the title is that time of the day, er, I think metaphysically, when you're supposed to go through a great crisis, just before dawn. ... You tend to die, like, at that time of day, four o'clock in the morning.... The idea is that one sort of rebuilds himself every morning, right, you become yourself again, and this involves not only rebuilding in a physical sense, getting up and going through all the physical changes, but also, like, rebuilding your personality. For me, I assume, I don't know about other

¹ These dark hours of the night have recently been confirmed as the most likely hours for suicides by researchers. See <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/study-pinpoints-when-people-are-most-likely-to-commit-suicide/>, accessed 14 Dec 2016.

people, it involves talking to myself a lot.... The 'Morning Thing' is that ritual you go through, trying to decide whether you're going to live or die that day, right.... Taking the metaphor a little bit further, er, the 'Morning Thing' is that body you have to cope with in the morning. You know, you have to shave the hair off its face, brush its teeth...."²

It speaks – Robert Ashley's That Morning Thing

The performance opens with 'Frogs', one of four scenes which, with a final 'episode', comprise the piece. As the theatre darkens to black-out, a rhythmical chorus of frog sounds drifts out, recordings we will learn are taken from the 1957 Smithsonian Folkways release, *Sounds of North American Frogs*. Their calls produce a soundscape, a neutral drone, with a high and a low pitch band, punctuated by grunts and cries, supported by the comforting charm of herpetologist Charles M. Bogert's expert narration.³ We will be told that Ashley used this collection in his first listed composition;⁴ its subtitle – 'The Biological Significance of Voice in Frogs' – points towards mating calls and 'warning' or aggressive vocal displays. The voice can be a deterrent, just as it can be a lure.

As the nocturnal swamp blue-green lights fade in, a ritual dance takes shape.⁵ Eight women in white shift dresses and round black glasses step forward and take up positions in pairs marking out a symmetrical grid, their hands open-palmed. At the back of the stage, five men are seated; a spotlight frames the middle – the 'Speaker' – who stands, suited (in contrast to the others), and begins his half-hour 'illustrated tract', its many-claused cadences in a-metrical polyphony to Bogert and the frogs:

"I intended to convey one simple idea; namely, that language, at least the American language, and in particular, the spoken and written language – joining these two, perhaps separable, kinds of language together – could, it seems, become obsolete, could be replaced in the mechanics of our daily life by other forms of communication, not more primitive, or more essential, but, in fact, more complex – communicating matters and ideas that are derived *from* language, and that in some, if not all, instances are not only derived from but concern themselves *with*, the decay of the spoken language"...

² Interview by Charles Amarkhanian with Robert Ashley. See http://ia600804.us.archive.org/3/items/TA_1969_12_06/TA_1969_12_06_ed.mp3, c.6'45" – 11'28".

³ See <http://www.folkways.si.edu/sounds-of-north-american-frogs/science-nature/album/smithsonian> for details, and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fYp6NhwIkjU> for an online recording, both accessed 14 Dec 2016.

⁴ Ashley used it for George Manupelli's film *The Image in Time*, one of the very first 'tape music' soundtracks in film history – see James, Richard S. 'ONCE: Microcosm of the 1960s Musical and Multimedia Avant-Garde' in *American Music* 5/4 (Winter 1987), pp.359-390.

⁵ My description comes from the video documentation of the 'opera' re-produced in November 2011 by Performing Artservices Inc at The Kitchen, New York, for Performa 11, the biennial of 'visual arts performance'. The production was curated by Mark Beasley, and directed by Fast Forward. See <https://vimeo.com/39447038>, accessed 20 December 2016. Further details of the production are available on the blog, <http://thatmorningthing.blogspot.co.uk> accessed 20 December 2016.

At this point, the other four males stand and begin calling numbers from one to five – their amplified voices filtered to a drawn out and blurted frog-like “w-^^-n” – which act as instructions choreographing the females’ movements for much of the remaining speech. The melodious reading of the Speaker continues uninterrupted:

“...much as, in the popularization of a basically clinical notion, the person who stutters or falters in his speech not only reveals his anxieties about himself, but, in fact, creates conditions in which new anxieties are brought into existence, projecting them upon his environment; in effect, forces which cause that environment to take forms that seem to exclude the speaker, forms that cannot but substantiate the speaker’s preconceptions; and that these newer modes of communication will be, paradoxically, more brutal and more dangerous precisely *because* they will have derived from situations in which the instinctive resort to the language of rationalization has been thwarted.”⁶

As the women meet en face in pairs, and as their palms touch, they turn their heads toward us, ‘blinking’: their glasses lighting up and flashing.



‘Image credit: Mimi Johnson 2011’.

⁶ The full text of *The Speaker* was published for the first time in Ashley, Robert, *Outside of Time: Ideas about Music*, Köln: Musiktexte, 2009, pp.440-51. It’s tempting to see in this ‘argument with frogs’ an echo of Aristophanes’ famous play on Dionysus’ comic journey to the Underworld in search of a deceased Athenian tragedian worthy of the tribulations at hand: whilst making the crossing, ferried by Charon, the frogs chorus provokes Dionysus to argument.

This tract – this voiced argument – concerns the vocal tract, the filtering of language by the body into meaningful sound, drawn out into a kind of song, a variety of tract.⁷ The exposition presents us not (only) with the *idea* of the sense-of-the-voice, but with the sense of the voice itself. It is to be understood in being read aloud.

The Speaker develops his thesis on the decaying of language – and its mortal dangers – by elaborating two situations, which ‘for the sake of memorability’ he calls respectively ‘The Dime Store Misunderstanding’ and ‘The Keypuncher’s Error’.⁸ The first concerns the misleading use of language to gain an advantage over an interlocutor, as in what Ashley perceived as the growing habit of salespeople to short-change their customers whilst appearing to perform them a service. The decline of the ‘dime store’, as of everyday verbal transactions, follows the abuse of that property of spoken language that acts as an appeal to the Other, its quality as a lure. The logic of the transaction, especially the profit motive, supersedes the logic of the exchange and the inter-relation. The power of the voice to deceive is normalised, or as the Speaker says:

“I have presumed that, as in higher and more dreadful forms of cruelty, ‘The Dime Store Misunderstanding’ is a fact perpetuated by men for whom language has become obsolete, and that their residual speech, their very words, are a threat to us.”⁹

As the rational quality of speech is polluted, perhaps in the making of the American language ‘great again’, we face a growing threat from knee-jerk reactions, meaningless acts borne of frustration as the truth of words is rendered redundant. This is ‘The Keypuncher’s Error’, whose mis-holed ‘punchcard’ would make early computers malfunction. The ‘nonverbal fact’ makes speech inoperable.

“[It] seems to lack a time dimension; it has no duration. I believe that it originates in a predisposition to do physical injury to someone in the immediate area, someone almost within arm’s reach, that it is not profoundly psychological; on the contrary.... It is as though one’s arm were angry.... It communicates a passing state of being so brief and violent as to be wordless. It is, in essence, a ‘fit’...a spike of madness. It corresponds, perhaps, to the muscular movement of the frog.”¹⁰

Ah yes, the frogs, whose crepuscular ‘dance’ and chant has continued to delight and chorus us throughout the Speaker’s disquisition, in plain hearing. The image of the frogs, we are directed, comes from George Orwell, and from Ashley’s association of them with the fragility of the lifecycle, and also with “our irrevocable, necessary commitment to the use of nuclear energy”. The frogs’ precarity speaks of our own vulnerability to man’s hubris, amid the ongoing wintering of language.

⁷ In Roman Catholicism, a tract (from the Medieval Latin, tractus cantus, drawn-out song) is an anthem of Spiritual verses formerly replacing the alleluia in certain penitential and requiem Masses. The simultaneous use of the different meanings of tract in ‘Frogs’ appears deliberate.

⁸ It is typical of Ashley to endow everyday propositions with philosophical anti-gravity, lifted surreally from their ground, just as the ‘bank robbery’ in *Perfect Lives* is intended as a metaphysical conceit.

⁹ Ashley, *Outside of Time*, p.448.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.450.

Orwell's essay – on the common toad, rather than frogs specifically – reflects on their spring-time emergence. 'At this period, after his long fast, the toad has a very spiritual look...his body is shrunken, and by contrast his eyes look abnormally large. This allows one to notice, what one might not at another time, that a toad has about the most beautiful eye of any living creature. It is like gold, or more exactly it is like the golden-coloured semi-precious stone which one sometimes sees in signet rings, and which I think is called a chrysoberyl.'¹⁰ Beyond the lifecycle or the botanist's regard, Orwell's concern is for the sense of wonder, if not awe, that even the 'common' toad can inspire, at no cost to its beholder. The 'miracle' of spring transfigures the abode of his 'decaying slum', and seems more urgent or pressing, more real than the graven images of everyday political life and more incredible than the latest technology.

'I think that by retaining one's childhood love of such things as trees, fishes, butterflies and ... toads, one makes a peaceful and decent future a little more probable, and that by preaching the doctrine that nothing is to be admired except steel and concrete, one merely makes it a little surer that human beings will have no outlet for their surplus energy except in hatred and leader worship.'¹¹

It sings my song – the hetero-hetero-affection of the voice

That Morning Thing invites us to marvel at the frogs, to remove the frog in our throats, and to hear ourselves sing before we croak. Against the rational oration of the Speaker, figuring out his anxiety at the withering of language, the over-reliance on a faith in verbal precision and its efficiency of communication, Ashley sets the humble amphibian vocalising and its capacity to surprise us, to disarm us and arouse our curiosity.

Reading aloud, or hearing the sing-song of our voice, might usher us anew into a dawning realisation that our self-difference – our inability to secure ourselves as self-same – need not be disturbing or alienating. On the threshold of waking, feeling half-human, there is a breath-taking moment of corporal virtuosity as that morning thing, staring back at us, touches us through the living marvel of its vocal tract.¹² A survivor of night's mystery, we might begin to appreciate – in song – this miracle of the self: a singer neither conjuring us from within nor affecting us from without; rather, a singing without precedent, a self as frog,

¹⁰ First published in *Tribune*, 12 April 1946; reproduced online at <https://www.theorwellprize.co.uk/the-orwell-prize/orwell/essays-and-other-works/some-thoughts-on-the-common-toad/>, accessed 20 December 2016.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² This echoes Brandon LaBelle's proposition: "Might the voice be thought to more as a tension – a tensed link, a flexed respiration, and equally, a struggle to constitute the body, rather than a disembodied sound? Not so much an object, but rather a primary production of a body? A body trying to be a subject?" See Brandon LaBelle, *Lexicon of the Mouth: Poetics and Politics of Voice and the Oral Imaginary*, New York: Bloomsbury, 2014, p.5.

perhaps, without need of a princess's blessing.¹³

We might also think of the frogs' song as a tract in the manner of Ashley's second piece (after the soundtrack for Manupelli's film): *Tract* (1958-9), for voice and orchestra.¹⁴ A curiosity amongst his work, he borrowed from the progressive jazz of the time the idea that a pitch can have a harmonic aura or logic of its own independent of its relation to linear progression, the harmonic field that it might imply. Presaging electronic techniques by focusing on the sound's colour, its unique timbre, and – with wind instruments especially – their capacity to be transformed by embouchure, the shape of the mouth, lips, and musculature of the larynx, its four-line polyphony toys with the possibilities *within* as well as *between* harmonies and their call for resolution. The logic of the line, its coherent progression in 'sentences', contains another logic: of the phoneme and the utterance through the vocal passage, the becoming-voice.

After further realisations of problems inherent to language, to rational understanding and its 'opposite' in nonverbal acts – with 'Purposeful Lady Slow Afternoon' (and its infamous distanced account of *fellatio*) and the inquisition of the Director of the show by the eight women in 'Four Ways' – *That Morning Thing* ends with 'She Was A Visitor'.¹⁵ Now, the house lights come up whilst the women performers position themselves on the staired isles within the audience. As the Speaker intones the words of the episode's title, bringing out its drone-like qualities through insistent repetition, they whisper in turn its phonetic components, inviting the audience to join in, enjoying the taste of the sound in its emanation through its passage from lungs to tongue: sh-ee oo-a-z a v-i-z-i-t-er.¹⁶ In a kind of inversion of the opening, we the audience have become a frog chorus, bringing enchantment to language through vocalisation.

¹³ In her auscultation of the experience of Wonder as the primary affect of Joy in Spinoza, and readings of his and Descartes' philosophy by the neuroscientist Antonio Damasio alongside Derrida and Deleuze, Catherine Malabou traces a similar path of self-relation from one of auto-affection – the self represented to itself, in particular through the 'inner' voice – to hetero-affection – the self as Other to itself, being touched as if from 'outside' – to a hetero-hetero-affection, as in the feeling of the voiced body, an astonishing event of the self. See Part I of Adrian Johnston and Catherine Malabou, *Self and Emotional Life: Philosophy, Psychoanalysis, and Neuroscience*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2013.

¹⁴ The piece was re-worked in 1992 for Tom Buckner, who recorded it with pre-recorded electronic orchestra: New World Records, 1995

¹⁵ Both 'Purposeful Lady' and 'She Was A Visitor' were recorded independently of the opera; both were key works in establishing Ashley's reputation from the early '70s before his seminal TV operas from *Perfect Lives* onwards.

¹⁶ For the production at The Kitchen, the audience were given a sheet with the phonemes spelt out within the programme. This and other materials are available to download via <http://www.robertashley.org/productions/2011-thatmorningthing.htm>, accessed 20 December 2016.

Epilogue: Pre-dawn chorus

Can we be amazed by the production and sounds of our own voices? As dawn breaks, perhaps the sense of our voices can call us into being, resisting any 'spike of madness' from the failure of language to fulfil its promise. Returning from the underworld (or under-duvet) of sleep, we might learn from the Orpheus legend that – as John Hamilton has suggested – 'a confrontation with death [is] the condition of the possibility of song.'¹⁷ More than this, perhaps: we can add that the voice may be the vessel that can transform an experience of death and transport us into wonder.

Given Ashley's reputation as one of *the* artists of the spoken and sung voice, *Tract* has one further notable peculiarity: the singer's part is wordless. Yet just as the use of frog sounds in his first work was inspired by Orwell's writing, so *Tract* also has a hidden text. Ashley had considered using poetry by Wallace Stevens, the great American Modernist, but decided against it. All his subsequent works would be made from his own lyrics. As dawn breaks, let us borrow from Stevens and feel the force of these words forming through our first breaths of day:

The sun was rising at six,
No longer a battered panache above the snow...
It would have been outside.

It was not from the vast ventriloquism
Of sleep's faded papier-mâché...
The sun was coming from outside.

That scrawny-cry – it was
A chorister whose c preceded the choir.
It was part of the colossal sun,

Surrounded by its choral rings,
Still far away. It was like
A new knowledge of reality.¹⁸

¹⁷ Tracing the coupling of torture and music through Greek and Roman texts, Hamilton suggests that the idea of music may have emerged to civilise the encounter with pain, that it arises from an experience of 'coming into contact with lifelessness'. See John T. Hamilton, 'Torture as an Instrument of Music', in *Thresholds of Listening: Sound, Technics, Space*, edited by Sander van Maas, New York: Fordham University Press, 2015; p.150.

¹⁸ From Wallace Stevens, 'Not Ideas About The Thing / But The Thing Itself' in *The Collected poems*, New York: Alfred Knopf, 1971, p.534.

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