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Gimme Some Tongue (On Recovering Speech)

Joshua Gunn

It is sometimes said that Herbert A. Wichelns' 1925 essay, "The Literary Criticism of Oratory," helped to advance an important rationale for the discipline of speech communication. In that essay Wichelns distinguishes the criticism of oratory from literary criticism, but what is sometimes forgotten is the reasoning behind such a distinction: although Wichelns admits that oratory "is no longer the chief means of communicating ideas to the masses," there is nevertheless "no likelihood that face to face persuasion will cease to be a principal mode of exerting influence."¹ The "here-and-now personal presence" of orality, to borrow Walter Ong's phrase, is featured throughout the essay as the unique purchase of the new discipline.²

A closely related and widely read touchstone text is Carroll C. Arnold's "Oral Rhetoric, Rhetoric, and Literature," which extends parts of Wichelns' argument but updates and abandons others. Although Arnold opposes treating oratory as literature, like Wichelns he grounds the study of speech in the intimacy and contingency of interpersonal encounter.³ Arnold's primary disagreement with Wichelns seems to be that even nonsensical speech can be moving because "orality . . . is itself meaningful."⁴ Perhaps what is most interesting about Arnold's argument is the apocalyptic tone in which he characterizes the persuasive dimensions of the interpersonal speech situation by repeatedly stressing that the spoken word always entails "risk" and "danger."⁵ The instability of interpersonal encounter in speaking situations is, of course, obvious to almost every student in a public speaking classroom. But what is the cause of speaking anxiety, and what is the source of speech's danger? Arnold answers somewhat obliquely: the terms "'speaking,' 'spoke' or 'speech' can, and often do, function for us as terms stipulating something more subtle than an acoustic transmission."⁶ This subtle "something more" of speech, this voice beyond word that is linked but not reducible to "here-and-now personal presence," danger, contingency, and risk, is what we might term the "something more in speech than speech." I submit that our field embraced speech as a substance term for over fifty years because of this something more.

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Conceptually speaking, one might argue that the risk and danger Arnold locates in speech is an illusion rooted in Western modes of thought. For example, some readers may be tempted to take a Derridian turn by celebrating the abandonment of speech as an outmoded vestige of “logocentrism” and the dreaded metaphysics of presence.⁷ From this vantage, Arnold’s discussion of speech and danger would suggest that this something more of speech is the narcissistic core of a delusional autonomy, an illusion of self-transparency that Derrida has shown can lead to discrimination and harm.⁸ However, Arnold’s constant recourse to the dialogical risk of speech situations, to the fact a speaker must “stare his failure in the eye” when he or she misspeaks, implies that the specificity of this something more in speech may not be *of* Self but *from* the Other.

The implicit something more of Arnold’s concept of speech is an ambivalent voice, or in Kenneth Burke’s terms, a voice that betokens both the recognition of identification and the rejection of division.⁹ How might we reckon with this ambivalent voice? A psychoanalytic approach to human speech suggests at least a tentative answer, and this answer begins by admitting the necessity of some modicum of auto-affection and self-consciousness rooted in the sound of the human voice. Hearing oneself speak—or as an infant, hearing oneself cry—“can be seen as an elementary formula of narcissism that is needed to produce a minimal form of self.”¹⁰ This something more in speech than speech cannot be understood as coming from one’s Self, but must be from *beyond* the Self, the province of the Other. One can easily identify the primary encounter with the Other as an infant’s encounter with its primary caregiver, and, not coincidentally, the primary vehicle of that encounter—at least to the degree such an encounter is consciously that—is usually the mother’s voice.

Whence, then, the danger of the something more of speech if this something more is originally associated with the person loved most unconditionally by the infant? The answer has something to do with the Self side of speech: human infants are born helpless and require the stranger Other to interpret the meaning of their cries. Because the infant who cries does not signify, the Other is responsible for assigning meaning; the voice of the Other is consequently a sign of dependence and helplessness as much as it is a portent of comfort. Furthermore, the mother’s voice is not always loving and, worse, her voice is sometimes painfully absent. The ambivalence of the mother’s voice is compounded by the infant’s identification with its own voice as “bad” as well: it cries out for food but the breast does not miraculously appear, and soon its own cry becomes associated with the horrors of hunger. The babe’s speech can become estranged and foreign to itself, just like the surprising stranger-voice that emits from our own mouths in moments of trauma or orgasmic release.¹¹ What is most uncanny about Self speech is that we can be startled by the “stranger” within it, by something more in our own speech than our speech.

The uncontrollable and threatening voice of the Other, be it of one’s god or one’s mother, is thus not simply a speech or voice object but also a voice *abject*: meaningful speech that does not signify, glossolalia, “the voice beyond logos, the lawless voice.”¹² That the voice abject is lawless gets at the underside of the risk that Arnold discusses

as the hallmark of speech. Some speech risks the violation of norms, as in the sublime oratory discussed by (pseudo-) Longinus, or in an address that violates generic constraints, or in screaming at a rock concert in that transgressive, underwear-throwing ecstasy of self-abandon.

The analogy drawn between involuntary speech or glossolalia and speech as our (now deceased) disciplinary love object points to an anxiety that is rarely addressed: the possibility of possession, the possibility that a stranger voice might come from one's own mouth. Perhaps speech has been abandoned as a substance term and/or object because it is ambivalent, because of this risk and danger that Arnold insists is inherent to it? Perhaps we have abandoned speech, not because it betokens the illusion of presence, not because it promotes auto-affection, but because it threatens to undermine precisely those things? Perhaps we have abandoned speech because, understood as an ambivalent thing both infantile and mature, speech as such forever denies that we are always in control and all grown up?

We should lament the abandonment of speech from our department nameplates, if only because our founders better understood the primacy of speech and the centrality of the human voice to public culture and daily life. Contrary to the singularity of voice in Derrida's critique of presentism, psychoanalysis posits "a different metaphysical history of voice," where at least one meaningful element of human speech "is considered dangerous, threatening, and possibly ruinous."¹³ This (conceptual) history concerns the voice abject that finds its origin in the speech of the Other, and while not necessarily consciously so, this something more in speech than speech is an elusive, fetishized, seemingly magical, and dangerous element that Wichelns and Arnold referenced as part of the grounding substance of our studies. Understanding the voice abject as the stranger element of orality, at least part of the appeal of speech as a concept for disciplinary coherence is infantile (but in a non-judgmental, psychoanalytic sense), which partly explains the strength and endurance of our past emotional attachment to the object. We love our speech, but we fear it too. The case can still be made that the disciplinary embrace of speech participated in the illusion of self-presence, but there is also this alien voice, this element that speaks through us, this reminder of our fallibility, dependence, and limits, that informed the disciplinary rationales of our forbears. Although the magic of the interpersonal speech encounter seems to have found a new life in rhetorical studies in the guise of historical and contextual contingency—therein one finds a Benjaminian notion of contingent danger and possibility, where rhetoric cements what could have been otherwise—the dialogical ethic and hospitality encouraged by a confrontation with the speech of the unconscious seems to be eroding.¹⁴ A psychoanalytic reading of our early texts coupled with an attention to historical detail and intellectual contextualization can help to renew and recover a more robust understanding of the object of speech.

If it is the case that a confrontation with the voice abject tempers the arrogance of self-transparency and autonomy, should we worry, then, that the abandonment of speech as the central object has caused us to lose sight of an ethic of responsibility tied neither to meaning nor to law, but to the acoustic bond of interpersonal

encounter, a bond that forces risk and tempts danger? “Over the years,” argues Frank E. X. Dance, “there has been an erosion of the understanding and acceptance of the centrality of speech. I believe the decision [to drop speech] was a betrayal of tradition and an abandonment of our disciplinary core.”¹⁵ Speaking only for the sub-disciplinary domain of rhetorical studies, if Professor Dance is right, then we have self-importantly erred on the side of text.

Notes

- [1] Herbert A. Wichelns, “The Literary Criticism of Oratory,” in *Readings in Rhetorical Criticism*, ed. Carl R. Burghardt, 3rd ed. (State College, PA: Strata Publishing Company, 2005), 4.
- [2] Walter J. Ong, *The Presence of the Word: Some Prolegomena for Cultural and Religious History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967), 113.
- [3] Carroll C. Arnold, “Oral Rhetoric, Rhetoric, and Literature,” *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 1 (1968):191–210.
- [4] Arnold, “Oral Rhetoric,” 196.
- [5] Arnold, “Oral Rhetoric,” 196.
- [6] Arnold, “Oral Rhetoric,” 195.
- [7] Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 20.
- [8] See Richard Kearney, *Strangers, Gods and Monsters: Interpreting Otherness* (New York: Routledge, 2003), esp. 63–82.
- [9] Kenneth Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1962), 45–46.
- [10] Mladen Dolar, “The Object Voice,” in *SIC 1: Gaze and Voice as Love Objects*, ed. Renata Salecl and Slavoj Žižek (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 13.
- [11] My discussion of “good voice” and “bad voice” here draws on Steve Conner’s intriguing reading of Melanie Klein in *Dumbstruck: A Cultural History of Ventriloquism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 3–43.
- [12] Dolar, “Object Voice,” 15.
- [13] Dolar, “Object Voice,” 16.
- [14] See Walter Benjamin, “On the Concept of History,” trans. Harry Zohn, in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 4, 1938–1940*, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge: Belknap/Harvard University Press, 2003), 389–400; also Laura Sells and Joshua Gunn, *Critical Public Address*, <http://www.voxygen.net/soapbox/critpubad.htm> (accessed July 10, 2006).
- [15] Frank E. X. Dance, personal correspondence, June 14, 2006.