

STILL DIGGING

(Reflections on the Centre for Performance Research 'An Archaeology of the Voice/The Dig' Conference, Aberystwyth April 1997.)

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An archaeologist was giving a lecture on that creation myth in which the earth is a sphere carried on the back of a turtle. 'But what's the turtle standing on,' shouted a wag from the audience. 'Well, unfortunately,' answered the archaeologist, 'it's turtles all the way down!'

I suppose it's inevitable that a conference on 'An Archaeology of the Voice' should concentrate on metaphors of excavation and retrieval: digging, stripping, opening, unearthing, revealing. Equally unsurprising that there should be much talk of discovering - deep-down - that priceless artifact, one's true, essential, authentic, natural voice. And thereafter of cleaning the hidden treasure, conserving it, restoring it, displaying it. But since excavation is a work of destruction - one layer is destroyed as we dig down to the next - we should be careful what we discard in delving for the illusionary bottom. For it is in these strata - of socialisation and acculturation, accent and affectation - that the real nature of the voice lies. This is what Roland Barthes describes as its 'grain': 'the materiality of the body speaking its mother tongue'. Which is perhaps why I found as much in the field recordings of Albanian men at a funeral - part mourners, part football crowd - as in the sublime, rehearsed polyphony of A Filetta from Corsica in Llanbadarn Church

Michael Shanks has written, 'Archaeology is about some very basic and mundane things: grubbing around in decayed garbage, recovering traces of things and processes which go largely unnoticed today - what happens to broken bits of pot, to things that get lost, abandoned buildings, rotted fences, microbial action. A creeping, mouldering underside of things'. Archaeology leads equally to thoughts of ruin, decay, putrefaction. And of aging, erosion, wearing... Which is perhaps why I found as much in the struggles of the *canu pwnc* group from Rhydwylym chanting John 1:1 - 'Why do you move from a minor third to major third in your chant?' asked the Vietnamese musicologist. 'Because we can't sing in tune', replied the aged choir - as in the practised harmonies of the equally aged Balkan 'grannies' of Bistritsa.

In contemporary parlance, archaeology is a material practice, set in the present which works on and with the traces of the past. What archaeologists do is to work with evidence in order to create something, a meaning or narrative or story which stands for the past in the present. Archaeology is the relation we maintain with the past. People experience things, appropriate them and produce a meaning for themselves. In this sense, archaeology is something that each of us routinely does: this we could call 'the archaeological imagination'. And there is increasingly a feeling that archaeology should include a defamiliarising of what is taken as given, revealing the equivocality of things and experiences: an attitude critical and suspicious of orthodoxy; an approach which embraces the impossibility of any final account of things; a poetics of the past; a practice sensual, subjective and phenomenological - making sense of

things that were never certain or sure in the first place. Which is why I found nothing in the presentations on the development of vocal technique in English theatre and much in Roberta Carreri's autobiographical account/demonstration of her years at Odin Teatret, half-remembered, part-fictionalised, always embodied.

But what are the points of contact between archaeology and the voice? Three interlocking notions come to mind: the voice in the past, the voice of the past and the voice as past.

Whatever its motives, archaeology does work with the traces of human actions. Yet the human voice is that most ephemeral of traces. We cannot know what the voice was in prehistory but at least we can be assured that it was used. Body remains - like the Neolithic 'iceman' trapped in a glacier - have larynxes and ear-drums: people wailed in the throes of battle-field deaths and sang on the wagon loaded with corn. We cannot hear the past but it was not a silent place.

There are what we might term 'sound houses', architectures specially built for the voice and its extension - or ostension - Greek theatres, for instance. We know the experience of standing and speaking at one of these sites as if in the past and thinking it must have been something like this, realising that vocal delivery must have required articulation, projection, clarity. But we must beware! Professor Terry Hawkes has famously suggested that Shakespeare's plays were constituted in an oral not a literate society - only 10% of the population could read - and that when face to face communication was the commonest form of communication then people spoke more quickly, heard more acutely and revelled in the intricacies of verbal metaphor more readily. Which is why no Shakespearean play should last more than two hours and why the new Globe Theatre can never be as if in the past.

There are also those places where the voices of the past seem to reverberate. But again we should be careful. The mediaeval cathedral was a busy place; our hushed tones might not be an echo of its essential sacredness! And the mediaeval forest, far from being a silent wilderness, was alive with the sounds of hunting, felling and scavaging. But there are sites, such as the Neolithic tomb at Tinkinswood, where sets of sonic conditions remain; where we might speculate on past employments and engagements of the voice by going there and trying ourselves, engaging the architecture, using our contemporary voices as a kind of 'experimental archaeology of phenomena'.

The voices of the past do reach us, in fragments: distant voices still echo. Occasionally we discover an artifact which chills and thrills us by the absences it suggests: the recordings of opera singer Adalena Patti, of the last castrato, of the bedevilled blues of Robert Johnson. And the panoply of ancient techniques are still preserved through oral transmission in the voices of practitioners who carry traditions, though these are never static.

Most strikingly we might regard the voice as past, as the location not of our true and essential spirit but as the very artifact of our constructed identity. Strictly speaking, the voice - except

perhaps in moments of true exhilaration or anguish - is always speaking of the past, expressing that thought, that emotion, I had a split second ago. And if it expresses my experience to you, then it is my experience as my story, my history. But beyond this we might pursue several further and perhaps interchangeable metaphors.

First, we might consider the voice as itself an artifact, manufactured through social practice. Its utterance is its raw material but as with a stone tool it is worked by hammering, splitting, trimming, polishing; as with a pot it is thrown, glazed, decorated, embellished, fired; as with a metal axe it is smelted, cast, moulded, alloyed. The processes of its fabrication are social, cultural, personal, artistic. It attains the deep patina of usage. Yet it is susceptible to wear: corrosion, mutation, decay...Michael Shanks again, 'The life of the artifact is accompanied by physical changes and processes, an artifact wears in its use and consumption. Marks upon it attest to events it has witnessed, things that have happened to it. It can deteriorate. The artifact ages.' The voice too displays analogous changes and the marks of time and experience. Mainly we get on with things, in a state of familiarity. But when things change without us sanctioning change, we take notice...when things happen - rusting, shattering, disappearing... And these non-reversible changes - connected to time - give us the true sense of our mortality: they are the signs of the human conditions of aging and the journey towards death. There are too marks of origin, individuality, experience. And scars of usage, misuse, over-usage.

It was long the practice to clean artifacts, to destroy the patina, the same impulse which causes us to strip pine furniture, to get rid of regional accents! But now the unrestored artifact is held to have equal resonance, its current state a reflection of its life-history. And it is revealed to be heterogeneous, an infinity of possible attributes and measurements. Which ones are made and held to constitute its identity depend upon the purposes of the researcher. It is not just one thing: it is polysemic, it has a plurality of meanings. It may be classified and associated with other objects it resembles, with activities in which it is employed, with classes of people who make use of, with past events in which it was implicated. Its significance is arbitrary and slippery. What then attracts us to a particular object - to a particular voice - may be what Walter Benjamin called its *aura* - the sense of associations and evocations which cluster around it : correspondences and interrelations.

A second metaphor is that of vocal technique as constituting a kind of prehistory of the speaking voice. Anthropologist Ruth Finnegan laments the fact that her discipline ignores everything besides the denotative and grammatical properties of words and their flat articulation, the voiced equivalents of written forms. And as Dennis Potter famously said, 'The trouble with words is that you never know whose mouth they have been in.' Tempo, volume, dynamics, pitch, stress, emphasis, timbre, intonation, weighting, rhythm, rhyme, accent, pauses, silence go under-considered, as ephemeral, impenetrable and enigmatic as the traces of prehistory in the face of history.

Semiotician Keir Elam calls this paralanguage: the vocalic features with which the speaker

endows vocalese over and above its phonemic and syntactic structure - pitch, loudness, tempo, timbre and the non-verbal - and which supply essential information regarding the state, intentions and attitudes of the speaker. And this itself may be stratigraphical in nature including 'the voice set' depending upon physiological features, gender, age, build; 'voice qualities' such as pitch, range, lip control, glottis control, tempo, resonance; 'vocalisations' - the actual sound emitted - divided into 'vocal characterisers' (laughing, crying, giggling, shouting) 'vocal qualifiers' (intensity, pitch) and 'vocal segregates' (clicks, uh-huhs). All of which are learned, acquired and culture specific. He further suggests that the rules of declamation are in fact controls on punctuation, ways of controlling the discourse. How these vary and are put to use in performance is the ancient object of the performer's art.

A third metaphor is that of the voice as a digging implement. Phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty suggests, 'People can speak to us only in a language which we already understand, each word in a difficult text awakens in us thoughts which were ours beforehand, but these meanings sometimes combine to form new thoughts which recasts them all, and we are transported to the heart of the matter, we find the source. A common property of meaning. We possess ready-made meanings.' It's as if the voice - in speech, chant, song - can excavate meaning, emotion, reaction in the other. It's rarely separate from those being sung to or about. But why do some voices work in this way and not others? And why do some, so strange and foreign, evoke emotion in us?

A fourth metaphor is that of the voice as palimpsest. Technically, a palimpsest is a piece of writing-material or manuscript on which the original writing has been effaced to make room for other writing. Contemporary archaeologists have taken this to describe the phenomenon of the site or artifact which exists not only then and now but all points in between, used, abused, written over. And that is its true nature : it is not some time-capsule bequeathed to us from a specific point in the past. And thus with the voice we might show the heterogeneity, the multi-temporality of what was imagined consistent with itself, a combination of genealogy and inheritance, accent and regional identity, pedagogy and received pronunciation. The voice as autobiography.

And so my thoughts inevitably wandered to those voices that reverberate for me: to my neighbour Bernard who was hit by a Cardiff tram and who didn't speak for fifty years. When his voice suddenly returned he was already deaf, with no notion of appropriate volume or intonation. So he talked incessantly, in the house, in the street, in the middle of the night; to my disabled colleague Dave Levett, whose fractured rhythms and swooping articulations - on the breath, against the breath - demand our attention, demand that we listen and interpret. And to Dave Edwards (Datblygu), Owain Wright (Rhenallt H. Rowlands) and Ann Matthews (Ectogram), the cracked voices of Welsh rock. All in some way broken, dissonant, unauthentic and ineffably human.