



sinister
resonance

The Mediumship of the Listener

DAVID TOOP

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Acknowledgements

Notes

*For Paul Burwell (1949–2007)
drumming in some smoke-filled region —
'And then the sea was closed again, above us' —
and Doris Toop (1912–2008)*

Prelude: Distant Music (on the contemplation of listening)

Out of deep dreamless sleep I was woken, startled by a hollow resonance, a sudden impact of wood on wood. Was the sound an isolated auditory event within my consciousness — a moment of dream without narrative or duration — or was it a real sound from the physical world? The reverberation time was too long for the sound to have emanated from the bedroom. This would imply a sound coming from somewhere else in the house, an echoing space, mysterious and distant. If that was the case, then I could only assume the presence of an intruder, unlikely as a possibility. The sound came from nowhere, belonged nowhere, so had no place in the world except through my description.

Words fly away; the written letter remains. Sound is absence, beguiling; out of sight, out of reach. What made the sound? Who is there? Sound is void, fear and wonder. Listening, as if to the dead, like a medium who deals only in history and what is lost, the ear attunes itself to distant signals, eavesdropping on ghosts and their chatter. Unable to write a solid history, the listener accedes to the slippage of time.

This possibility — that sound is nothing — is characteristic of sound, perplexing, disturbing yet dangerously seductive. Distant sounds of unknown origin are enshrined in myths, such as the Swedish legend of the Näckén — naked male water sprites living in rivers and lakes who lure children to their deaths with songs and the sounds of musical instruments. They have no reality as physical beings yet their sound, just beyond reach, is a deadly lure. Sound is a present absence; silence is an absent present. Or perhaps the reverse is better: sound is an absent presence; silence is a present absence? In this sense, sound is a sinister resonance — an association with irrationality and inexplicability, that which we both desire and dread. Listening, then, is a specimen of mediumship, a question of discerning and engaging with what lies beyond the world of forms. When sound, silence and other modalities of auditory phenomena are represented through ‘silent’ media, this association of mediumship becomes more acute. Dwelling in every written text there are voices; within images there is some suggestion of acoustic space. Sound surrounds, yet our relation to its enveloping, intrusive, fleeting nature is fragile (a game of Chinese whispers) rather than decisive.

As a boy I read James Fenimore Cooper’s nineteenth-century novel, *The Last of the Mohicans*, and became fixated on preternatural hearing, a recurring theme of the book. No footfall is safe from the cracking of a dry stick, no rustling of leaf free from suspicion: night trembles with calls and whispers that demand perpetual vigilance. The name of the central character is Hawk-eye, the scout with raptor vision, yet what I recall, and a rereading confirms this, is the importance of hearing to survival in the forest. Hawk-eye’s companion, Chingachgook, is always alert, head turned aside, ‘as though he listened to some distant and distrusted sounds.’ Cooper wrote frequently of a ‘breathing silence’ through which the harried protagonists must pass, often in darkness or concealment from their French or Iroquois enemies. Though the narrative becomes laborious and barely credible, Cooper maintains interest with vivid descriptions of an intense engagement with a sublime yet dangerous environment. Sight is prioritized — the naming of this engagement falls by default to the eye — but some of the most strikingly affective incidents of the story are auditory. When the fugitives led by Hawk-eye shelter in a cave, the comically pious singer, David Gamut, is interrupted in his impromptu recital of psalmody by a cry, ‘neither human, nor earthly’.

In this context, the cave functions as a vernacular church in which the sonorous tones of Christianity resonate in natural acoustics. Wilderness is reclaimed by holy texts that stir the emotions and raise the morale of the listeners, only to be pulled back into inexplicability by an external sound so strange that even the scout is inclined momentarily to consider unearthly origins. 'If 'twere only a battle,' he says, 'it would be a thing understood by us all, and easily managed, but I have heard that when such shrieks are atween heaven and 'arth, it betokens another sort of warfare!' Though the sound is understood eventually as the scream of terrified horses, its capacity to unnerve and confound is so powerful that only supernatural origins seem adequate as an explanation.

In *The Haunting*, Robert Wise's 1963 film adaptation of Shirley Jackson's psychological ghost story, a harp sounds without any sign of human activation, a sinister resonance. I don't believe in ghosts, at least not the kind hunted in television programmes like *Most Haunted* — wraiths draped in white, clanking knights and headless horsemen that nobody actually sees. But I am fascinated by the spectral qualities of sound, disturbing noises, eerie silences and the enchantments of music. Distant music is the perfect poetic expression for such qualities (another debt we owe to James Joyce), a reaching back into the lost places of the past, the slippages and mirages of memory, history reaching forward in the intangible form of sound to reconfigure the present and future.

All of us, or should I say those of us equipped from the beginning with the faculty of hearing, begin as eavesdroppers in darkness, hearing muffled sounds from an external world into which we have yet to be born. The film editor and sound recordist who invented the term 'sound design', Walter Murch, was intrigued by the paradox of hearing. Four and a half months after conception we begin to hear. This is the first of our senses to function: hearing dominates amniotic life and yet after birth its importance is overtaken by seeing. As a revolutionary sound designer for films such as *The Conversation*, *THX-1138*, *American Graffiti* and *Apocalypse Now*, Murch wondered why this should be so. 'The reasons, no doubt, go far back into our evolutionary past,' he wrote in an essay called 'Sound Design: The Dancing Shadow', 'but I suspect it has something to do with the child's discovery of causality. Sound, which had been absolute and causeless in the womb, becomes something understood to happen as the result of. The enjoyment a child takes in banging things together is the enjoyment of this discovery: first there is no sound, and then — bang! — there is.' If Murch is right, then sound without apparent source will always return us at some unconscious level to our pre-birth state, but with the added anxiety of awareness, of knowing that sounds should have a cause. If they lack a cause, then our need is to invent one.

'We are faced with the immense difficulty, if not the impossibility of verifying the past.' Harold Pinter once said. Places are saturated with unverifiable atmospheres and memory and these are derived as much from sound as any other sensation. 'How beautiful a London street is then,' Virginia Woolf wrote in her essay, 'Street Haunting: A London Adventure', 'with its islands of light, and its long groves of darkness, and on one side of it perhaps some tree-sprinkled, grass-grown space where night is folding herself to sleep naturally and, as one passes the iron railing, one hears those little cracklings and stirrings of leaf and twig which seem to suppose the silence of fields all around them, an owl hooting, and far away the rattling of a train in the valley.'

Although this book is more about listening than it is about music, in the first section I list

sounds and recordings of music that connect me with that presentiment of reaching back or forward over hidden far distance to hear echoes of an unverifiable past. Some of these recordings have never been released in digital formats, so I listen to them on vinyl. When the stylus connects with the surface of the record the crackle of this contact ushers in a ghost of time, even before music has begun. Like the cracklings and stirrings of leaf and twig heard by Virginia Woolf, this is a transformative sound, a sound that dispels for a moment the visual, tactile reality of the present. Inspired by Jacques Derrida's neologism, hauntology, a cabal of research, ideas and auditory practice has grown around such experiences, dedicated to exploring the ghostly and nostalgic affect of music. I will leave it to others to unpick the hauntological labyrinth of Derrida's *Specters of Marx*, but this haunted aspect of sound is fundamental to my earliest encounters with sound. In the amniotic ocean, all of us are unified by the furtive yet helpless condition of eavesdropping, unable to identify what we hear when its operation is enacted in another space, entirely beyond our experience as unborn beings.

Am I hearing things? Is there anybody there? I began a new phase of enquiry by asking such hypothetical questions. Why, for example, are the various modalities of sound — from silence to noise — associated so frequently with disquiet, uncertainty and fear, with childhood terrors and a horror of the unknown? At the same time, many people seem to be oblivious to noise and resistant to silence. The two positions seem contradictory, but are they inextricably linked?

'To listen is an effort,' Igor Stravinsky once said, 'and just to hear is no merit. A duck hears also.' Quite why a duck should be singled out as a symbol of unthinking sensory input is unclear (perhaps a misunderstanding over a viaduct and a chicken, though this is a conundrum only a Marx Brothers scholar could untangle). Stravinsky's point is that auditory discernment demands a certain attentive skill, but never mind the duck, the rest of his terminology could be questioned. Is listening more attentive than hearing, or is it the other way around? Both possess an active sense; neither can be consigned entirely to passivity: 'listen to your heartbeat'; 'she's just hearing things'. Listening may be executed with effort yet result in nothing being heard, whereas hearing may begin as instinct and end in *Le Sacre du Printemps*. The point is that all hearing individuals are open to sounds at all times. There is shuteye, but no shutear. Our reasons for deciding to listen, or learning to hear, may range from survival to poetry, from sexual desire to jealous desperation, from curiosity to snooping with malice. Developing our listening abilities in order to gain a deeper understanding of complex passages of sound from the entire auditory world — this is a decision that involves rejection of cultural norms.

I had been thinking more deeply about sound and silence, attempting to separate out the experience of hearing everyday sounds from the act of listening to music. Listening more intently to those microscopic sounds, atmospheres and minimal acoustic environments that we call silence, led me to examine more closely the subtle perceptual entwinement of our senses. I kept notes in a journal, recording ordinary events. In detail, at an emotional as well as a perceptual level, what was I hearing as I walked the dog in local woodland, or listened to the nocturnal murmurs of our house? A pleasurable intensity of sensation grew out of this practice. For example, as a late-night reader, I became more alert to the importance of sound in literature, not only for innovative twentieth-century authors such as James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, Franz Kafka, William Faulkner and Samuel Beckett, but in the supernatural fiction and

ghost stories of writers like Edgar Allan Poe, Algernon Blackwood, Shirley Jackson, Arthur Machen, Bram Stoker and Wilkie Collins.

I revisited John Berger's *Ways of Seeing* (asking myself why there was no equivalent *Ways of Hearing*) and found myself questioning aspects of his emphasis on seeing, particularly his belief that seeing establishes our place in the surrounding world. Yet from Berger's inspired reading of time and silence within the physical surface of *Woman Pouring Milk* by Vermeer it was possible to imagine a sound world within 'mute things', as Nicolas Poussin once described his profession of painting. For some years I had been conscious that my own ways of seeing had atrophied. I wanted to look again, with the same attention to detail that came naturally when I was an art student in my teens, before music and sound took over.

Then I visited the Wallace Collection in London, finding there a hushed atmosphere underscored by the gentle roar of air conditioning, the ticking of ornate eighteenth-century French clocks, and a quiet but insistent background note of chimes emanating from a sound installation by Leora Brook and Tiffany Black (otherwise known as brook & black). As I walked through the galleries, paced by time and broken time, floorboards creaked and echoed under the pressure of my footsteps. I had been there before, yet already there was a prickle of anticipation, a feeling described by Freud as 'the uncanny' in his 1919 essay of the same name.

One particular work in the collection began to link all these disparate threads. The painting was called *The Eavesdropper*, by Nicolaes Maes, a seventeenth-century Dutch artist who had joined Rembrandt's studio in his teens, then later became a highly successful portrait painter. *The Eavesdropper* is one of his early genre scenes, one of a series of six works on the same theme. What all of them show is a moment of surreptitious listening, a prolonged instant of collusion between the central figure within the painting and the person looking at the painting. Both of these protagonists silence themselves in order to hear sound from another space within the painting's frame. This led me to consider sounds as phenomena that are difficult to control or subdue, signals that may seem to come from nowhere, or an unknown source, then fade and die. In many circumstances, sound and silence are uncanny. That may be because we live in a visuocentric culture, so sound seems disturbingly intangible, indescribable or inexplicable by comparison with what we can see, touch and hold. It may also be a reaction to noise pollution, through which the rarity and unfamiliarity of clear listening environments can attach strange associations to quiet places or odd sounds.

On the day I finished revising the first draft of this book I read an interview with an American band, Animal Collective. One of the members recounted an epiphany, experienced when he first saw Stanley Kubrick's film, *The Shining*. In particular, the peculiarly conservative avant-gardism of Wendy Carlos's electronic music score was a revelation. 'It's strange,' he said, 'how abstract, non-musical sounds can have a really intense effect on you emotionally.' Kubrick's use of music and sound in *The Shining* was exemplary in this respect. For cinema of such reach and ambition, it was revolutionary. The alien atmosphere of Carlos's synthesized sounds heightens the eldritch power of Krzysztof Penderecki's *De Natura Sonoris No. 1*, the eerie suspended tension of Gyorgy Ligeti's *Lontano*, the crunching of snow, the bounce of a ball, the noise of Danny's small car as he races over the hotel's various floor coverings, or the distant echoes of old music by Henry Hall, Ray Noble and Jack Hylton that may be seeping through solid air to be heard by a disintegrating mind, or simply the sinister

resonance of a ghost. Their cumulative emotional effect is overwhelming; the question of whether one or other of them is music, noise, ambient sound, real music or good music is hardly an issue.

A line was cast into the dark, a search for similar memories of this emotional affect from my own childhood, particularly my acute fear of strange sounds heard within eerie silences, those things that go bump in the night. Looking at Dutch paintings of the early modern period stirred a realization: many of these painters were representing sounds, noise, silences and moments of listening through visual means. In other words, they were using one of the only means available to record auditory events for future centuries to decode. From that point I began to listen more closely to visual media from all periods. In many cases I heard nothing, but in artists as diverse as Juan Muñoz, Georges Seurat, Marcel Duchamp and Ad Reinhardt, encountered rich soundworlds. This unexpected sensation of clairaudience, of hearing inaudible sounds, either from remote history or recent times, struck me as uncanny, as if I could suddenly hear the grass growing or listen to the inner thoughts of a stranger.

The thought is not so strange. In *The Invention of Solitude*, Paul Auster describes something similar in relation to the crystalline silence of Vermeer's *Woman in Blue*: 'A. stares hard at the woman's face, and as time passes he almost begins to hear the voice inside the woman's head as she reads the letter in her hands.' Samuel Beckett wrote about looking at a painting by Emil Nolde, wanting to replay it over and over as you would a recording of music. All of these paintings in the Wallace Collection were silent recordings of auditory events, some more silent than others. Sound haunts their silence as a spectre of history that can never be heard in full, yet its presence is buried within their creation.

Sound and silence have become the recent focus of a rapid expansion of interest. As if now worn out, the century of cinema, television, photography and audio records relinquishes control to less tangible sensations of a new time. But this sudden growth suggests that the phenomenon of sound in itself, distinct from music and speech, has been neglected in the past. I hope to show that sound — and by sound I mean the entire continuum of the audible and inaudible spectrum, including silence, noise, quiet, implicit and imagined sound — can be identified as a sub-text, a hidden if uncertain history within otherwise silent media. It's not so much that sound has been neglected. A profound engagement with sound runs through all aspects of human culture and yet in many cases that engagement goes unrecognized. Neglect invariably engenders a counter movement, so sound and silence (and even noise) can be idealized as the most pure and positive of all sensory impressions. This, it seems to me, reduces the fullness of sound, ignoring its darker attributes as trespasser, invader of territory, agent of instability, unreliable witness. 'I confess my predilection for the silent arts,' wrote Eugene Delacroix in his journal, 'for those mute things of which Poussin made profession, as he said. Words are indiscreet; they break in on your tranquillity, solicit your attention and arouse discussion.' Exactly these irritants may be the reasons why sound is valued — Delacroix also claimed to prefer the society of things to that of men. 'Silence is always impressive,' he wrote, 'even fools look respectable when they are silent.' But surging beneath this respectability there are the problematic properties of silence as chaos, lacuna, intangible presence. Sound is energy unleashed, yet also the perpetual emerging and vanishing, growth and decay of life and death — the perfect metaphor for a ghost.

Freud's description of the uncanny as eerie or frightening, the unhomely sensations arising

from that which is unfamiliar and uncertain, particularly when they are once familiar feelings that have become secret or repressed, extended to the uncanny nature of silence and darkness. Inconclusively, at the end of his famous essay, he attributed this to infantile anxieties that none of us fully overcome. Such fears may be childish, but they are rooted in very deep memories of unknown sounds and eerie silences overheard in the dark. Perhaps this returns us once again to the womb, floating in darkness, eavesdropping on mysterious sounds from the unknown world outside. These anxieties are not easily overcome, so when a writer or director needs to evoke atmospheres, administer shocks or summon the uncanny, sound is powerful in its capacity to disturb, to unsettle and install dread.

Just as a silent reader is implicitly a containment of sounds, so the letter itself, the silent speaker, can become a listener. 'The door was shut; and to suppose that wood, when it creaks, transmits anything save that rats are busy and wood dry is childish', wrote Virginia Woolf in *Jacob's Room*. And yet, a letter, personified as Jacob's mother, sits waiting on the hall table, eavesdropping on the faint sounds of her son (his unthinkable sexuality), 'stretching with Florinda,' on the other side of the bedroom door. 'But if the pale blue envelope lying by the biscuit-box had the feelings of a mother, the heart was torn by the little creak, the sudden stir. Behind the door was the obscene thing, the alarming presence, and terror would come over her as at death, or the birth of a child.' Sounds, along with silences, are invoked frequently as signs of the uncanny. Writing about his drawings, Odilon Redon said that they place us, as does music, 'in the world of the ambiguous and the indeterminate.' This is not dissimilar to ideas expressed by Walter Murch, who believed that contemporary cinema is diminished by its technical capacity to show everything imaginable under the sun.

What comes together through sound is emergent and passing time — a sense of duration, the field of memory, a fullness of space that lies beyond touch and out of sight, hidden from vision. Sound must be trusted, cannot be trusted, so has power. When sound that should be present seems to be absent, this is frightening. Through silence we come face to face with ourselves, but into silence sound may enter, intruder again, a question directed at tangible, visible reality. 'One can look at seeing;' wrote Marcel Duchamp, 'one can't hear hearing.' Through that strange anomaly of the senses, the way we perceive the world and the ways in which we represent those perceptions, we strain to hear what can never be there.

Sinister Resonance begins with the premise that sound is a haunting, a ghost, a presence whose location in space is ambiguous and whose existence in time is transitory. The intangibility of sound is uncanny — a phenomenal presence both in the head, at its point of source and all around — so never entirely distinct from auditory hallucinations. The close listener is like a medium who draws out substance from that which is not entirely there. Listening, after all, is always a form of eavesdropping

Because sound vanishes into air and past time, the history of listening must be constructed from the narratives of myth and fiction, 'silent' arts such as painting, the resonance of architecture, auditory artefacts and nature. In such contexts, sound often functions as a metaphor for mystical revelation, instability, forbidden desires, disorder, formlessness, the supernatural, for the breaking of social taboos, the unknown, unconscious and extra-human.

PART I

Aerial — Notes Toward a History of Listening

1 Drowned by voices

‘For beauty is nothing but the beginning of terror ...’

– RAINER MARIA RILKE

Ishmael is ruminating on Narcissus, in the Loomings section of *Moby Dick*. Narcissus could not grasp the ‘tormenting, mild’ reflection of himself he saw mirrored in water, so plunged and drowned. ‘But that same image we ourselves see in all rivers and oceans’, Melville wrote. ‘It is the image of the ungraspable phantom of life; and this is the key to it all.’

Through sound heard in darkness, this ungraspable phantom comes to haunt the crew of the Pequod:

At last, when the ship drew near to the outskirts, as it were, of the Equatorial fishing grounds, and in the deep darkness that goes before the dawn, was sailing by a cluster of rocky islets; the watch — then headed by Flask — was startled by a cry so plaintively wild and unearthly — like half-articulated wailings of all the ghosts of all Herod’s murdered Innocents — that once and all, they started from their reveries, and for the space of some moments stood, or sat, or leaned all transfixedly listening, like the carved Roman slave, while that wild cry remained within hearing. The Christian or civilized part of the crew said it was mermaids, and shuddered; but the pagan harpooners remained unappalled. Yet the grey Manxman — the oldest marine of all — declared that the wild thrilling sounds that were heard, were the voices of newly drowned men in the sea.

For sailors, the sound of haunting voices heard at sea is a mystery solved by recalling the story of Ulysses in *The Odyssey*, the ears of his crew stuffed with wax to shield their hearing from the death lure of siren song: ‘And a call, pure, long and throbbing’, wrote James Joyce in the Sirens section of *Ulysses*. ‘Long in dying call.’ But from Ahab, a man in obsessive pursuit of the white whale, the void, *Moby Dick*, they learn the truth. The sound they hear is made by seals that have lost their cubs, but according to Ahab, this eerie sound of distress is not the only cause of superstition among sailors. ‘Under certain circumstances,’ he tells them, ‘seals have more than once been mistaken for men.’

DUMBED BY THE CHARM

In *The Voyage of Maildun’s Boat (Immram curaig Maíle Dúin)*, an ancient Irish tale first written down in the early eighth century, a curragh, a boat of wood lath and animal skins, carries Maildun and more than sixty other men from southern Ireland over a boundless ocean. Number is important. Maildun, also known as Maeldune or Maelduin, was cautioned by a man of divination and spirits that he should embark on his mission of revenge with no more nor less than sixty companions. In fact, the exactitude of the wizard is not matched by translators of the story, as in some versions there are seventeen rather than sixty and this seems more likely for a boat of skins. Whatever the numbers, this condition of travel was compromised from the outset by the misplaced goodwill of his foster-brothers. We join your voyage or drown, they say, plunging into the sea. Exceeding its sacred quota the craft is diverted from violent purpose by a magical storm, then forced to accede either to the will of

God or chance, depending on one's beliefs.

Drifting and wandering where the wind and currents pull them, through haunted weather and transparent seas, Maildun and his followers encounter a series of wonders. Each of these is confined to its own island — deserts in the ocean — as if the world were a body, a map of disease and pathology, within which all entities, plagues and humours could be located and isolated precisely. There is an isle of giant ants; an isle of red-hot animals; an isle of cannibalistic quadrupeds; a monster who rotates himself within his own skin; an isle populated by people of black skin and clothing, all weeping as they walk; an isle split in two halves of black and white; an isle of laughing that transforms one of their company into this state of permanent joy.

Sound is the precursor to some of these strange adventures, an early warning of what will be. In others, sound is a charm, a binding of spells. There is the small island on which they find a fortress. The door of this fortress is connected to the land by a glass bridge. According to the Celtic scholars who published translations of the story between 1879 and 1906, details of the door differ slightly. In P. W. Joyce's translation, the door is festooned with a copper chain and silver bells; in the translations of Lady Gregory and Whitley Stokes, the door is brass, with brass fittings. A woman comes with a pail, lifts a slab of glass from the bridge and fills her pail with water from the well. She acknowledges Maildun and leaves. 'After this they were striking the brazen fastenings and the brazen net that was before them,' wrote Whitley Stokes, 'and then the sound which they made was a sweet and soothing music, which sent them to sleep till the morrow morning.' For three nights they try to gain entry to the door in the same way, but the metal music entrances them. At the conclusion, their waking brings the evaporation of a dream. No sign can be seen of a fortress, a woman, or even an island.

On the first island appearing out of the great endless ocean, they discover the men who murdered Maildun's father. Eavesdropping outside their forts, they hear the warrior who committed the murder boasting. The scene is mirrored at the end of the tale, when they eavesdrop again at the same spot and realize that the vengeful motive that drove them has melted in the heat of their initiatory trials and revelations. They hear the murmur of surf through darkness, a sign that land is close. Then at night, after their somniferous experience on the island that vanishes, they hear on the air, from a distant north-easterly direction, a low confusion of voices, as if many people are singing psalms. Following the sound until noon the next day, they arrive finally at the Isle of Speaking Birds, black, brown and speckled, all shouting and singing with human voices.

SINGING FROM THE DEEP WATERS

Over the years I have imagined this sound as an unearthly composite of some of what I like, or partially like: those birds prone to harsh volubility, such as rooks, magpies and jays; the shifting, sliding manner, water flowing over water, in which a congregation negotiates Gaelic psalms on the Scottish island of Lewis; vocal polyphony from Corsica, Sardinia, Bulgaria; antiphonal choirs of Georgia; the elaborate melisma and falsetto of Korean Buddhist *pomp'a* *hossori* chanting; one-voice chording of Tantric Buddhist rites of Tibet; chants of Ethiopian Coptic *debteras*; the updraft and eddies of air suggested by Poul Rovsing's Olsen's 1975 recording of a Sufi group of 25 men, worshipping in the Khalif's mosque in Baghdad; Morton Feldman's *Rothko Chapel*; the Scratch Orchestra singing 'Paragraph 7' of Cornelius Cardew's

Great Learning; Krzysztof Penderecki's *Canticum canticorum salomonis*; György Ligeti's *Lux aeterna*; 'Search For Delicious' by Panda Bear; the Beach Boys at their most blissed, bootlegged and outré; Björk's 'Pleasure Is All Mine' and 'An Echo, A Stain'; Tim Buckley's 'Starsailor'; *The Bird Song* by Muhal Richard Abrams; songs by Guillaume de Machaut and Gesualdo da Venosa; *The Country of the Stars* by Elisabeth Lutyens; Gustav Holst's *Choral Hymns from the Rig Veda*; the 4th movement of Giacinto Scelsi's 1966 work for ondes Martenot, chorus, percussionists and small orchestra — *Uaxuctum*; *The Legend of the Mayan City which they themselves destroyed for religious reasons*; Olivier Messiaen's *Oraison* for ondes martenot ensemble; Miya Masaoka's a cappella choral work, *While I was walking, I heard a sound*; Salvatore Sciarrino's *La Bocca, I Piedi, Il Suono* for 4 saxophone soloists and 100 saxophones in movement; John Zorn's *The Clavicle of Solomon*; Alan Lamb's recordings of wind humming through long telegraph wires in rural Australia; Max Eastley's aeolian wind flutes; the whistling of strong winds through John Butcher's soprano saxophone, recorded near Stenness, in the Orkney Islands; the dream chord (as La Monte Young described it) of Japanese gagaku court music; sacred flute music from Papua New Guinea; potoos and howler monkeys from South America; lemurs and aye-ayes from Madagascar; the umbrella of noise formed by gangs of starlings massing in the treetops of my local wood and in Scotland's north-western highlands, blubbersome gobbets of foetid moaning wind snorted out by seals over the mercury shimmer of Loch Linnhe into thin silver air.

In Beijing I heard the eerie cloud-chord of pigeon flocks flying overhead, each bird fitted with a globular multi-pitch whistle made from a lacquered gourd. As the flock wheeled through the sky in mysterious patterns so the strange unbounded sound of their whistles followed in a vapour trail like finely perfumed smoke. *Ko-tze*, these eight note whistles are called, and their practical function is to deter birds of prey. The one on my desk, a six-centimeter mottled brown globe given to me by an old man in the hutongs of Beijing, feather light in the palm and face-on like a cross between an African mask and an alien spaceship, looks little different to the *ko-tze* collected prior to 1890 and photographed for a postcard published by the Pitt-Rivers Museum in Oxford. The otherworldly formlessness of their sound serves as a symbol of paradise and its freedoms in Frank Capra's 1937 film of *Lost Horizon*.

'You know, every time I see you I hear that music,' Conway the diplomat says to Sondra, the woman he meets in Shangri-La. 'What is it?'

'You mean my pigeons,' she says.

'Was this your idea?' he asks. No, there are at least 13 examples from the nineteenth century housed in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, is the answer she should have given, though of course she says yes. Dimitri Tiomkins's soundtrack cue is persuasively unearthly at this point. Orchestrated by the African-American composer William Grant Still, whose piano works, notably *Bells: Phantom Chapel* and *Seven Traceries: Mystic Pool* and *Out of the Silence*, are hauntological evocations of place and moment, Sondra pigeon music is a blurred cascade of harp arpeggios, dissonant see-sawing strings and what might be a held organ chord, anticipating minimal and ambient music nearly three decades before its birth.

I also recall a murmur of speaking and singing voices heard many years ago at night, as I lay half awake in a room directly above the mill race of a barn in Devon. These apparitional voices were picked out from the white noise complexity of a rushing stream diverted through

resonant interior space below. They gave the impression of communicating in an unknown tongue bridging music and human speech, and even though it made no sense to me I felt a strong compulsion to decipher the language. Like the interwoven streaming inner voices of Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*, such secrets present themselves as a potentiality of meaning to the attentive eavesdropper: 'One must have patience and infinite care and let the light sound whether of spiders' delicate feet on a leaf or the chuckle of water in some irrelevant drainpipe, unfold too.' Others have noted similar ethereal musics:

T. S. Eliot's 'voices singing out of empty cisterns and exhausted wells', Thomas Hardy's 'wind oozing thin through the thorn from norward/And the woman calling', and the strangely wounded children, the White Order of the Innocents in Arthur Machen's short story, 'The Happy Children'. Heard by the narrator, they sing 'from the deep waters' an old tune, whose 'modulations were such as I had never heard before.' Composer John Ireland experienced a momentary vision of phantom children during a picnic on the Sussex Downs, at a spot haunted by relics of a prehistoric fort, Neolithic flint mines, and a medieval lepers' colony and church. They danced around him in silence, dressed in archaic clothes. He wrote to Machen, recounting his vision. Machen replied, by postcard, with a blithe, 'Oh, you've seen them too.' Ireland's deeply romantic, nostalgic *Legend*, written in 1930 for piano and orchestra, was dedicated to Arthur Machen.

Less romantically, strange distant singing by children is heard by K., the land surveyor, in Kafka's *The Castle*. Mladen Dolar quotes the passage in his book, *The Voice and Nothing More*. K. uses the telephone, a recent invention, to clear up what he believes to be a misunderstanding about his need for a permit to stay in the area of the castle: 'The receiver gave out a buzz of a kind that K. had never before heard on a telephone. It was like the hum of countless children's voices — but yet not a hum, the echo rather of voices singing at an infinite distance — blended by sheer impossibility into one high but resonant sound that vibrated on the ear as if it were trying to penetrate beyond mere hearing.' For Dolar, voices are subject to constant change. They are fleeting and unverifiable. K. only wishes to verify the law, but he is connected to indeterminate voices. 'The letter of the law is hidden in some inaccessible place and may not exist at all,' writes Dolar, 'it is a matter of presumption, and we have only voices in its place.' Dolar also scrutinizes the perplexing displacement of the voice, its detachment from the body as the acousmatic voice (the Pythagorean term used by Michel Chion to describe sounds whose origin cannot be seen), and its equally tenuous relationship to the body, even when attached. 'We can immediately see that the voice without a body is inherently uncanny,' Dolar writes, 'and that the body to which it is assigned does not dissipate its haunting effect.'

If I were writing this sixty years ago I might have imagined the Isle of Speaking Birds as Debussy's *Sirènes*, from the three *Nocturnes*, completed in 1899. *Trois scènes au crépuscule*, a lost work mentioned in 1892 by Debussy and commonly assumed to be the precursor of *Nocturnes*, was a setting of poet Henri de Régnier's *Poèmes anciens et romanesques*. A familiar visitor to those salons of Mallarmé also frequented by Debussy, de Régnier had written of a 'wan choir'. But Debussy's sirenic choir now sounds too close to kitsch to evoke an island of souls, having been pulped by an excess of imitative swirling climaxes, wild seascapes and tempestuous emotions in too many films of the 1930s. The ethereal female sirens and their wordlessness, 'the collective and impersonal voice, an instrumental timbre,' as Vladimir

Jankélévitch put it, have travelled far from the original Greek sirens: birds with human heads, male or female, funerary muses who lured the living to their deaths, then consoled their souls with music in the afterlife. Their ancestor may be the harpy, or snatcher, the winged death-spirit seen in William Blake's watercolour, pen and ink illustration of Dante — *The Wood of the Self-Murderers: The Harpies and the Suicides*. Grotesque beaked creatures squawk and screech in trees whose branches drip with blood. Blake's vision captures the spirit of Dante's chilling lines from *Inferno XIII*:

Wide winged they are, with human necks and faces,
their feet are clawed, their bellies fat and feathered;
perched in the trees they shriek their strange laments.

DEAD VOICES

Voix Mortes, the title of a little book dedicated to Debussy by his friend, Victor Segalen, is closer to this conception, but Debussy, like many writers and artists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, was also beguiled by fauns and satyrs, and by Pan, the Classical god of sensuality, languor and animate nature. Pan pursued Syrinx to the edge of the river Ladon. Desperate to keep her chastity, she called for help from the river nymphs, so they transformed her into reeds. Pan fashioned himself a flute from these hollow reeds cut to different lengths. According to Golding's sixteenth-century translation of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Pan's sighs pass over the open endings of the reeds (an end-blown flute without air ducts, according to organologists) to produce a sound that was still, sweet, strange, feeble and mournful: death and transfiguration were acknowledged then, but a more significant death to Pan was his loss of a conquest, lust in the dust. Pan's breath passed over the open endings of the reeds and airy music materialized, but the 'instrument' was Syrinx herself, known for the beauty of her voice. In James Merrill's poem, 'Syrinx', the sacrificial, erotic surrender of this embodiment within an instrument is conceded: 'I tremble, still / A thinking reed. Who puts his mouth to me / Draws out the scale of love and dread'. Complex influences contribute to this mythical music: The origins of Pan's instrument and his hybrid nature as goat-god — half human-image, half animal — locate his music somewhere within a triangulation of forces. He behaves as a god, operating outside human morality and structures, yet we can recognize human passions and desires. The instrument itself suggests the supposedly random actions of nature, the latter rediscovered for twentieth-century music by composers such as John Cage and Tōru Takemitsu, and by sound artists such as Christina Kubisch, Annea Lockwood, Max Eastley, Jem Finer, Felix Hess and Akio Suzuki.

Other sonic and acoustic ingredients lurk within Pan's lineage of wildness. In some versions of his ancestry, his mother was the oak tree woodpecker nymph Dryope, whose drumming echoes through woodlands. According to Robert Graves in *The White Goddess*, not always the most reliable source, the Latin god Faunus was the equivalent of Pan: 'Faunus is worshipped in sacred groves, where he gives oracles; chiefly by voices heard in sleep while the visitant lies on a sacred fleece.' Another nymph to lose her human form to Pan was Echo, dismembered by his followers to leave only her voice, echoing the sounds made by others. The primal scene of *Music*, painted by Henri Matisse in 1910, could be an illustration of these origin myths, in which the first articulations of musical form are found in ecstatic vision, sexual desire and tragedy. *Music* was a companion piece to *Dance*, murals commissioned by

the Russian industrialist Sergey Shchukin for his Trubetskoy Palace in Moscow. Both paintings magnified scenes visible in an earlier work, *Le Bonheur de Vivre* — which portrayed a ring of dancers, inspired by the Sardana, a folk dance that Matisse had witnessed during a sojourn in Collioure, southern France. A female aulos (the double-reed pipe of shepherds) player lies with other naked figures at the front of the picture, and in a woodland grove, an androgynous shepherd plays a single reed pipe. In *Music*, this golden Edenic age has regressed further into primeval time, long before the Fall. Against a depthless blue sky, Matisse shows five naked figures, all of them dry blood-red, deep as the ochre of Australian desert. Two musicians play at the left of the picture. One stands, bowing a tiny violin (despite the self-conscious primitivism of the painting, the violin is too modern to support the idea that this depicts the first music). The other musician sits, blowing an aulos, which is also played by some depictions of Pan. To their right, three figures sit on the ground, knees drawn up as if cold and vulnerable. Their mouths gape wide open, emitting a continuous wail; they could be sacrificial victims, lamenting as they await their fate. The inflated cheeks of the piper's circular breathing would allow a continuous drone with variations — a musical equivalent of the ritual ring dance, circling perpetually like seasons, life cycles, planets orbiting the sun, and astringent harmony of naked voices, reeds and strings.

This strand of musical myth may be ethereal, partially Aeolian, oscillating between nature and culture, but in the lower depths it smoulders with eroticism, bestiality and cruelty. Retold through Mallarmé's 'L'Après-Midi d'un Faune', the myth of Pan and Syrinx radiates out from a drowsier aura of dream, heat and sound:

Through the motionless, lazy swoon suffocating with heat the cool morning if it struggles, there murmurs no water not poured by my flute on the thicket sprinkled with melody; and the only wind, quick to breathe itself forth out of the two pipes before it scatters the sound in an arid rain, is, on the horizon unmoved by any wrinkle, the visible, calm and artificial breath of inspiration returning to the sky.

Debussy gave sound to these images in *Prélude à L'Après-Midi d'un Faune*, *La Flûte de Pan*, from *Chansons de Bilitis*, and a solo flute piece, originally titled *Flûte de Pan* but later renamed *Syrinx*. Many writers of the period struggled with the limitations of words in attempting to describe distant ethereal or elfin music. These sounds, a seduction, a siren song, drew the receptive listener toward an experience of bliss: erotic reverie or a mystical union with nature. Arthur Machen's *The Hill of Dreams* begins with a fictionalized self-portrait of the author as tortured young aesthete, drawn to the remains of a Roman fort in the countryside of his home in Wales. Hearing 'the faint echo of a high-pitched voice singing through the air as on a wire', he lies on the grass. Disinhibited by hypnagogic trance and the lingering occult atmosphere of place, he sheds his clothes and daydreams of merging with the mosses, bark and tree roots, 'the gleaming bodily vision of a strayed faun.' Machen's invocations of Pan — in *The Hill of Dreams*, *The Ceremony*, *The Rose Garden*, and *The Great God Pan* — were as suggestively sexual as mainstream publishing of the time allowed. 'Faint stirring sounds from the fringe of reeds' are heard by the unnamed woman who is the subject of *The Rose Garden*, as she looks at the centre of a lake to see a carved white pedestal of a boy holding a double-flute to his lips (at this point, the doughty organologist might query a discrepancy between Pan's original end-blown tubes of reed, 'with wax together knit' according to Ovid, and more sophisticated double duct flutes and reeds, such as the ancient Greek aulos, the instrument of madness played by the satyr Marsyas and by Dionysus's Maenads in the Temple of Apollo at

Delphi). An unnamed man, the stranger, murmurs rich unknown words that 'sounded as the echo of far music.' For these diffuse murmurings she is happy to annihilate her former self, her likes and dislikes, feelings and emotions: 'He had shown her that bodily rapture might be the ritual and expression of the ineffable mysteries, of the world beyond sense, that must be entered by way of sense; and now she believed.' The old world of daylight, built upon parental influences, is abandoned for nocturne, the irrational, sybaritic and sensual life.

Though loosely associated with such decadence through his contributions to *The Yellow Book*, Kenneth Grahame was disinclined to admit Pan's essential nature as predatory seducer. Pan's reputation, portrayed through art and poetry, was incorrigible: the leering, voyeuristic goat-gods of Bacchanal, painted by Rubens; the debauchery of Poussin's *Bacchanal* before a statue of Pan; and Pan's rapacious lunge depicted by Boucher in *Pan and Syrinx*. Study Boucher for too long and even the landscape rewrites itself into pornographic code: labial rocks; phallic trees and pubic river grasses through which Pan thrusts forward into the vulva shape formed by two young nymphs, pink and fleshy as lips. One of these nymphs supports herself on a large pot, its opening facing the viewer. Water flows around them in a landscape that is obsessively and onanistically all orifices and liquidity, lapping and resonance. Occultists of the early twentieth century also found Pan serviceable as a malleable symbol of various transgressions against the laws and prejudices of their time: Austin Osman Spare's drawings of inventively priapic satyrs, Victor Neuberg's homosexual and bisexual poem, 'The Triumph of Pan', and Aleister Crowley's 'Hymn To Pan' — 'And I rave; and I rape and I rip and I rend' — the latter typically excessive in both sentiment and alliteration. 'When Crowley and Neuberg speak of Pan, the imagery is redolent with heat and violence,' Alex Owen writes in *The Place of Enchantment: British Occultism and the Culture of the Modern*, 'a god, half man, half beast, who rapes and ravishes men and women alike.'

Equally remote from Grahame's dilution of Pan is E. M. Forster's surreptitious politicization of the metaphor. 'The Story of a Panic' was Forster's first story, written before the First World War. An oppressively bourgeois group of English tourists picnic in the chestnut woods above Ravenna. During a visitation of panic, a member of their company, a young man named Eustace, is transformed suddenly from an idle, unmanly 14-year-old boy to a creature tormented by elemental forces. First there is a silence, as if reality has been stilled. The boughs of two chestnut trees grind together, then Eustace blows an 'excruciating noise' on the whistle he has made from a piece of wood. 'I had never heard any instrument give forth so ear-splitting and discordant a sound,' says the priggish, xenophobic narrator. Stone through glass, the reed shatters their complacency. The marks of goat hooves are found; dog-like, Eustace rolls in their imprint. On their return to the hotel, he forms a mysterious understanding with the stop-gap waiter, 'a clumsy, impertinent fisher-lad.' At the conclusion of the story, Eustace disappears joyously into the trees, shouting and singing, and the waiter falls dead. As in so much of Forster's writing, landscape, particularly those sites imprinted with occult memory of a pagan past, confronts the refined, hypocritical world of manners that enforced its silence on Forster's homosexuality.

Grahame, on the other hand, preferred to believe that woodlands and riverbanks were 'clean of the clash of sex.' Speaking of his most famous creation, *Wind In the Willows*, that is what he told his devoted fan from America, Theodore Roosevelt, with the implicit suggestion that sex for him was more conflict than pleasure. Accounts of his life bear this out, and his

writing is suffused with powerful nostalgia for a prelapsarian world, a childhood of dreamy days spent escaping from the emotional complexity of adulthood. ‘The Rural Pan’, one of a collection of essays published as *Pagan Papers* in 1893, shows Mercury and Apollo in ascendance within the city while Pan hides from sight and hearing. His presence can only be felt once civilized society is left behind: ‘In solitudes such as these Pan sits and dabbles, and all the air is full of the music of his piping.’

Quiet anxiety drives these thoughts, the fear that Pan will be driven into permanent exile by ‘the growing tyranny’ of forces Grahame identifies as commercialism, fashion and chatter. But cute Pan was more susceptible to commercialism than an amoral, animalistic seducer. J. M. Barrie’s *Peter Pan in Kensington Gardens* depicted Peter, half-bird and half-human in origin, making a pipe of reeds: ‘... and he used to sit by the shore of the island of an evening, practicing the sough of the wind and the ripple of the water.’ Arthur Rackham’s original illustration for the book — captioned *Peter Pan is the fairies’ orchestra* — showed a plump, naked baby sitting on a toadstool, blowing at pan pipes. Peter has preternatural sensory capacities. He can see grass grow and hear insects walking about in tree trunks — both his human component and his music are so finely tuned to natural sounds because he has crossed the threshold that supposedly separates humans from animals. Even birds are deceived by this ambiguity, unable to distinguish between Peter Pan’s reed pipe and the sound of fish leaping in the water; in 1912, this interspecies scene was fixed as a tableau in Kensington Gardens by Sir George Frampton’s statue of Peter Pan, the boy who would not grow up, one hand lifted as if to gather about him all species, the other holding an improbable tricorn pipe (more hunting horn than panpipe, so perhaps not the most suitable instrument for a pagan Halfling). Stoic in the ultra-human constancy of this animistic flute, cormorants stand in line on the wooden stakes that cross the Long Water, grave and black as undertakers. At its most banal, this nostalgic image of the idle piper by a riverbank found its nadir in a 1970s fashion for insipid panpipe music by George Zamfir and Los Incas, both precursors to a ‘lifestyle’ choice of new age, world music and other suitably innocuous dinner party backgrounds. Animal nature, the goat half of the god, was tranquilized. Panic, pandemonium and the terror sparked by unknown noises in dark woods were mastered, though given the nature of (and within) human beings, can the mastery ever be permanent?

A more faithful rendition of Pan as havoc (even though anthropologically dubious), and his resuscitation through the goat-god Boujeloud, father of fear, can be found in Brion Gysin’s novel, *The Process*, and various writings by William Burroughs. For Burroughs, the rhaita (oboe), flute and drum music of Jajouka, in Morocco’s Atlas Mountains, became shorthand for a control mechanism, a soft machine for altering time and space: ‘From siren towers the twanging tones of fear — Pan God of Panic piping blue notes through empty streets as the berserk time machine twisted a tornado of years and centuries,’ he wrote in *The Soft Machine*. In the ‘Chinese Laundry’ section of *Nova Express*, the narrator plays back hallucinatory tape montages of Moroccan music: ‘The music shifted to Pan Pipes and I moved away to remote mountain villages where blue mist swirled through the slate houses — Place of the vine people under moonlight.’

AIR AND EAR

In Cy Twombly’s sculpture, *Untitled 1953*, the allusion to panpipes is inescapable. Eleven

strips of wood are bound together, painted white and bound in fabric and wax. Nails protrude from two of the strips; they are not hollowed. Their lengths are irregular, as if this is a flute that emits music of illogical intervals. Two years later, Twombly produced another *Untitled*, this one five slats of wood standing vertically on a single pole. Four of the slats are wrapped in cloth and all five are bound with twine. The piece could be an ancient bellows disinterred with its air constrained. For a third sculpture from this period, *Untitled (Funerary Box for a Lime Green Python)* 1954, he fixed palm leaves to two upright sticks and mounted these on a box. Again: white. Air is implicit in all these works, but the air is stilled, palm leaves like fans fixed solidly in the snake coffin; withheld from the compressed bellows; blocked off in the panpipe.

‘The Piper at the Gates of Dawn’, an anomalous ethereal reverie of far-off heavenly music implanted within adventures that are otherwise reassuringly four-footed (if a toad who drives a car can be described as four-footed) gave *The Wind in the Willows* its psychedelic credentials in the 1960s, more than 60 years after first publication. Like Maildun and his men, Mole and Rat are rowing between the hours of dusk and dawn, and the elusive music they hear, delicately picked out from the heightened sounds of night and water and described as intoxicating, beautiful, strange and new, a song-dream, ‘a sudden clear call from an articulate voice’, draws them to an island. Unlike Maildun, however, they put up their oars and go on land; their reward is to tremble in the presence of Pan himself. ‘Such music I never dreamed of,’ says Rat, ‘and the call in it is stronger even than the music is sweet.’

Grahame’s anthropomorphic fantasy is very pleased with itself: vulgarity is repulsed, the unruly working classes are put back in their place, and the landowner learns responsibility to the peasants, but the sensory acuity described in ‘The Piper at the Gates of Dawn’ chapter deepens and unsettles the atmosphere of this otherwise complacent tale. The book is not the only published example of his sensitivity to sound. In 1895 his short essay — ‘The Inner Ear’ — was included in that quarterly bible of fin-de-siècle decadence and aestheticism, *The Yellow Book*. The title chimed with another contribution, Rosamund Marriott-Watson’s poem, ‘The Isle of Voices’, so the two were printed facing each other. The metaphor of her poem, the siren song of lost youth and memory and its potential to shipwreck those seduced by its call, illustrates the modish appeal of this theme, speaking of a wind ‘strange with the sounds and scents of long ago ... word from a lost world.’ ‘The Inner Ear’ anticipates ideas relevant to the current environmental crisis. Grahame writes about a dulling of senses, the consequence of urban life. A Sunday excursion out of town has the opposite effect, of bombarding the listener with unnatural silence. ‘The clamorous ocean of sound has ebbed to an infinite distance’, he wrote, ‘in its place this other sea of fullest silence comes crawling up, whelming and flooding us.’ Gradually, the silence is itself displaced by a revivification of listening:

Silence, indeed! Why as the inner ear awakes and develops, the solid bulk of this sound-in-stillness becomes in its turn overpowering, terrifying. Let the development only continue, one thinks, but a little longer, and the very rush of sap, the thrust and foison of germination, will join in the din, and go far to deafen us.

This is similar to the narrator’s crisis in E. M. Forster’s short story, ‘The Curate’s Friend’. During a picnic (a surprisingly dangerous activity in Forster’s fiction) a dull curate is befriended by a Faun, visible and audible only to him: ‘Already in the wood I was troubled by a multitude of voices — the voices of the hill beneath me, of the trees over my head, of the very insects in the bark of the tree. I could even hear the stream licking little pieces out of

the meadows and the meadows dreamily protesting.’ His Christian duties are now compromised, not unhappily, by this pagan secret.

Grahame’s innocent precognition of psychedelic visions is striking. In an earlier passage from ‘The Inner Ear’ he refers to the fairy tale in which a man’s hearing is so sensitive that he can hear the grass grow. A precursor of The Move’s acid-pop classic of 1967, ‘I Can Hear the Grass Grow’, this ability to perceive microscopic levels of biological activity is a reminder of Peter Pan, who escapes his bedroom to become a child of nature. As Grahame infers, there is a prospect of nightmare in this hypersensitivity to the minutiae of living processes, though only so long as human attributes are preserved. Many fictional transformations into unearthly creatures such as werewolves and vampires are marked by preternatural sensory capabilities manifesting during the transition from human to bestial. This becoming-animal is implicit in any intensification of perception, but in transfiguration the qualities acquired come from creatures whose sight is a lesser sense: the so-called ‘blind’ bat, or the wolf, whose geography of scent and hearing extends, respectively, for nearly two miles, and between six and ten miles according to terrain. Dr Jekyll notes this sensory acuity of himself as he becomes Mr Hyde: ‘I have more than once observed that, in my second character, my faculties seemed sharpened to a point and my spirits more tensely elastic.’ At a further stage in the dissolution and transformation of human into compost and plant life, a different language becomes intelligible. There are intimations of this level of extra-human communication in Ezra Pound’s *Canto XLVII*:

By prong have I entered these hills:
That the grass grow from my body
That I hear the roots speaking together.

As Thom Gunn writes, in a commentary on the poem: ‘The god enters the earth, the man enters the woman, Odysseus enters the porch of the underworld, we all enter the ground in our death, and in doing so make it fertile.’ In David Lynch’s film, *Blue Velvet*, the homely surface of Lumberton is penetrated by sudden burrowing, through an audible layer of grass into what crawling horror lies beneath. Soon after this Mole-like entry into the underworld, a severed ear is found, hidden in the grass, and within the ear, descending from the sound bowl of the auricle, the scapha and the concha, down into the auditory canal to the chthonic roaring of its black chambers, lies Lynch’s other universe, in which sex and death, decomposition and growth, writhe together like snakes.

Grahame, Barrie (and Lynch) may have been thinking of Fine Ear, one of the seven attendants of Fortunio. In Grimm’s version of this fairy tale, ‘The Six Servants’, a young Prince is faced with an apparently impossible task. During his journey he forms a company of six men endowed with what we would now call superpowers. He encounters one of them with his ear pressed to the ground and asks him what he is doing. The Listener, as he comes to be known, replies: ‘I am listening to everything that is going on in the earth; nothing escapes my ears; I can even hear the grass growing.’ But the central argument of *The Inner Ear* is that intensive listening of this kind is humbling. Grahame’s contention was that humans are superfluous to the workings of the world: we should make ourselves as small as we can and interfere as little as possible with other species. That was, of course, the opposite of what happened subsequently. In fiction’s reinvention of the Pan myth, sound materializes out of nowhere as a visitation from nature, an uncanny reminder that humans (‘an invention of

recent date' as Foucault wrote) have less control or superiority over their environment than they like to believe. Like a biblical plague, the enigmatic rattle of acorns falling on the cabin roof in Lars von Trier's 2009 film, *Antichrist*, is a certain prediction that sciences of the mind will not repel the chaos forces of nature soon to be violently unleashed.

Pan's laughter taunts complacency, as in Bruno Schulz's story, 'Pan', in which a dishevelled despairing Pan, like a tramp or drunkard, is discovered in the darkest corner of an inaccessible garden of the imagination, hiding among the 'bestially liberated' cabbage heads of burs:

Deeply shaken, I saw how, still roaring with laughter, he slowly lifted himself up from his crouching position and, hunched like a gorilla, his hands in the torn pockets of his ragged trousers, began to run, cutting in great leaps and bounds through the rustling tinfoil of the burs — a Pan without a pipe, retreating in flight to his familiar haunts.

Sound gathers like an electrical field around the peculiarly self-destructive hunter Thomas Glahn, central character and narrator of Knut Hamsun's *Pan*, first published in 1894. Living in a hut detached from a remote community in the north of Norway, he experiences acute, if self-induced, loneliness. Enfolded in silence, he rattles coins together to break the isolation. At night, he asks himself if Pan is abroad, sitting in a tree, watching him, shaking with silent laughter. 'There was a rustling everywhere in the woods,' Hamsun wrote, 'beasts sniffing, birds calling one to another; their signals filled the air. And it was flying year for the Maybun its humming mingled with the buzz of the night moths, sounded like a whispering here and a whispering there, all about in the woods. So much there was to hear! For three nights I did not sleep.'

There is another link between the Isle of Speaking Birds and the music of Pan. The death of Pan is a story reported during the reign of the Roman Emperor Tiberius. Attributed to Epitherses, it was retold in Plutarch's *de Defectu Oraculorum*, and again in the sixteenth century by Rabelais in *Gargantua and Pantagruel*. Epitherses was sailing from Greece to Italy. One evening, a disembodied voice called out to the ship as it came near to the island of Paxos. The voice cried loudly once, twice. 'No one replied,' wrote Rabelais, 'but all stood silent and trembling. Then the voice was heard a third time, more terrible than before.' This time, the pilot of the boat, an Egyptian named Thamus, answered, what do you want from me? The voice commanded him to set a course for the island of Palodes and on arrival to announce that the Great God Pan is dead. Close to Palodes, the wind dropped, the ship was becalmed, and silence fell upon the scene. Reluctantly, Thamus climbed on to the prow and shouted the message: Pan is dead. 'Immediately there arose from the forest a great lamentation which resounded through the peaceful evening sky,' wrote W. R. Irwin, in his essay, 'The Survival of Pan'. 'But the shore itself was empty; no wailing devotees could be seen.'

In his lecture, 'The Great God Pan: the survival of an image', Classics scholar John Boardman interpreted this as a recurring theme of nature sorrowing at the death of pagan gods. He quotes Milton, from *Paradise Lost*:

Nature ...
Sighing through all her works, gave signs of woe
That all was lost

Pan's demise as a force of nature was not always lamented. An amusing allegory of sacred

and profane love painted by David Teniers the Younger, copied from a now lost original by Annibale Carracci, shows an undignified scrap between Pan and Cupid. Cupid has laid his bow and arrows to one side; Pan has thrown down his staff and panpipes. The contest between a virile goat-god and a fleshy baby encumbered by wings would seem unequal, but Cupid is on top, one little fist pounding at Pan's face, the other pulling his pointy ear, while the right knee aims for his groin. Unsurprisingly, given this ignominious defeat, Pan's expression is a picture of panic.

BARKLESS DOGS — SONGLESS LARKS

Of course, there is no way to hear the island choir of Maildun's voyage, no magic radio tune to ancient poetry, lost voices and faded memory. Thomas Hardy's poem of 1917, 'In a Museum', from *Moments of Vision and Miscellaneous Verses*, nevertheless speculated on such possibilities. In Exeter museum he sees the 'mould of a musical bird long passed from light,' and blends its imagined 'coo' with the contralto voice he heard the previous night. Time is a dream, Hardy says; ultimately, their mix of sounds from different periods of history will join all other sounds 'in the full-fugued song of the universe unending.'

Personal interpretations, based as they are on an absence of information, take the liberty of re-imagining any music possessing the characteristic that Freud, in *Civilisation and its Discontents*, described with some scepticism as 'oceanic'. He was responding to a letter sent to him in 1927 by a friend, Romain Rolland. The letter supported Freud's assessment of religion as an illusion but deplored his failure to appreciate the source of religious feeling. 'It is a feeling,' wrote Freud, 'which he would like to call a sensation of "eternity", a feeling as of something limitless, unbounded — as it were, "oceanic".' Freud considers this argument but finds it unconvincing. He concludes that the oceanic is more likely to represent an early phase of development, of infantile helplessness before the ego detaches itself from the external world, and argues that this stage can survive, crocodile in a modern world, alongside mature feelings. Sensations of bliss that revisit the experience of a child in the womb, floating in darkness, liquid and undifferentiated sound, may not be religious, but they are entirely comprehensible.

Perhaps it was a choir not to the liking of Maildun and his men, or perhaps the paradox of unbounded music encircled by the finite shores of an island was too close to reality, for they choose not to land. Instead they move on to another island close by, inhabited by an ancient hermit and many birds. These birds that cover the island's trees, the hermit tells them, are the souls of his dead children and descendants. Together they wait for judgement day.

Where translators Lady Gregory, P. W. Joyce and Whitley Stokes stayed fairly close to earlier sources in their retelling of the story, taken from the *Book of the Dun Cow*, a twelfth-century manuscript of Gaelic literature, Alfred Lord Tennyson took Joyce's account of the navigations, published in *Old Celtic Romances* in 1879, and set off on his own romantic voyage. Some of Tennyson's elaborations in his poem of 1880, 'The Voyage of Maeldune', built upon the theme of hearing and sound. He wrote, for example, of the Silent Isle, a place of barkless dogs and songless larks where 'a silent ocean always broke on a silent shore.' Maeldune and his men abhor this paradise, quiet as death, where streams, waterfalls and birds may be viewed in all their beauty but not heard. Their voices, usually manly and warlike, become 'thinner and fainter than any flittermouse-shriek.'

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