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Microphonaime

Abstract

At the core of Creative Writing is the concept of voice. Far from being easily elucidated, this concept becomes even more problematic when a creative work is performed, foregrounding as it does in the performance, the speaker's accent. Whether this accent is deemed 'regional', 'foreign', or purely 'idiosyncratic', it embodies the grain of the voice. This paper seeks to define the nature of the accent with respect to the voice by utilising Lacan's concept of the split between the eye and the gaze as expounded in *Seminar XI*, speculating that the invocatory drive which partakes of the aural field summons more archaic material than the scopic field does. By dint of the creative artefact, this paper exposes psychoanalysis' complicity with the conventions it aims to subvert, and situates the speaking subject in an anti-conventional discourse the listener is compelled to encounter.

Biographical note:

Dr Dominique Hecq is Associate Professor at Swinburne University of Technology where she is Research and Discipline Leader in Writing. She has a PhD in literature and a background in French and Germanic languages, with qualifications in translating. She has published in the areas of literary studies, translation, creative writing, psychoanalysis, and pedagogy. She is the author of eleven major works of creative writing. *Out of Bounds* (Re.press) is her most recent collection and *Stretchmarks of Sun* is due out later this year. *The Creativity Market: Creative Writing in the 21st Century* has recently been released by Multilingual Matters.

Keywords

creative writing – voice – accent – affect

For Michael Plastow

In the beginning every word was a neologism—J. L. Borges

Madame Doggerelle, Creative Head of the Dog Town School of Poethics wants me to deconstruct my barbaric yap in the interest of curiosity, a word, she says, with its roots in the etymological matrix of caring and curing and originary sorrow

I oblige for *gynetricks*'s sake¹

It is a foreign word, *accent*, a French word²

Familiar. Foreign. *Unheimlich*³

Queer pronunciation, rhythms, style

An accent is an abject erotics of utterance

It is the double axe inside my throat—
an absence and a manner of speaking
a homage to loss and a pastiche of fracture recomposed

My accent is an untranslatable hiccup—
the ironic conjunction of two languages
the lyrical disjunction between two tongues

I speak it. Don't write it

I become it in your ear

Through some extimate seduction, I become
a vain *coquette*⁴
an accentile

I am pregnant wind

I am within the work of the shadow

From within the shadow, a hollow—

an echo, tone, modulation, timbre
pitch, vibration, interval—

disembodied voice

I am accented, accentric, accented
spell-binding silent rhetoric

I am the other who speaks from some foreign text
I am the other who speaks through your text
despite all volition

I am *vol*⁵

I am folly

I make her write to distraction
for in the writing I am zilch

I demur
 for love follows hate
 the way a flower grows out of a navel-stone

An accent is not a language is not a sentence is not a word is not a letter
 An accent is the secret beating of the heart where the heart skips a beat
 Call it *micropoaime-micropohaine*⁹
 The chip of *hatelove* in a phoneme¹⁰

(after all event an accent is)

Endnotes

- ¹ This text exposes psychoanalysis' complicity with the conventions it aims to subvert, and situates the speaking subject in an anti-conventional discourse known as 'the discourse of the hysteric' (Lacan 2007 [1969-70]: 31-38). However here, the master whose discourse the speaker counters is the (m)Other. This is to upset the binary opposition between the Law of the Father and the mother's desire at the core of the concept of castration, a symbolic act which bears on an imaginary object, namely, the phallus. The castration of the subject occurs in the final phase of the Oedipus complex, when s/he renounces all attempts at being the object of the mother's desire, thus also giving up a certain *jouissance*. On a more fundamental level, castration may also refer to a state of lack existing in the mother prior to the infant's birth. This lack is evident in the mother's desire, namely, her own incompleteness, which the subject perceives as a desire for the imaginary phallus. The 'I' of the text confronts the (m)Other at the point of castration in order to uncover the nature of her accent, one that she suspects is related to Lacan's *objet a*—and perhaps to some other *thing*.
- ² As the grain of the voice, an accent is both intimate and extimate to it. In this sense, it is comparable to the difference between the eye and the gaze (Lacan 1979 [1965-66]: 67-78). Thus what the accent foregrounds, is 'the split in which the [invocatory] drive is manifested at the level of the [auditory] field' (73).
- ³ Freud starts his essay 'The uncanny' (1919) with a long philological, etymological discussion of the word *Unheimlich*. After providing an extensive series of examples while withholding a definition of the term, he ends by saying, with Schelling, 'it is those things that, destined to remain hidden, have nevertheless become manifest' (Freud 2003 [1919]: 345). It is what irrupts when it should not have appeared; what should be lacking is the uncanny. It is, moreover, a 'sudden irruption that does not last' (346). It is an experience that, at a particular moment, is brought upon the subject, 'leaving him or her petrified' (346) by anxiety. However, *Unheimlich* is, as Freud points out, a compound word. The negation prefix 'un' precedes *Heimlich* – familiar. *Un-*, he suggests, is the mark of repression (364), which is part of the term as such: something that was familiar has become not-familiar, strange, and threatening. Through the peculiar status of the unconscious, where opposites, far from excluding one another, either substitute for one another or are implied in pairs, the familiar and the not-familiar surface together, thereby creating ambivalence (363).
- ⁴ There is a play on the word 'coquette', a flirtatious woman who trifles with men's affections, here and its homophone neologism 'cocket', thereby turning her into a little phallus.

- ⁵ The French ‘*vol*’ conflates ‘to steal’ with ‘to fly’, adumbrating the exploration of the death drive in what follows.
- ⁶ Things get cryptic here, for ‘*chantoir*’ is not even a French word. It is a Belgian technical word (geology) meaning little gulf, chasm or abyss, especially one produced beneath an underground expanse of water in claystone or limestone country causing water to drip onto more solid rock. The term (which I remembered from a geography class, years ago) appealed to me as it resonated with the verb *chanter* (to sing).
- ⁷ As the grain of the voice, again, an accent may be understood as a navel, the ‘*omphalos*’ which inscribes a speaking being into the symbolic, while bearing the mark of a real trauma (the severance of the umbilical cord). It also marks the beginning of ‘navel gazing’, a history of narcissism which is at once personal and cultural. The term *omphalos* is used to signify that the time of narcissism is the time of both disaster and its recuperation through art-making, the time of an event whose traumatic character repeats itself at every moment, beyond the recovery of historical memory.
- ⁸ The interlocutor here returns the message voiced by the speaker and ties in with the preceding note on narcissism, deflecting the presence of affect.
- ⁹ *Micropoaime-micropohaine* puns on ‘microphone’, ‘*peau*’ (skin) and on the near homophony ‘*aime/haine*’ (love/hate). Lacan usually puts love and hate on the same axis, as two forms of imaginary inter-subjectivity linking ego and alter ego, and thus the speaking being and the (m)Other.
- ¹⁰ ‘The chip of *hatelove* in a phoneme’ may be that which produces castration anxiety in the listener. *L’angoisse* (Lacan, 1962-63) opens with the assertion that ‘anxiety is an affect’ as opposed to an emotion (20). What Lacan emphasises here is that anxiety signals the desire of the Other because the distance between desire and *jouissance* is suddenly and unexpectedly shortened – or blurred. Does this mean that the desire of the (m)Other (as I have gendered it here) causes anxiety? It would seem so, precisely because what the (m)Other seeks is to find itself in me, for which it solicits my loss. This situation in fact refers to the desire of the mother as a location for *das Ding*. Whereas Freud sometimes distinguishes between fear, which has an object, and anxiety, which doesn’t, Lacan argues that anxiety is not without an object (103), but rather involves an object that escapes symbolisation. He calls this object *objet petit a*, the object behind desire, or object-cause of desire (115). And anxiety arises when something appears in the place of this object. I call this the shadow of *das Ding*. In Lacan’s teachings, the Name of the Father should act to separate or break away, introducing a cut between *das Ding* and the child. But how does *das Ding* give way to the irruption of anxiety? What happens is that all limits disappear with a kind of cover up of object *a*. This is the condition for the manifestation of the uncanny to appear, for the manifestation of what was destined to remain hidden. The lack of a limit to *jouissance* endangers the stability of castration. Let me explain what I mean with an illustration: what is foregrounded in a symptom such as vertigo – a phobia of heights, for example, is actually a phobia of ‘lower depths’. It is the abyss, like *das Ding* that is calling. The subject who suffers from vertigo perceives a call to which she is about to answer, throwing herself into the void. Beyond the vertigo itself, it is what summons her to jump into space, which is characterised specifically by not having any defined limits and being a void.

Research statement

Research background

The research undertaken in 'Microphonaime' uses the tools of prosody (Milner & Regnault 2004) to extend the lessons of psychoanalysis regarding the nature of the unspeakable but nevertheless transmitted signifier by imagining the affect it produces on the listener, namely anxiety (Freud 2003, Lacan 2004).

Research contribution

'Microphonaime' not only exposes the aural aspect of the written text, but as the pun in the title suggests, also draws attention to its libidinal underpinnings and effects.

Research significance

The encounter with the writings of psychoanalysis is here taken to the limit by reconsidering the nature of the unspeakable signifier in the context of the '*accent d'impulsion*'. 'Microphonaime' demonstrates that this signifier is not a letter as psychoanalysis would have it, but a phoneme. As such, it is isolated here as the 'accent' which, like a phantom limb, is absent and yet hooked up with the invocatory drive in *both* speaker and listener.

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