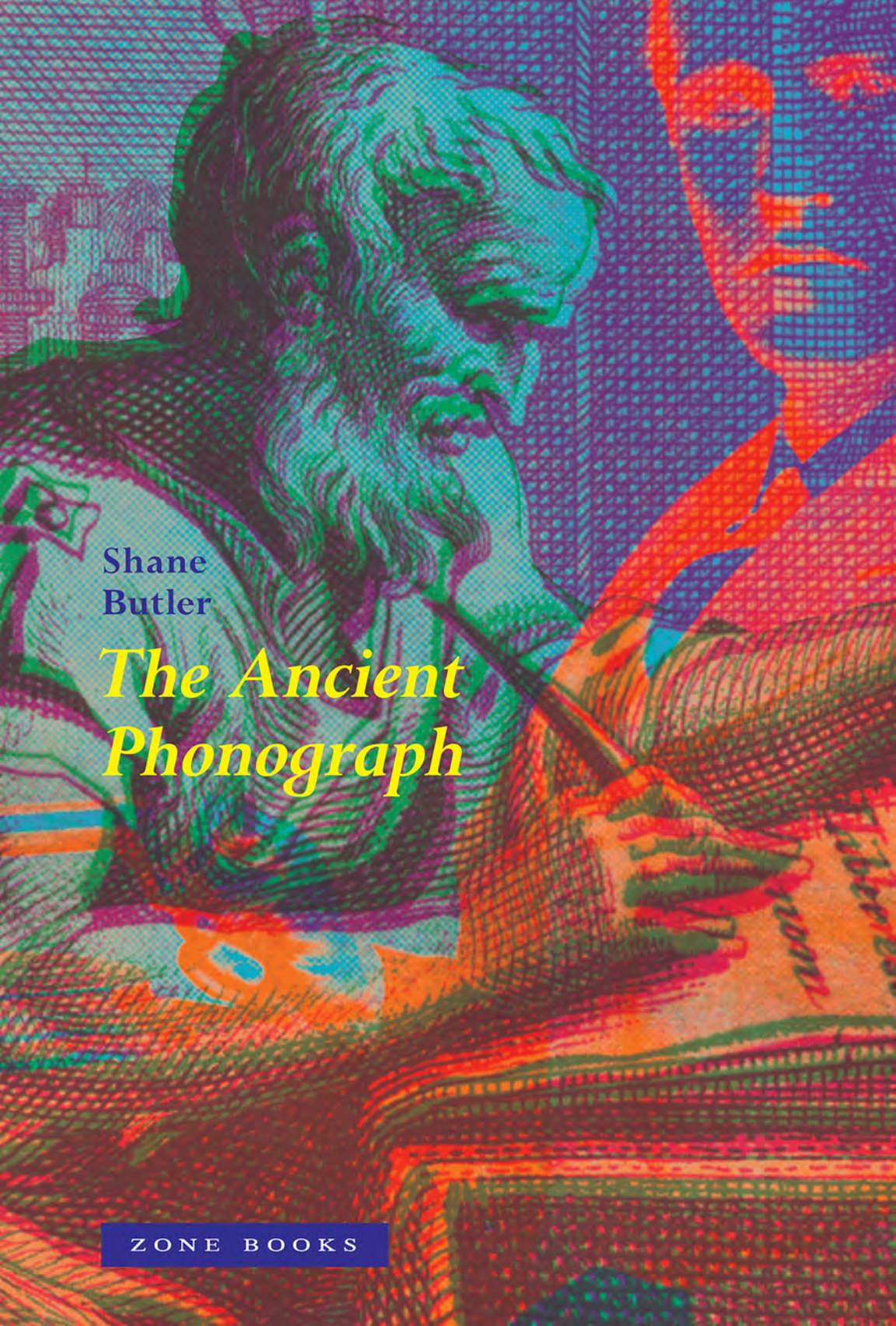

Shane Butler

The Ancient Phonograph

ZONE BOOKS

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For Jim

But O for the touch of a vanished hand
And the sound of a voice that is still!

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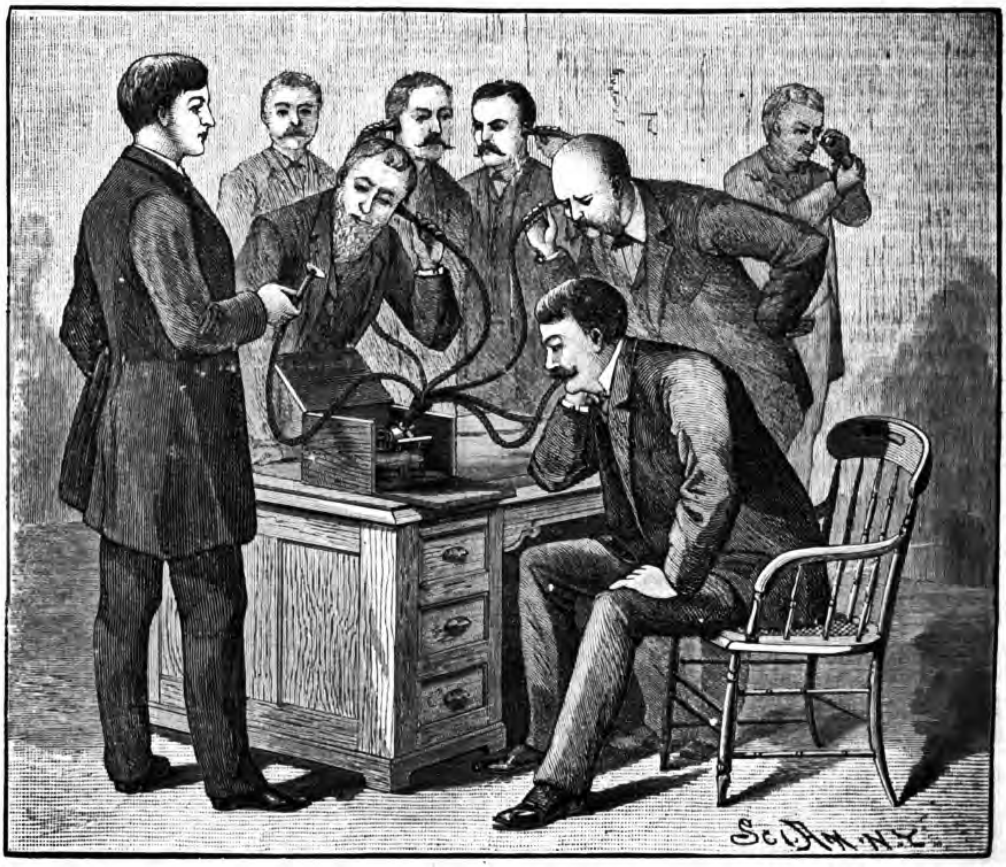


Figure 1. Edison's Phonograph, as first demonstrated to the editors of *Scientific American* in 1877, from "The New Phonograph," *Scientific American Supplement* 632 (1888), 10096.

LINER NOTES

The Ancient Phonograph

The voice makes people write.

—MICHEL DE CERTEAU, *THE PRACTICE OF EVERYDAY LIFE*

"Good morning. How do you do? How do you like the phonograph?" Thus did Thomas Edison's cheerful new machine greet the editors of *Scientific American*, "to the astonishment of all present."[1] For media theorists, this was one of history's great turning points, and Friedrich Kittler, who begins his account of modern media in Edison's laboratory, looks forward from the recorded salutations of 1877 to a world that, almost at once, would never be the same.[2] The present book looks instead back—indeed, far back, not only before Edison, but long before Marshall McLuhan's earlier starting point of Gutenberg,[3] to an age for which, from our own distant perspective, even writing itself was still relatively new. To return with the right ears to those early chapters of Western writing, I shall argue, is to hear something no less astonishing than what rose from the spinning cylinder of the "wizard of Menlo Park." "How do you like the phonograph?": the new machine's name was a neologism, but like the roots from which that name was compounded, its question was an ancient one.

Etymologically speaking, a "phonograph" proposes to write (*graphein*) the voice (*phōnē*). Edison would monopolize the term but did not invent it, for linguist Edward Hincks had used it earlier in the century to designate those Egyptian hieroglyphs that were

"representations of sounds," and the word had entered the general lexicon via an invention that had spread as rapidly as Edison's would: Isaac Pittman's system of shorthand, described in his 1845 *Manual of Phonography, or Writing by Sound*.[4] Pittman and Edison alike thus used the word to announce the arrival of a new kind of writing, but Hincks reveals the subtle problem in this act of branding, for any form of writing that purports to represent speech, such as the ancient syllabic cuneiform he is famous for having deciphered or the alphabetic script in which the words on the present page are written, is in some sense phonographic. Pittman was largely reacting to the vagaries and complexities of English spelling, but Edison's phonographic claim ultimately rests on a far deeper problem, one which, in fact, we can trace back to one of their shared etymological roots, *phōnē*. We shall turn in earnest to this problem in this book's first chapter, but let us anticipate that discussion simply by noting that the Greek word means both "speech" and "voice." If the former meaning makes even the most pedestrian alphabetic texts at least notionally phonographic, in the sense that they inscribe something that has been or could be spoken, the latter leads to conclusions that are far less clear. What did it mean to seek to write the *voice* long before Edison, in faraway Greece and Rome? This question has inspired this book. What has emerged by way of answer is, for its author, a startlingly unfamiliar picture of the aims of ancient writers, striving to capture the voice precisely as something conceptually distinct from language, even if largely inseparable from it. Indeed, the case studies that follow reveal that this voice was more than just a recurring object of desire: rather, it was in antiquity something like the raison d'être of the very category of literature, the texts of which it may even invite us to read as the single experiments of a unified project of phonographic research, stretched out over centuries.

Let us linger for a moment longer among the recorded voices of a more recent past. Early rivals to Edison's phonograph were the "graphophone," from the laboratories of Alexander Graham Bell, and the "gramophone," whose inventor, Emile Berliner, would perfect the flat-disc records that eventually displaced Edisonian

cylinders. Though the variation in brand names is partly arbitrary, the inversion of syllables arguably reflects a subtle shift in focus away from the marvelous machine that turned voices into records to the proliferating devices that, in the comfort of countless homes, were turning records back into voices. At the same time, in Berliner's substitution of *gram-* (from the Greek *gramma*, "letter of the alphabet") for *graph-*, we may perhaps detect a look not so much forward as around and back, to mass consumption of the various products of the far earlier invention of the printing press.[5] Novel as it was, the phonograph-gramophone entered bourgeois life in the familiar guise of the fireside reader, a fact from which we may draw two important lessons. First, one cannot go looking for phonographic writing independent of gramophonic reading, for any history of media must also be a history of media players (*lecteurs*, as the French prefer to call them, maintaining the redeployment of writerly language that attended the rise of digital media). Second, the very age that invented the phonograph regarded the gramophonic reanimation of its inscribed voices sufficiently like ordinary reading to market it as such, a strategy that paradoxically captures for us a glimpse of the readerly expectations which Edison's cylinders and Berliner's disks would immediately begin to transform.

These lessons return us to the contradiction that continues to lurk in our own understanding of the relationship between voice and text. While, in one sense, we regularly assume that the voice is indeed what writing captures, especially writing that is "phonetic" (i.e., alphabetic or syllabic), we simultaneously suppose that the voice is precisely that quantity which, before Edison, eluded transcription. We seem to ourselves to resolve this paradox by asserting a distinction between the linguistic voice, which writing has long recorded, and the extralinguistic voice, which had to wait for the phonograph. But centuries of literary texts are filled with—and at least partly defined by—phonic features that cannot be reduced to a function that is, strictly speaking, linguistic, even if we might be inclined to call some of them "expressive" or "communicative." It will be the contention of this book that the ensemble of such

features, added to writing's linguistic work, long constituted what we should identify as a phonographic claim. Well over a century of record playing, on a series of machines, has partly deafened us to this claim, even in the case of classical literature, which, as we shall hear, practically shouts it. To be sure, we shall not entirely disagree with Michel de Certeau, for whom the voice is an elusive object of desire that forever propels writing forward. But we shall forgo any post-Edisonian pessimism about the ability of earlier voice-writers to get some satisfaction—or even to provide such now for their acoustically overloaded twenty-first-century readers.

Let us therefore begin again, setting aside more recent phonographs and conjuring that far earlier Edison who, millennia even before Homer, first dazzled his prehistoric contemporaries with a stylus that scratched words into pliant matter—perhaps the same Mesopotamian mud out of which his successors would shape countless cuneiform tablets. Certainly it has been common to assume that, from the start, his aim was to represent spoken language. Strictly speaking, however, we cannot exclude an alternative hypothesis, namely, that his writing sprang, independently, from the same linguistic instinct that had generated human speech; these two forms of language would have been correlated in a second moment (even if this came quickly), through triangulation with their shared ends. Finally, let us imagine an even more radical possibility that detaches writing's origins from any linguistic purpose at all. In this hypothesis, the first writer's aim was the same as Edison's: to capture the voice itself. A grounding in the linguistic voice simply made that task feasible, exploiting speech's existing reduction of the countless variety of sounds human voices can make.

In truth, no such proto-Edison ever existed. Writing developed slowly over millennia, cheek by jowl with other mediated modes of human expression and interaction; its origins, in a current reading of surviving evidence, are best understood as a representation neither of speech or of voice; indeed, it is not even clear that we should regard them as linguistic at all; in the beginning, writing was not "an extension of speech" but "an extension of drawing."[6]

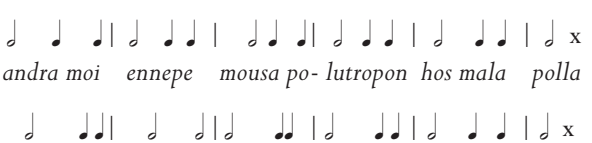
But numerous efforts to imagine him (or her: in Rudyard Kipling's "How the First Letter Was Written," the inventor is a little girl) are revealing all the same, for like most mythical points of origin, he embodies tensions that endure in the tradition we would trace back to him.[7] This book will approach that tradition at a point after the invention of writing[8]—and in particular, of alphabetic writing—has fully been accomplished and writers have begun to take the most basic tools of their trade for granted. Nevertheless, we shall find in some of the texts they produced an enduring doubt about writing's root purpose. To be clear, that doubt has not entirely left us, even today, though Edison's wizardry has distracted us somewhat from it. Antiquity's remoteness from us, even more than its relative proximity to writing's origins, will help to bring this doubt to the fore in the pages that follow, even in the case of more recent comparanda.

The tension essential to this doubt may perhaps best be understood in terms of the alphabet itself, the single elements of which are capable of expressing sounds that are less than words, but which, as an ensemble, simultaneously makes possible the inscription of something that is *more* than (mere) language. This latter category is dominated by that class of texts we have come to call "literature," after the Latin word for the very letters (*litterae*) of the alphabet. In such texts, literary heights plunge back to their alphabetic base in search of such "sound effects" as alliteration: to give us more than words, the writer calls our attention to what is less than one. Far older than writing itself, "alliteration was one of a number of phonetic figures available to the Indo-European poet,"[9] or to put this slightly more carefully, the poet's deliberately dense repetition of consonants long predates the invention of the letters that represent these consonants in writing and so give "alliteration" its name. Any writing system that corresponds to fairly stable conventions of speech can capture such phonetic figures (i.e., one hears them when reading), but alphabetic writing actually represents them (i.e., they are as visible as they are audible, at least to the extent to which its letters continue to match, one-to-one, the constitutive sounds of speech). This has led one scholar to call the Greek alphabet, capable of representing

both consonants (aspirated and unaspirated) and vowels, "the first technology capable of preserving by mechanical means a facsimile of the human voice."[10] The same scholar goes on to argue that the Greek alphabet must have been devised for the express purpose of writing down poetry, perhaps that of Homer.[11]

The thesis of a sudden poetic origin for the Greek alphabet has found little favor among those who argue instead for its gradual emergence around more prosaic tasks—and in any case, recent evidence would seem to leave little doubt that the Greek alphabet predates the transcription of the Homeric poems themselves.[12] The question of the alphabet's origins, though, may not really be the most interesting part of this puzzle. Sooner or later, *someone* began to write down, for example, the first lines of the *Odyssey*: "Tell me, Muse, of that wily world-traveler who so often was driven off course, once he had sacked the sacred city of Troy." And what we resolutely cannot know is whether that writer sought *primarily* to capture the address to the Muse that survives in my translation, or, instead, the music of the poem's repeated consonants and metrical vowels, lost in translation but able, respectively, within limits we may momentarily ignore, to be transliterated into our own alphabet and transcribed into the relative durational values of modern musical notes:

> Ἄνδρα μοι ἔννεπε, Μοῦσα, πολύτροπον ὃς μάλα πολλὰ
> πλάγχθη ἐπεὶ Τροίης ἱερὸν πτολίεθρον ἔπερσε...



One way or another, writing recorded not only the singer's sense, but also no small part of his sensuous sound, both of which continue to drive the poem forward long after its opening lines, even while pushing its protagonist and namesake extravagantly off course.

Naturally, we could say much the same about the continuing odyssey of classical poetry in Homer's wake. Indeed, looking back over the combined poetic-alphabetic tradition, it seems hard to imagine any point (including its point of origin) at which letters seemed the building blocks of language alone.

In one sense, this is a new book about a very old subject: the role of sound in Greek and Latin literature. Indeed, we soon shall find ourselves in the well-charted territory of classical meter, rhetorical figures, and other sound effects to which antiquity gave both form and nomenclature. The stakes of our inquiry, however, will be rather different from those of the various manuals long familiar to students and scholars in classics. In laying claim to these and other disparate sounds as symptoms of textual vocality, I shall be arguing for them a role that is anything but ornamental, that is, a role hardly reducible to that of anodyne "sound effects" or even to that of poetic "musicality," the two explanations generally invoked by said manuals. In addition, I shall follow the lead of medievalist Paul Zumthor in simultaneously distinguishing this *vocalité*, "the corporeal aspect of texts" and so "their mode of existence as objects of sensory perception," from *oralité*, which he defines as the voice's instrumentalization as, instead, the bearer of language.[14] What, however, remains of the voice when it is distinguished both from language and from (mere) sound, and what, if anything, can this remainder tell us?

In search of an answer, we can take some first hints from recent work on the voice by theorists and philosophers, most notably Adriana Cavarero, *A più voci: Filosofia dell'espressione vocale* (2003; trans. 2005 as *For More than One Voice: Toward a Philosophy of Vocal Expression*), and Mladen Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More* (2006). As their titles already suggest, both introduce the problem of the voice as one of measure. For Cavarero, who finds her initial inspiration in a story by Italo Calvino, voices are always multiple, each of them "a unique voice that signifies nothing but itself," that is, "the vital and unrepeatable uniqueness of every human being."[15] This single, specific voice upends the world of the eavesdropping king of Calvino's story, and it would do the same for philosophy, if the latter

stopped to listen, which it almost constitutionally cannot do, for "the philosophical tradition does not only ignore the uniqueness of the voice, but it also ignores uniqueness as such, in whatever mode it manifests itself."[16] Against this monolithic (and monophonic) tradition, Cavarero launches a "challenge" that she will partially derive from the role of the human face in the thought of Emmanuel Lévinas. "This challenge . . . consists in thinking of the relationship between voice and speech as one of uniqueness that, although it resounds first of all in the voice that is not speech, also continues to resound in the speech to which the human voice is constitutively destined."[17] Although I began my research for this book in the same spirit of challenge and thus attune to the same polyphony, from my ancient material soon emerged competing vocalities that were both collective and irreducible. "Every sound we make is a bit of autobiography," notes classicist and poet Anne Carson, but as her own title, "The Gender of Sound," suggests, sometimes the sounds we make tell stories that some of us (at least) share.[18] As we shall see, ancient efforts to write *a* voice were almost always also efforts to write *the* voice, conceptualized in varying degrees of generality. Not all of these efforts unfold as preludes to an inevitably disembodied, metaphysical leap to speech-as-*logos*. Cavarero's appeal to listen for the unique voice still echoes throughout this book, but it often is answered by voices that, without embracing logocentrism, nevertheless insist that uniqueness is not the only thing that brings human bodies face to face, listening to and for one another. For the most part, the present book aims to vindicate a more general version of Cavarero's challenge to philosophy, more like what Jean-Luc Nancy epigrammatically expresses in the distinction he draws in French between *entendre* ("to hear," but also "to understand") and *écouter* ("to listen"): "Isn't the philosopher someone who always hears (and who hears everything), but who cannot listen. . . ?"[19]

Dolar instead takes most of his cues from Jacques Lacan, and it may be useful to ask at once whether the same will be true of this book. After all, the Lacanian reader will already have heard something familiar in the parameters I have begun to use: the voice as

an object of desire, seducing us with the siren-song of something beyond language, that which Lacan calls the "real." Beginning in the mid-1960s, explicitly shifting his early focus on the "symbolic" and "imaginary" orders to that of the real, Lacan offered a series of overtures to the voice. In one of these, he traces his contribution back a decade, when he had taken up the subject of Daniel Paul Schreber, whose *Memoirs of My Nervous Illness* had famously been analyzed by Freud in "The Schreber Case":

> When I think that in the phenomenology of psychosis, we are still at the stage of questioning ourselves about the sensorial texture of the voice, when simply with the six or eight pages of a prelude that I gave in my article on "A Question Preliminary to Any Possible Treatment of Psychosis," I designated the quite precise approach from which there can be in our day, at the point that we are at, there can be questioned the phenomenon of the voice.[20]

But neither in the earlier article (which had been redacted from the seminar of 1955–56) nor in his later musings does Lacan move much beyond what we would expect from him, namely, an insistence that the voice, like the real, is an effect of the symbolic.[21] Schreber "hears voices" because of what he *knows* (albeit unconsciously), and the same is true of those more ordinary voices we attribute to our senses and the noisy world beyond. In other words, for Lacan, we do not make meaning out of voices but, rather, voices out of meaning, even when, acoustically speaking, there is nothing to hear.

Fully embracing Lacan's view, Dolar describes the pervasive error it is meant to illuminate:

> Bringing the voice from the background to the forefront entails a reversal, or a structural illusion: the voice appears to be the locus of true expression, the place where what cannot be said can nevertheless be conveyed. The voice is endowed with profundity: by not meaning anything, it appears to mean more than mere words, it becomes the bearer of some unfathomable originary meaning which, supposedly, got lost with language. . . . It should be stated clearly: it is only through

> language, via language, by the symbolic, that there is voice, and music exists only for a speaking being. . . . The voice as the bearer of a deeper sense, of some profound message, is a structural illusion, the core of a fantasy that the singing voice might cure the wound inflicted by culture, restore the loss that we suffered by the assumption of the symbolic order. This deceptive promise disavows the fact that voice owes its fascination to this wound, and that its allegedly miraculous force stems from its being situated in this gap. If the psychoanalytic name of this gap is castration, then we can remember that Freud's theory of fetishism is based precisely on the fetish materializing the disavowal of castration.[22]

On its own terms, Dolar's logic is impeccable; what instead points to trouble is, let us say, his own first-person voice, thinly masked as the third: "It should be stated clearly . . ." For what can we call this scolding about "illusion" and "fantasy" if not precisely a "no of the father" (*non du père*), that is, the prohibition that for Lacan inaugurates our entry into the symbolic order, with Dolar himself in the castrating paternal role? Dolar even finishes things off by invoking the ever-authoritative Dr. Freud—can he not have been thinking of Lacan's play on the "name of the father" (*nom du père*)?—here "remembered" precisely in the name of the re-membering fetish. In other words, as Dolar reading Lacan and even I reading Dolar reveal (and one can repeat this game endlessly), the terms of psychoanalysis are never quite so useful as they are when used to describe psychoanalysis itself.

With his own roots not only in Freud but also in the clinical observation of severe psychosis, Lacan himself, even as he turned to the real, never quite shed a view of the symbolic as a necessary prison beyond which lay the madhouse and, farther off and even worse, meaninglessness. But while paranoiacs, the subject of Lacan's 1932 doctoral dissertation, and other psychotics may hear voices, the fact that those voices so often tell them what to do—stab a famous actress, in the case study at the center of that dissertation—makes them exactly unlike the extralinguistic voice conjured by Dolar and

dismissed as the actual "illusion." In the end, what psychotics and psychoanalysts have in common is a ready willingness to assume that truly meaningful voices are always *telling* them something. What if, sometimes, this belief is instead the illusion, one fostered precisely by hermeneutic enterprises like that founded by Freud?[23] In other words, what if it is not meaning that requires language, but only interpretation? The exclusion of such a distinction is foundational to psychoanalysis: even when words are not forthcoming, as in the case of the unconscious and its manifestation in dreams, some kind of language, or at least something like one, is always already there, even when it manifests itself in the form of "a primitive language without a grammar," as Freud puts it in his *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*.[24] Lacan less hesitantly pronounces that "it is the whole structure of language that psychoanalytic experience discovers in the unconscious."[25] Interpretation, in such a view, remains close to its root Latin sense of "translation," from one (kind of) language (or one kind-of language) to another. But should psychoanalysis have the last word here?

Psychoanalysis is not, of course, the only practice to reach us from the past century with a deep stake in interpretability, that is, the linguistic translatability of meaning. Let us limit ourselves to the way in which the latest Lacanian word on the "voice and nothing more"—namely, that it is little more than an afterthought of language itself—resembles an independently persistent axiom of twentieth-century literary criticism. From the latter's long bookshelf, let us select just one well-worn but now dusty text: William Empson's *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, which first appeared in 1930 and which continued to be printed in a series of editions into the 1950s. Empson pointedly professed little interest in Freud (whose *Civilization and Its Discontents* was first published in the same year), but something else bothered him far more:

> And if one is forced to take sides, as a matter of mere personal venom, I must confess I find the crudity and latent fallacy of a psychologist discussing verses that he does not enjoy less disagreeable than the blurred

> and tasteless refusal to make statements of an aesthete who conceives himself to be only interested in Taste.[26]

Mostly forgotten today, Empson's book nevertheless helped to train generations of readers and critics to be suspicious of lovers of uninterpretable beauty. Empson begins by taking aim at a particular breed of hermeneutically disinclined aesthete: the kind devoted to what he calls "Pure Sound." Empson aligns his own contrasting position with a celebrated dictum of Alexander Pope: "The official, and correct, view, I take it, is that 'the sound must be an echo to the sense.'"[27] This echoing, however, will not always obey clear principles, Empson notes; in the end, even "a sound effect must be interpreted"; when it cannot be, it should not hold our attention for long.[28] Interpretation, for Empson, is the rational response to all manner of poetic ambiguity and thus to poetry tout court; fans of "Pure Sound" unnaturally resist this hermeneutic drive. But *why* do they do so? Empson compares their irrationality to synesthetic disorders "due to migraines or epilepsy or drugs like mescal" (i.e., peyote), which in turn may offer the dim recollection of "an infantile state":

> Mescal-eaters have just that impression common among readers of "pure" poetry, that they are seeing very delightful but quite new colours, or knowing something which would be very important and interesting if they could make out just what it was. But how such a disturbance can be of serious importance to a reader of poetry is not easy to see, or how one is to be sure when it is occurring.[29]

What fails here is not meaning—or, at least, not (apparent) meaningfulness—but, rather, interpretation, first in the purple haze of the mescal-eater who cannot say "just what it was" (like the aesthete who cannot "make statements"), and then, with the briefest hint of longing, in the reader-critic's inability "to be sure," though proleptically he already has pulled himself together and moved on to matters of "serious importance." Dolar, as we already have seen, will summon the "structural illusion" of purely vocal meaning through a similar picture of earnest error: "The voice is endowed with

profundity: by *not meaning anything*, it *appears to mean* more than mere words, it becomes the bearer of some *unfathomable originary meaning* which, *supposedly*, got lost with language. . . ." Unlike Empson, Dolar finds this illusion endlessly interesting, but that it is nothing but an illusion is something on which they agree. And in exposing this illusion, both are led to conjure the benighted true believer who, encountering something that feels like meaning but which cannot be interpreted, wrongly supposes that it must mean something pretty deep, man.

What if the true believer is right? Poets, at least, have long been kinder to addicts and other hard-core aesthetes—and not only because they are an important part of their fan base. "How sweet," writes Tennyson in "The Lotos-Eaters," ventriloquizing the drugged deserters of Homer's *Odyssey*,

> To hear the dewy echoes calling
> From cave to cave thro' the thick-twined vine—
> To watch the emerald-colour'd water falling
> Thro' many a wov'n acanthus-wreath divine!
> Only to hear and see the far-off sparkling brine,
> Only to hear were sweet, stretch'd out beneath the pine.

Of course, on a first listen, these lines might seem abundantly to satisfy any demand that sound echo sense, since the sailors' words mime those "dewy echoes" that enchant them: "calling . . . falling," "cave to cave," "thro' the thick," "twined vine . . . divine . . . brine . . . pine," "Only to hear . . . Only to hear."[30] But the paradox is that sound thus *is* the immediate sense of their words, and their only deeper meaning is this: stop worrying about what it all means, or better, stop worrying about what we were meant to be doing, where we were meant to be going. Among the many things that are happening here is a rejection of the tortured teleologies of epic: as the sailors abandon their odyssey ("we will not wander more" is the last thing they and the poem say), so Tennyson borrows his setting from Homer but his pastoral scene and its dense repetitions from the *Idylls* of Theocritus, which famously begin with a sweetly sonorous pine.[31]

But if the history of literary taste can be boiled down to a long debate about form and content, embracing endless subdebates about (this) form versus (that) form, (this) content versus (that) content, and of course, form itself versus content itself, then the eaters of mescal and lotus, as readers, pose a very particular challenge to the critic. Not merely preferring extralinguistic sound *to* meaning but embracing it *as* meaning (Dolar's "structural illusion" of the voice), they raise the unsettling suggestions that it is instead interpretability that is a "structural illusion" of the literary text, that literature, as a medium, is only incidentally concerned with the recording of language per se, and that literature may best be regarded the use of language itself as a medium, for the recording of something not linguistic at all.

Before his death in 1892, Tennyson enthusiastically allowed himself to be recorded by the phonograph, reciting "The Charge of the Light Brigade," soon followed by other poems.[32] Earlier, one of the first Europeans to write about Edison's new machine, the inventor W. H. Preece, had already appropriated a line from the poet's "Break, Break, Break," lamenting the death of a friend, in order to observe that now at last it would be possible to enjoy forever "the sound of a voice that is still."[33] In his enthusiasm Preece rather misses the poignant ambiguity of "still" (let us finally give Empson his due!), and indeed, that of the entire seaside poem, which both does and does not capture the sound of the crashing waves, "the thoughts that arise in me," the shout of the boy "for his sister at play," the song of the lad "in his boat on the bay"—all proxies for the poet's groans of grief for the still, but still echoing, voice of his friend.[34] When Tennyson wrote these lines, Edison had yet to be born; for Friedrich Kittler what made the latter's invention revolutionary was its ability to mediate just the sorts of things the poet before him could not fully grasp, the extralinguistic real. But the fact that the early phonograph repeatedly went looking for Tennyson hints that the new device was at least partially recognized as a reinvention of "the dark round of the dripping wheel" of his kind of poetry.[35] One can of course object that poets have never really

been able to capture the sound of a crashing wave, a sailor's song, or a dead friend's voice—or even their own. But is this ambivalence of reference the same as a failure to record? After all, if the real is beyond the symbolic, then surely its mediation need not be confined by symbolic categories.

Tennyson represents something of an acoustical high-water mark in English literature, but in a moment we shall be throwing open the floodgates of classical literature. Everyone knows that the latter, which calls its poems "songs" (a matter to which we shall return), is a noisy business, offering a battery of sonic devices that are deployed with a density and pervasiveness rarely matched, even when imitated, by later literatures. As we have already noted, however, outside rather vague gestures at "orality" or "musicality," few ever bother to ask why. Already on the basis of our brief considerations thus far, however, it seems possible to hazard a new guess. If, as Dolar suggests, what we call voice is the real that swirls around speech, then the sounds of poetry—not in spite of their lack of clear referentiality, but because of it—would seem to add up to voice, or at least to a partial claim to represent such. And this means that the sonority of classical poetry (and prose, as we shall see) contributes to an especially strong version of such a claim, indeed, one that would long remain paradigmatic, through to the classicizing Tennyson himself. This strong vocal claim is the "ancient phonograph" of my title.

To be clear, the sounds of ancient literature, though a crucial part of this claim, were not themselves sufficient to complete it. In antiquity, the text's phonographic status was supported, for example, by the development and adaptation of oral practices (like oratory itself, subject of Chapters 1 and 5, as well as music, subject of Chapter 3) in ways that maximized their perceived susceptibility to writing, and also by education that controlled for consistency among readers. Other factors are there in the texts themselves, from the stories they tell about voices (like that of Echo, subject of Chapter 2) to the marked tendency in some genres (like tragedy, subject of Chapter 4) to push beyond the speakable but not the voiceable. Such factors

became mutually reinforcing, across genres, periods, and the Greek and Latin languages—boundaries likewise crossed by ancient meters, rhythms, and sonic figures.

It is not, of course, that other literatures do not make vocal claims, even strong ones, as Zumthor reveals, for example, for medieval poetry. Still, the sheer extent and diversity of antiquity's phonographic literature is hard to parallel. Naturally, that literature's coherence as "a" literature has been constructed retrospectively, though such retrospection was well under way in antiquity itself. Accordingly, this book will end with two looks back, one from late antiquity, the other from the early Renaissance. As we shall see (and hear), antiquity's specific ensemble of phonographic technologies would, for later ages, be key to its audibility as "ancient" (and, to use the value-laden term, as "classical"). So, too, in antiquity itself, had those same technologies made literature audible as literature. On this last score, scholars sometimes advise, *caveat lector*: antiquity had no consistent term for "literature," and our own use of the word in its most common current meaning is itself not much older than Tennyson and his age. Indeed, for one scholar, Florence Dupont, the application of "literature" to antiquity is to be reckoned among the modern "crimes" against ancient "orality"—that is, against a culture in which texts, in her reading, were either quietly ancillary to performance or performance's mostly mute afterthought.[36] Surely, though, a more serious crime is Dupont's, banishing voices from the very texts in which ancient readers so plainly heard them. (Evidence that they did so will be abundant in the coming chapters.) Against Dupont, this book not only finds voices in classical literature but also finds voice at the heart of literature's classical definition. The classical literary text emerged, in antiquity, not in spite of voices, nor even for the voice's sake, but *as* voice, written.

Why, however, does the voice *matter* to, in, and as (classical) literature? The word I have just italicized, ostensibly to emphasize its meaning but also to conjure the voice in one of the few, clumsy ways favored by academic prose, offers a key: literary voice restores matter to written language, or rather, it calls our attention to matter

that, in one form or another, was there all along. To be sure, it is not that texts do not have their own native materialities; indeed, the present book to some extent offers a follow-up to my study of these in *The Matter of the Page*. Voice, however, pointedly presents itself as, or as something like, the matter of the human body, or at least of part of it. (Which part will be a subject of Chapter 1.) To what end? Each chapter will offer a slightly different answer to this, but all will pursue an intuition that what draws us to vocal media is not just *what* they mediate but *that* they mediate. For the living voice, I shall argue, is itself a medium; like the wax of Edison's later cylinders, or that of an ancient writing tablet, its ability to express depends in part on its ability to be impressed. In other words, voice and record are phonographically linked not so much as original and copy as they are by a more basic resemblance rooted in the stuff of which they are made. In this regard, phonographic inquiry goes looking for a certain strand of ancient materialist thought and, from time to time, uncovers a version of what James I. Porter has famously dubbed the "material sublime." Indeed, I record here a blanket acknowledgment of indebtedness to Porter's work, in which the voice has long been a major theme, most recently in *The Origins of Aesthetic Thought in Ancient Greece: Matter, Sensation, and Experience* (2010); he has influenced what follows well beyond my specific invocations of him. That said, not everything to come will be lofty or even entirely literary. From babbling babies, to nursery rhymes recited by inventors, to something like a nursery rhyme half-sung by God himself, this book's soundtrack mixes the sublime with a decent dose of the ridiculous. In the end, my aim is to demonstrate the ordinariness of the voice in classical literature, where it is as much a part of the furniture as are wax and papyrus. This is not to say, however, that writing the voice *well* was not extraordinarily hard work, as we shall see.

One final note on my approach. Maurizio Bettini, in *Voci: Antropologia sonora del mondo antico*, reconstructs antiquity's "phonosphere" by placing human voices and languages firmly against a broader backdrop of animal sounds, with special emphasis on attempts by the

former to mimic and transcribe the latter.[37] So too Mark Payne, in *The Animal Part: Human and Other Animals in the Poetic Imagination*,[38] repeatedly invites us to think—and listen—our way outside the category of the human in ancient literature and life. Together they may be allowed to strike a salutary note of caution about what follows. The literary soundscapes that await us in the coming chapters offer no shortage of noisy non-humans, from gods and demigods to birds and beasts to resounding rocks and bubbling brooks. One might well ask, therefore, why we should we seek in these the *vox humana* and not, at the same time and among other things, the call of the wild. For the semantically superfluous sounds of literary texts would seem, *prima facie*, to record that nonhuman call as surely as they do the human one, completing the ancient phonograph's analogy to its modern counterpart, promiscuously receptive to the entire sounding world. One might go farther still, observing that the human voice cannot really assert its distinctiveness without simultaneously revealing its continuity with that same world, which just as surely assails our ears and which can—and, indeed, should—command our attention and care.

Nevertheless, this very homophony between voice and world, precisely because it contests the supposed distinctiveness of human beings from their environment, is what enables a text to construct a human voice out of seemingly nonhuman sources of sound. And what causes a text's varied acoustical elements to coalesce, foremost, as human voice is the simple fact that even (and especially) the most enchanted literary *selva oscura* is a world made not of woods but of words (even if not entirely reducible to these *as* words). As Susan Stewart puts it, "It is not just sound that we hear; it is the sound of an individual person speaking sounds. . . . Such sounds might be imitations of sounds in nature, of animal cries, or of the most elaborately inflected nuances of human conversation, but in every case sound is here known as a *voice*."[39] This is not to say, however, that this same voice, as it emerges, cannot also renew our sense of a broader, less human-centered ecology. If this book remains focused instead on the humanness of literary texts, it does so out of a low rather than high