

Condensed Article

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The “Condensed Article” explores the telephone’s promise of immediate access to distant voices through the technological preservation and condensation of speech. The author calls up what spooks or haunts the structure of telephonics. By unraveling these encrypted connections the essay demonstrates and explains the relay/delay interference signal between confusion and certainty. In that sense, the essay connects telephonics to Bell. The story of Alexander Graham Bell from his early childhood to his invention of the telephone holds many clues to the repressed desires in the telephonic structure. But, rather than a biography, the author writes a “biophony”, somewhere between empiricity and speculation. This speculation operates a party line between Heidegger’s “What is Called Thinking”, Abraham’s and Torok’s psychoanalysis of crypts, Jacques Derrida’s desedimentation of “the death sentence” structure, and many other stations.

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M iCrographia

In the early 1860's a New York newspaper telescripted a warning to its readers against buying stock in a new fangled device called the "telephone". Here goes the rumorous stock market, switched on by telephonic speculation. As in *The Trial of Kafka*, rumor and arrest are part of the same performative experience:

A man about 43 years of age giving the name Joshua Coppersmith has been arrested for attempting to exhort funds from ignorant and superstitious people by exhibiting a device which he says will convey the human voice any distance over metallic wires. He calls the instrument a "telephone", which is obviously intended to imitate the word "telegraph" and win the confidence of those who know the success of the latter instrument. Well informed people

Condensed Art

After the Crash: The Cl

The Bell telephone shapes a locus which suspends absolute departure. The promise of belonging to the telephonic connection nor yet beyond or outside it, terminates speech in arrival of silence ("Learning to speak is like learning to shoot," AGB), the click stuns you. Other. The phone's non-finitizing promise is broken. Designed to uphold the technical continually reinscribes its terror at loss in such texts as are properly designated Telephone network.

To avoid the crash whose site is your ear, you hang up together, you deny the **cli ck**. This way, the other is not gone but survives the telephone, just as she was prior to it. The telephone only places the call. Thus Pacific Bell, offering a pacifier to the teleconsumer, prints a

know that it is impossible to transmit the human voice over wires, as may be done by dots and dashes and signals of the Morse Code. The authorities who apprehended this criminal are to be congratulated and it is hoped that punishment will be prompt.

In a crisis of small narcissistic difference, the newspaper presses charges against the parasitical instrument upon which it will develop addictive dependency. Pitting dots and dashes against the voice, the tele-graph against the tele-phone, the newspaper forms an agency with the police authorities of small-time writing. However, the logic of opposition informing the difference between writing and vocal systems, phonetics and telephonetics, has no conceptual sanctuary to shelter it.

icle The Black Box

ick: The Survival Guide

death resisted however destines itself towards the click at your end. The click, neither fully noise's finality. A shot that rings out to announce, like an upwardly aimed pistol, the It closes in on you, momentarily absolving *Mitsein* or the Heideggerian "being with" the difficulty when it comes to cathecting absence, the telephone, whether consciously or not, Books, of which this fragment would be merely a teletype flash in an infinitely crossed

Survival Guide whose first words are *a major disaster*.¹The last introductory word to the directory of rescue transmissions promises, (as do the stickers on French telephone booths)

you can save a life! The borderline zone of temporal action cuts a path across the decisive moments separating life from death, as if the lines of telephony *can make the difference between life and death*. This, precisely, is the difference that Alexander Graham Bell and Thomas A. Watson were committed to making, but from the dimension of an afterlife, which is to say from a paranormal position or a repression of the absolute difference. They argued a far more uncanny projection of the return call than we can perceive through the iron curtain blocking our view from the genealogy of a technological desire, a desire that celebrated ideally, the techné and participated in a rhetoric pumping the artificial self. Already heterogeneous, the self that speaks into the phone or receives the call splits off from its worldly complexity, relocating partial selves to transmitting voices in the fundamental call for help. The call for help is what Kafka imagines in his diaries: Alone. He would be in pain. The telephone rings. The voice tells him, *don't worry, we're coming to help you.*² In Kafka's diary of pain the phone responds to your aphonic call for help.

Instant Theory cl..... ick

If one were to set an event, a date or a time-bomb in order to see the beginning of the modern concept of technology touch off, then this event gets stirred up by the invention of condensed milk. In fact something like the history of positive technology is unthinkable without the extension of this maternal substance into its technologized other, in other words, its precise mode of preservation and survival.³ Where on this body of lactate diffusion does the telephone plug in? First, let us sense the withdrawals for which the telephone speaks. This has to do with a certain concept of orality in part guiding the rapport to the telephone. Even the ear opened for Bell like a hearing mouth. On the most materially banal level, think of Watson's many scrupulous attempts at explaining the extent to which the lips had to fit themselves inside the labia of the telephone cavity. Something was always going on between the body's mouth as the receiver-secrets were being passed along. Of what order? The disaster of the mouth, the medusoid rift, reflects the implacable grimace of technology. It's a mouth that twists along the umbilicus of loss. Loss. Where is it contained and who keeps watch over it? As if something like a

crypt had been inserted into the telephone's receiver.

We may have felt the parasitical inclusion of a crypt, always double and doubling, duplicitous like the ear, inhabiting the haunted telephone, operating the speaking automaton which is in fact a monument to an impossible mourning, a megaphone to the beyond. In the particularized case of Bell, there had been something that he could not swallow, a death paired, impossible to assimilate or digest and whose figuration shaped the place of the telephone -- properly a place of absence, where the other speaks in the absent tense of its many voices, engaging multiple path transmissions of disfigured tracings. In the meanwhile, the ghosts that accompanied both Watson and Bell, whose permanent residence has been registered neither inside nor outside technology, have been made to disappear, falsely translating the most uncanny of phenomena, whose effect is not reducible to a phenomenology of spirits, into a cannily at-hand household object -- an organ attachable, that holds a membership card to the human body, from which it detaches. Hanging on the wall and placed on a desk it functions like a family picture or any another partially tranquilized fetish. Whatever the maze of interpretive constructions the point that might be recovered from these inventories of the imaginary rests on an inarticulable cut of separating, a story of disaster to which every reading of technology owes its opening impulse and projected end.

Technology, perhaps more so than any other thing except for a certain illumination of a god, is inseparable from catastrophe in a radically explicit way. Cutting lines and catastrophizing, the telephone has been associated with a maternalized force. Now, the maternal is that which withdraws, leaving traces and a sense of the call. The maternal calls to you from afar. According to a certain logic, mourning is broached by an idealization and interiorization of the mother's image, which implies her loss and the withdrawal of the maternal. The call tracing the lost object shows that the telephone maintains this line of disconnection while dissimulating the loss, acting like a pacifier.⁴ But at the same time it acts as monument to an irreducible disconnection and thus runs like incorporation, a kind of pathology inhibiting mourning, offering an alternative to the process of introjection. In this sense the telephone operates along lines whose structures promote fantasmatic, unmediated, instantaneous, magical, sometimes hallucinatory flashes.⁵ What happens to the perished Other when

mourning is inhibited? The refusal to mourn causes the lost “love object” to be preserved in a crypt like a mummy, maintained as the binding around what is not there. Somewhat like freeze dried foods, the passageway is sealed off and marked (in the psyche) with the place and date in commemoration.⁶

The silent pathos of object-preservation, linked to food assimilation, discloses a mode of orality which the telephone draws forth. The work of mourning symbolically consists in eating the dead — what Derrida calls *mors*, the bit.⁷ The losses are cut in the telephone, whose ringing repetition denies the death drive in which it nevertheless participates. In its extension to the locality of eating or vomiting the *mors* makes the telephone an exemplary simulator of mourning and its disorders. The telephone makes you swallow what is not there. It contains preservatives. At the same time, you spill out a part of yourself that contains the Other; in this way, it is a vomitorium. To these additives condensed milk comes in, if we can still hold it down, because the question of preserving and swallowing what no longer is there —

a specific form of mourning sickness
-- may well be guiding all the missiles
of technology.

Assuming the telephone responds to a protocol that would be exemplary, then catastrophe and the uncanny spread their prehensions at the root of every technological incursion into the real. The technology of preserving food, arguably the first true technology in the modern sense, originates in precisely such a narrative. It emerges from the calamity associated with the Donner party, a group of pioneers trapped in 1846 in the snowy Sierra Nevada as they made their way from east to west. **National nausea** was aroused when it was learned that they were forced to eat their own dead to survive. This *horrific event in American history*, recounted most recently by Kathleen Woodward in the “Introduction” to *The Technological Imagination: Theories and Fictions*, furnishes the grounds for Herbert Blau’s *The Donner Party: It’s Crossing* and is sublated in the account of Daniel Boorstin to the achievement of Gail Borden. *Moved by the suffering of the Donner party, Borden devised a practical solution to what he doggedly perceived as only a problem rather than a testament to the human condition.*⁸ (Though I don’t quite get the sense of this reproach—does cannibalism offer a testament to the human condition, is the literalization of incorporation

of the dead that testament? is this what happens to everyone who makes the move from the east to the west coasts? – and though Woodward’s description of Borden’s solution trivializes his discovery to a playful imagination, it is worth reading this drama into the network that connects all technology to the grounds of commemorative art work. Woodward’s ho! *Borden, an enterprising bricoleur with a playful imagination, determined to find a method to make food more portable. In 1849 he discovered ‘an improved process of preserving the nutritious properties of meat, or animal flesh, of any kind, by obtaining the concentrated extract of it, and combining it with flour or vegetable meal, and drying or baking the mixture in an oven, in the form of a biscuit or cracker.*⁹ This in turn led him to invent condensed milk.)

The technology of preserving milk, of rescuing other perishables from natural spoilage, can be traced back, therefore, to the catastrophe marked by the event of incorporation, a sort of auto-cannibalism which had the travelers ingest that which among them was dead. This still sticks in the throat of all preservatives, this original feast of technological remorse – sinking one’s teeth into the flesh of the other. The crypt cracked an opening when missing children started signifying the container. Condensed and liquified, the dialactate body of that which is missing was to be swallowed. Borden did not merely create a condensed milk product, but a general theory of condensation that impinges upon discourse and the transcendental signifier: *Condense our sermons*, Borden advised a minister, *the world is changing. In the direction of condensing . . . Even lovers write no poetry, nor any other stuff and nonsense, now. They condense all they have to say, I suppose into a kiss.* The kiss is the abolition of sense, the miniaturization of all postal systems. At any rate, the movement points towards a reader’s digest of utterance, towards a radical digestibility of all that is. This is based on the morsel that will

never have been digested,
not by you and not
by me.

Call a Friend cl***** ick ick

Following Dr. Clarence J. Blake’s suggestion, Bell gets hold of

a human ear to use as a phonautograph instead of making an artificial imitation of it. How to get the ear in motion, to vibrate? -this is the next problem. Alexander Graham Bell recollects the moment. *The idea was novel, and struck me accordingly, and I requested my friend to prepare a specimen (of the human ear) for me, which he did. While engaged in these experiments I was struck with the remarkable disproportion in weight between the membrane and the bones that were vibrated by it.* (m, 123)¹⁰ This marks the moment when Bell begins to construct what will eventually become our telephone. At the receiving end, as we know, there was Watson. Bell refers to Watson as *friend*. Perhaps this represents a generous signifier, a slightly valueless gesture of acknowledgement, or even the truth. Perhaps this Watson was a friend Bell could count on: *The results, however, were unsatisfactory and discouraging. My friend Mr. Thomas A. Watson, who assisted me in this first experiment, declared that he heard a faint sound proceed from the telephone at his end of the circuit, but I was unable to verify his assertion.* (m, 47)

We travel the full circuit from one to the other, from one orifice to the other, between friends, a transmission bubble, a scratch noise of discord. While this passage does not present itself with the manifest traits of ambivalence, much less a demolition expert's job well done, let me refresh your memory. The point made by Bell says that he could not verify or confirm what Watson had said he had heard. What place do "friends" take in scientific rhetoric? This designation could amount to a promotion, a merit increase or a displacement of the nature of their relationship; in any case it's what Watson gets within a scientific explication, and not in the personal memoirs of fondness, set aside by the inventor in a parascientific text for his grandchildren, or grandfather, to enjoy. In walks a friend during the course of Bell's scientific research, to help him out. This is not malicious slander—let's not get too dramatic about our inflections. But as a description its accuracy does not seem unimpeachable either. Perhaps they were friends, maybe this was how science was conducted in those days, among friends, and Bell was just getting a little help from this friend. Fine. They were friends. Mr. Watson my friend assisted me, lending his ear to the substitute dead ear, claiming his ear was alive to a faint sound but I could not verify what his ear is said to have heard. My friend could have been dead

wrong, so what his ear claims to have grasped has to be set aside. It doesn't end here. We have already suggested the precarious positioning of a rumoring audibility. This ear opens the question of priority. *Who was the first to hear the telephone speak*, even if it only mouthed a faint whisper to its auditor?

Yet, what if there will have been precisely no original sound at all, not in the sense of the telephone's technicity? Like the big bang, the telephone's first sonic emission will always have taken place prior to it, no place—a first crack, therefore, that, never being first, sheds the structure of simplicity that reduces a sheer telecommunicability to the hopelessly pitched poles of sender and receiver. The transmissions complexify themselves at the outset, suspending any simple certitude about the first emission — whether it came from Bell or his father, his grandfather, his mother's comatose ear or the friendly ghosts travelling within Mr. Watson's earshot. The conception date cannot be fixed absolutely, nor can the operation of its strict emergence. For *I was unable to verify his assertion*. All we know is that it had something to do with a dead ear that Watson claimed he heard speaking, or, more precisely still: he caught it "groaning." But does this not correspond to the essential structure of fundamental telephonics, namely, *I was unable to verify his assertions*? It literally stacks up to hearsay when Watson says he hears; the other cannot verify, cannot, at this fragile point of entry, know. Unless, a hundred years later or so, the CIA has you on tap. But it remains legally, epistemologically and technically unclear whether this sort of earwitnessing amounts to knowing. (Did Polonius know he was a rat?) Whatever Watson heard that day, Bell claims not to have verified. Under what conditions would it have been conceivable to verify what Watson said he heard him say? Bell means that whatever Watson heard cannot be said again, not to us now nor to Bell then. It was not part of a structure of sure iterability, could not be quoted, did not bear repetition. It did not indicate an occasion, as Watson would say, for the *fertile awakening* of the ear. But how can Bell ever have hoped to hear what Watson heard? Bell can only have heard what his ear could tell him.

Visible Speech and the Bell Boys cl ick

Bell was the third Bell in a line of direct descent to be a pro-

fessional in the field of speech. In the early part of the nineteenth century, his grandfather, Alexander Bell, was a recognized authority on pure diction, a teacher of speech, and the author of a pop textbook on elocution, familiarly known as 'Elegant Extracts'. We are intent on shaking up the reputedly intractable father-son incorporated that is indicated in a number of other texts on the subject. At best, father's tend to occupy the agreeably remote but urgent space of an operator for geniuses as they loop back to the figure of the grandfather for a direct line to future engenderment. Long distance recommends itself if anything is to be accomplished, particularly under the pressure of an intimate configuration. Still, paternal removal systems amount only to a momentary suspension.

Freud has given abundant explanation of a grandparently primacy in terms of the affective bonding that too easily slips into bondage with a precariously local connection. This is important to establish at the outset, though our purpose does not consist in elaborating a psychology of the son at this point. Fathers, as in Kafka, spread their bodies across the global map, leaving very little (but immeasurable) territory for one to work with. Somehow, they are to be bypassed by an automatic switch. Bell's father was to a certain degree surpassed, a move that carries with it the stroke of ambivalence, at once in service of and annihilating the other, appropriating the work of the other to oneself within a structure of inescapable usurpation. Again, Freud has supplied a reading of the anxiety involved in surpassing the father which, on the Acropolis, he located on the grounds of filial piety. He had himself had an attack of incapacitating piety when at long last he reached his goal of seeing the ancient temple. Let us however skip the familial bypass and get down to business. The survival guides that flank telephone books maintain the connection between a broken, stammering body and the telephone, the father's link.

Melville Bell corrected faults of speech, then, *following his father's methods, and won further local renown by installing a speaking tube in a shop—an innovation for St. John's in the early forties*. Like his son after him Melville Bell repeated the amorous history of his father, in this case by marrying a mature woman. *She was thirty-five. Melville Bell was ten years younger. History was repeated.* (m, 17) We know what that means. Among the more engaging things, it means that this family created an extremely fine copying mechanism for the transmission of desire.

The Melville Bells produced three babies, all of them not girls. The second, born on his grandfather's birthday, March 3, 1847, was baptized Alexander. To his family he was 'Aleck' as long as he lived.

In the mid-forties, in Edinburgh, Melville Bell advertised in the city directory as 'Professor of Elocution and the Art of Speech.' He soon announces his famous system of alphabets known as 'Visible Speech'.

In Visible Speech, Melville Bell reduced to a series of printed symbols the anatomical positions which the speaking organs take in uttering sounds. These symbols were so drawn as to indicate the shapes taken by the lips, the positions of the tongue, and so on, and once a sound was written in its proper symbols, the initiate had only to reproduce the physical position with his own organs of speech in order to reproduce the sound. There was, for instance, a symbol indicating 'closed lips, voice passed through the nose.' There were only ten basic symbols, and these, in various combinations, covered the whole range of vocal sound in any tongue.

At a time when music and speaking machines were to share the same status, as for example in E.T.A. Hoffmann's *Automaton*, AGB was also musically formed by a mother who could not hear. In case we weren't on alert for the hazards of reconstituting narratives, we must at least with this observation be on guard before easily plucked psycho-genealogies of the sort mother/ear, although this in the final analysis is not altogether wrongheaded. In other words, conclusions can be correct even when unsupported by the mere empiricity of facts. Aleck, according to M., *inherited* an acute ear from a deaf mother. This means that the biographer got herself involved in the family story of denial.¹¹ Still, it makes sense. Who would be more attuned to the hearing than a deaf mother?

As a child AGB and his siblings developed different kinds of retention structures, storage pockets for relics, and body parts — what we tend to call a "natural" museum. The three Bell boys collected natural objects, animate and inanimate. Aleck himself went *through a period of intense scientific inquiry in which he dissected field mice and collected the skulls of other small animals for his 'museum'.* (m, 25) The compulsion to collect and preserve, the imagination that contains within it a museum which doesn't let go of its object, shaped the childhood of a boy who *didn't like to play games.*

As we know, Ma Bell was partially deaf. AGB's earliest performances, his first discursive repetitions, were designed to the ear of a partially deaf mother. The suturing of disconnected speech began by translation into a system other than the mother's museum of the deaf. His father trained Aleck to speak a particularly accentless English which was punctilious regarding diction and pronunciation. As a result AGB could be identified neither as an Englishman nor as a Scotsman, nor as anything contaminated by the accent marks of local speech. This suspension of regional traits, the porcelain quality of an unmarked speech, indicates membership in a club of literary speech effects while also urging the beginning of a broadcast system of diction that harbors its own myth of phonetic purity, belonging topographically nowhere. The homogenization of a spoken language gathered into a traceless spot of geonational graphics, foreshadows the network of links that make up the smooth run of long distance language.

Once, on a visit to London, Melville Bell had heard a performance of the philosophical toy, "Euphonia," Professor Faber's "speaking machine" which was making mechanical noises at the Egyptian Hall. Upon returning, the father of visible speech offered his two older boys a prize if they could themselves make a speaking automaton. *I don't suppose he thought we could produce something of value in itself, AGB used to say, but he knew we could not experiment and manufacture anything which even tried to speak, without learning something of the voice, and the throat and the mouth -- all that wonderful mechanism of sound production in which he was so interested.* (m, 26) Neither boy had ever seen an automaton, so they decided to copy the structure of the human organs of speech. *My brother and I went to work; he was to make the lungs and the vocal cords, I was to make the mouth and the tongue. He made a bellow for the lungs, and a very good vocal apparatus out of rubber. I devised a skull and moulded a tongue with rubber, stuffed with cotton wool, and supplied the soft part of the throat with the same material.* The word "material" verges, for this scientific project as in Freud's, on essentializing a rhyme with *mater*. *Then I arranged the joints, so that the jaw and the tongue could move. It was a great day for us when we fitted the two parts of the device together* (two, always two of them, a partnership, double and uncanny).

Did it speak, or, what spoke? According to Bell's recording it squeaked and squawked a good deal, ***But it made a very passable imitation of 'Ma-ma, Ma-ma!'*** Repetition and imitation, together the two men reconstruct the possibility of channeling the self-repeating ma-ma. M. narrates: *The great thing was that it worked, Melville energetically plying the bellows; Aleck opening and shutting the lips. And if its 'Ma-ma' which transported the youngsters was actually somewhat less human than it seemed to their prejudiced ears, its construction had taught them the mechanism of human speech. Melville Bell was satisfied. (m, 27)*

The boys were pathologists of speech. In the late summer afternoons Aleck held his Skye terrier between his knees, opening and shutting its jaws, trying to oblige the dog to growl 'How-do-you-do?' As an activity, teaching to the speechless was globalized from the start, though AGB eventually let the canine pedagogy go in favor of other speaking entities.

Aleck made his first public appearance for the purpose of demonstrating his father's system of visible speech. Of these tests, later repeated publicly in Glasgow, one is described by a contemporary and friend of Melville Bell, the Reverend David Macrea:

We had a few friends with us that afternoon, and when Bell's sons had been sent away to another part of the house, out of earshot, we gave Bell the most peculiar and difficult sounds we could think of, including words from the French and the Gaelic, following these with inarticulate sounds as of kissing and chuckling. All these Bell wrote down in his Visible Speech alphabet and his sons were then called in.

I well remember our keen interest and astonishment as the lads-not yet thoroughly versed in the new alphabet-stood side by side looking earnestly at the paper their father had put in their hands, and slowly reproducing sound after sound just as we had uttered them. Some of these sounds were incapable of phonetic representation with our alphabet.

One friend in the company had given as his contri-

bution a long yawning sound, uttered as he stretched his arms and slowly twisted his body like one in the last stages of weariness. Of course Visible Speech could only represent the sound and not the physical movement and I well remember the shouts of laughter that followed when the lads, after studying earnestly the symbols before them, reproduced the sound faithfully, but like the ghost of its former self in its detachment from the stretching and body twisting with which it had originally been combined.
 (m, 32)

The voice disembodiment of which the last lines speak is perhaps most striking about this description, giving vent to the ghost-utterance that disengages itself from a presumably living though wearily wasted body (*like one in the last stage of weariness*)

Whereas earlier we found an example of repetition for the sake of the maternal ear, here we witness repetition in the form of a paternalizing mouth organ – the lads are called in to mouth the *oeuvre* of the father, to bring forth into the space of representation the visible speech formerly hidden, concealed. The brothers conducted the performance with such earnest mimetic application that even a yawn, the resounding cavity of paternal buccality, echoes at the end to mark its end. What they appear to produce, taking down the lessons of the father, concerns the Hamletian ghost of its former self. The link-up of this ghost to the lads, one of whom will survive to report the other, has merely been installed at this point of the biographical narrative, mediated by the father. Between the maternally enfolded ear and the paternal mouth, the pair of brothers are already on the telephone, a project they had begun to construe in a determined fashion since at least the speaking automaton built under the command of the father to utter *ma-ma*.

Surviving the Mama-Papa Machine cl...e-0 *0c ss 1'' Δ0f0'≥.....ick

Aleck became a passionately absorbed teacher, endeavoring to restore speech to silence, trying to induce silence towards a language that might be apprehended by his maternal ear. He put *one pupil after another through the test sen-*

tences of his father's system—'I see the panting spirit sigh' (not spirits eye)... demonstrating the postures approved for lecturing, for reciting, for preaching; right foot in front, weight on left foot; neck upright, chin horizontal; arms relaxed (m, 44) The test or paradigm sentence feeds into the receiving mouth of telephony, one that can hardly be taken as fortuitous in its formation or usage. The spirit, diverted in terms of sight perception (not spirits eye) wanders through a barely linguistic sound production, that of sighing, as if in the moan of a sustained lament. The test sentence teaches the deaf the conversion from sight to hearing effected by the distillation of a full bodied entity into spirit.

In the typical drama of fatherly erasure, M. asserts of Alexander Bell: *in his father's absence he came to his full stature professionally*. The doublings into which Aleck grew are now to become spiritualized, incorporated into an inwardly stretched Bell system and partially externalized in the form of a substitute other, Watson. We are in the year 1870. The eldest son, Melville Bell, faces the threat of the same disease from which the younger brother has died. Aleck goes to Edinburgh to relieve his brother of his teaching cares, but just as health appears to have been restored, *Melville died with shocking suddenness*. A double dispossession, losing both brothers, one of whom he had tried to replace, and who himself in name replaces the father. *The double burden of teaching during his father's absence, and his most recent anxieties, had had their full effect on Aleck's health. His grief-stricken parents suddenly became aware of his pallor and frequent exhaustion. Their fears were confirmed. Aleck's health was seriously impaired.* (m, 44-45) Seriously impaired. Go over the details. Melville Bell had been lecturing in America to return home to find Aleck who in his absence *came to his full stature professionally*. This implied a classical structure of disaster: the absent father returns to discover the fullness of his absence. Theseus, for example. Except that here there is no *cordon sanitaire* limiting the drama to a single son or figure of alterity. Melville Bell will not have been the only one supplanted, but Aleck's singularity coincides, at least symbolically, with the sacrifice of his brothers, whom Aleck had tried to replace. It quickly becomes clear that from now on everything depends on Aleck; a restitutive structure emerges. Aleck will be re-

sponsible for returning to his father his due. Replaceability will become his burden. Charged with translating the departed figures into a ghost of themselves, he assumes responsibility for reconnecting that which had disappeared into the theater of the invisible. The spirit's sigh. The remaining triangle prepares to leave the mother continent. The *recollection of my early experiences*, said Melville Bell of his former visit to Newfoundland, *determined me to try the effect of a change of climate for the benefit of my only remaining son....* (m, 45)

The move is made towards what remains, a surviving son. At fifty-one, Melville Bell abandoned his London career, its professional associations and its friendships, and, very largely, the fame for which he had worked through a lifetime of extraordinary activity, which was never to be regained. *For the parents could not be separated from this one surviving son.* (m, 45)

We need to understand this drama of exhausted survival and convoke if we have to, which we do, the many ghosts that accompany its unfolding. The family, shrouded in the veils of grief, sails to a new region, disconnecting from everything — an event at once consisting in the cause and effect of the move. It is amputated, reduced to its essentiality of family - Dasein, the maternal, paternal and a fragile sign of its future. The whole drama becomes involved in the pathos of revival, reviving the one remaining son whose task it will be to recall the fraternal spirits, to make them respond to his secret conjurings so that a father's mouth and a mother's ear might be granted a place of reception for the voices of the lost sons. Remember, though by now you must have forgotten, that this represents the kind of scenario which Freud evokes much later, his child has gone away, the telephone brings him back as a voice departed, where the telephone becomes the origin of writing: the voice of the departed, instantaneously transcribed. Alexander Graham Bell's project will consist in literalizing the opening cut into absence made by Visible Speech.

The Technological Cut cl · · · · · ick

Since one of the branches of its genealogical tree link it to the predicament of deafness, the telephone will always, unhappily, be hard of hearing. With the deaf-mute, **language is cut**

to the quick. Theories rush in emergency supplies to dress the wound. The stakes are high and abundantly argued. We shall have to content ourselves with the results of a microrecording that situates telephonics within an order of deafness. The condition which Dr. Johnson called the most desperate of human calamities, deafness focalized the subject's site in language and the spatialization of accoustical images. David Wright, the deaf man who wrote, and among the first to accede to language in this way, speaks of the phantasmal voices which he constantly hears.¹² The deaf suffer an *a priori* disconnectedness that technology promises to repair, ever trying to rehabilitate the Wild Boy of Aveyron. The deaf are unable phenomenally to hear the Other. I think Bell was working both sides of the switchboard at this time. On the night shift, and always working for the Other, he outlines his early incredulity concerning the value of lip-reading to the deaf:

My original scepticism concerning the possibility of speech reading had one good result: it led me to devise an apparatus that might help the children ... a machine to hear for them, a machine that should render visible to the eyes of the deaf the vibrations of the air that affect our ears as sound ... It was a failure, but that apparatus, in the process of time, became the telephone of today. It did not enable the deaf to see speech as others hear it, but it gave ears to the telegraph, and today we hear in Boston what is spoken in New York and Chicago. (m, 57)

If you and I hear each other it is because the apparatus to make the deaf see sky-writing ghosts knew failure. To render visible to the eyes was not possible. Another way of saying this is that he could not invent an enabling machine to make the dead hear the vibrations of the air. Still another way of translating this failure that *should render visible* - as if a commandment or an ethical imperative were being stated - is that Visible Speech failed Alexander Graham Bell at this crucial time of mourning. The deaf and the departed, linked by the register of the interlingual dead, could not be reached, not yet, and not through a speech conjuring apprehended in terms of its visibility.

I trust, Mr. Bell concludes apologetically, that you will

pardon personal allusions to my own work. He trusts and he apologizes; he has somehow become much too personal – pardon personal allusions to my own work – in this history of an aberrant invention, as if his ownmost work were to expose the personal work of the grief-stricken. He assigns the origin of the telephone to the missing children known as the deaf— children or siblings fully out of earshot. It is only right that it should be known that the telephone is one of the products of the work of the Horace Mann School for the Deaf, and resulted from my attempts to benefit the children of this school. (m, 57)

In those days there were always people like the young neighbor, Richards, occupying the room next to Bell's,

who would let Bell string wires on their premises, who would make up a human circuit for him by clasping hands in a row, and fill their ears with water to listen for an electrical effect; all because he was such a very engaging young man, even if he was, regrettably, a little mad.

Like the archetypal inventor eaten up by a compulsion or a starving Other who inhabits him, AGB allows himself to be vampirized by his machine. He virtually ceases to eat and to sleep, technologizing himself to the point of breaking down.¹³ *He ate as infrequently as he slept, and in the spring of 1873, he was a wreck. In May he went home to Brantford, to his mother's anxious care (m, 58)*

The Deaf Mute

AGB returned to Boston in October, 1873. He took up residency at Salem. Thomas Sanders, his patron, welcoming back his protégé, wonders: *Which of us is happier— I who have found such an artist, or you who have found such a prince?* We are still talking art, and of the poetry diverting a child from the isolation of deafness, saving the child in language, bringing him to the proximity of speech with his father. Alexander Graham Bell did this – an act of genuine *poiesis*—for Thomas Sanders' little boy. The father's unpayable gratitude for this mediated return of the son (to Speech, to him and therefore, in some sense, to the law of the father)

took the form of a transfer of funds. For rendering his child accessible to speech, Sanders granted Bell an atelier in which to pursue his oto-experiments. His mother, Mrs. Sanders, turned over to Bell the entire third floor of her house, *and wires ran down the stairways to the basement workshop* which had been fitted up for the tutor's use.

I offer this detail in order to show a subtle transaction taking place which, while shifting the locality and terms a bit, nonetheless serves to reinforce the structure that has been emerging in its tender frangibility. Bell has entered a strict economy which approaches the incalculable in terms of desire and effects. To reduce it to a rude formula would not rob the economy of its riches, however. The great debt that Mr. Sanders acknowledged was incurred principally as father. Bell was to reconnect his son to him, draw him out of silence's heavy isolation chambers. In return – and it is a question only of returns – Bell incurred a debt towards Mr. Sanders who turned over his home to him, supporting his experiments, his desire to wire up a family dwelling into connection with itself, but currently cut off from itself. The house turned over to Bell is held by a mother. The reduced perspective shows how the telephone in part grew simultaneously with the economy engaged by the assumption of a grateful father attaching a remote son. As the system capable of giving him his son, Bell simultaneously occupies the place of a mother and that of an engendering father, the other to whom and from whom the seed is destined. He gives the father a child. At once transmitting and receiving, AGB speaks conjuringly and makes the thingly silent one emit sounds. The telephone could arise only within such a space divided upon itself from top, the third floor, to rock bottom, the ground, if not *the basement*. *He also lectured that winter at the School of Oratory of Boston University, where he was 'Professor of Vocal Physiology.'* (m, 60) He had not abandoned his father; in fact he has amplified him, strengthened his debt, splitting the father in two, hearing his encouragement stereophonically, supported on one ear by Melville Bell and the other, Thomas Sanders.

August, 1871 Flint, Michigan "Speech" cl ——— v ——— v ——— v ——— v ——— ick

Speech, he said, *is a mere motion of the air*. His revival

talk shows the air moving with speech, the panting spirit's sigh, as it momentarily runs out of breath. We could say he was now sucking into a bereaved diaphragm the air on whose vocalizations the sibling apparitions were borne. Resuscitation through air, nonsubstantializable as it is, infiltrates a number of texts. There will be no telephone without the vaporous phantasms of an air that speaks. What immediately comes to mind, with the instantaneousness of a call out of nowhere, is the bereaved telephone calling that organizes *Franny and Zooey*, a novel rising out of the desire to reconnect a lost brother.¹⁴ But Aleck hasn't even invented the uncanny telephone yet, whose posturing involves an upward and downward movement, locating its possibility in the shuttle between mouth and ear, en route to language's homecoming. Aleck's extensional hermeneutics of aerial speech was disclosed when he was twenty-five.

The Toxic Telephone

*

ick

If his own family had diminished to the minimal requirements of familial accountability, AGB soon counted himself in another concept of family, and one that paid tribute, as if to help him cover his impossible debt, to ancestral spirits. Bell entered the reservation of the Six Nations Indians near Brantford in order to analyze, with a view to Visible Speech, their language. What constituted his rapport to the Iroquois, the Mohawks, weaves together the ceremonial and speech, a deeply ritualized rapport to death. The Iroquois language became an object of study for Alexander Bell in a way that permits us to peruse the signifier of their tribal mark. The Mohawks of the Iroquois language derived their name from "real adder"—relating in the other spirituality, with which Bell had some cause of recognition, to the story of a genesis, the Iroquoia or snake that whispered into Eve's ear the desire to incorporate something forbidden, something as modest as an apple. This put God on the line. The retribution of an angry God made itself felt. The tube-like snake had its legs amputated for its toxic telephones. War dances began; paradise became a long-distance call of considerable expense. The first *Guilty!* resounded from Eden's transmitter. Absence, exile

wife. And if this strange community of receptors seems too cryptic or disjunctive, we have only to think of the dead ear into which he tried in his parental home to whisper life, the ear of the brother. He carries the ear about with him as if transporting the speech conveyance separating a thin membrane of Canada from the beyond, the membrane or veil of grief muffling the sounds of an impending séance. The dispersing point of his breath was aimed at the unhearing children who were still to be brought to language as their sole mode of existence. Again, we recall, that the deaf were considered more radically deprived of life than the blind, for blindly still we dwell in language

Avital Ronell (415)

Notes

¹ The Pacific Bell *Telephone Book*, copyright 1985.

² Franz Kafka, *Diaries 1914-1923*, ed. Max Brod, trans. Joseph Kresh (New York: Schocken Books, 1965) 128. See also Lawrence A. Rickels' discussion of Kafka's phone calls to Felice which in turn throws open the telephone switchboard at the Hotel Occident (GS 2:197). In *Aberrations of Mourning: Writing on German Crypts* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1988) 272-273.

³ The condensed milk dialactate, if you will, is the way Woodward starts recounting the "Technological Revolution" in her introduction to *The Technological Imagination: Theories and Fictions*. "Dialactate" was coined to capture the flow of this argument by Matt George, University of California, Berkeley.

⁴ The sudden death of AGB's brothers seems to call for an interpretation of telephonics in terms of the cryptonymy elaborated by Maria Torok and Nicolas Abraham, and Jacques Derrida. AGB signed a contract with his second brother, promising that communication superior to that of spiritual-

ism would be attempted. Nowadays many grave sites in California maintain open telephone lines.

⁵ Gregory Ulmer, in *Applied Grammatology* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985) 61, reviews perspectives that shed light on mourning as the idealization and interiorization of the mother's image.

⁶ Jacques Derrida, "Fors," trans. Barbara Johnson, *The Georgia Review* 21: 2 (1977)

⁷ Jacques Derrida, "Economimesis," in S. Agacinski et al., *Mimesis: des articulations* (Paris: Flammarion, 1975) 90.

⁸ *The Myths of Information: Technology and Postindustrial Culture*, ed. Kathleen Woodward (New York: Coda Press, 1980), xxv.

⁹ *Ibid.*, xx.

¹⁰ Cited in Catherine Mackenzie, *Alexander Graham Bell: The Man Who Contracted Space* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1928) 123. Henceforth we will be dialing "M" for Mackenzie.

¹¹ The Bell family lived in denial of the mother's deafness. The importance of the deaf in legal history and the regime of metaphysics cannot be overstated. I try to treat this and a number of topoi that appear in this paper in *The Telephone Book: Technology-Schizophrenia-Electric Speech* (University of Nebraska Press, forthcoming). Bell has received a lot of flack for his bias against signing as a principal means of communication for the deaf. Helen Keller, who learned to speak, dedicated her autobiography to him; but since then he has been criticized for forcing speech on the speechless. It ought to be stated, however, that a judicious interpretation of Bell's position on oralism would have to go through the metaphysical demands of the day. If Bell aimed at the perfectibility of the vocal cords, it was chiefly for the purpose of securing human rights for deaf mutes, whose essential humanity depended upon a logocentric membership card. By a simple but juridically necessary tautology, Bell was able to prove that the silent non-hearing citizen was capable of performative vocality. Humanism seems to say to us: no voice, no vote.

¹² David Wright, *Deafness* (New York: Stein and Day, 1969) is discussed in Oliver Sacks' review essay, "Mysteries of the Deaf" in the *New York Times Review of Books* (March 27, 1986) 23-33.

¹³ A history of the nervous breakdown would have to link perceptions of nervous disorder with power failures of a technological sort. A probing rhetoric of the psyche would show the degree to which we are constantly borrowing structures from the technosphere.

¹⁴ I haven't yet spoken to you about lighting up on the phone, smoking and the telephone, telling time per cigarette, ashes, language incineration. Wait. Let me get a cigarette. The Lighter? ... Fire! Catch the end passages from *Franny and Zooey* (J.D. Salinger, New York: Bantam Books, 1985, 201-202) for the dead brother impersonated on the line and a phenomenology of hanging up.

Click.