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The Silence of God

Charlie Gere

In this chapter I take as my starting point Natalie Heinich's description of the use of headphones in *Les Immatériaux*:

In the absence of a guided tour, visitors to *Les Immatériaux* had to wear earphones, through which they could hear human speech. The voices streaming through the earphones did not provide any direct "explanation" of what the visitor had in sight, but rather unidentified fragments of discourse indirectly related to what they were supposed to comment on, without requiring the visitor to press a button in front of each exhibit. Most visitors did not make the connection between the voices and their own movement through the exhibition, which inevitably led to some colourful misunderstandings ...¹

The fragments in question were excerpts from literary and philosophical works by, among others, Blanchot and Beckett. The "earphones" or headsets, which were wirelessly controlled and supplied by Philips, kept breaking down (unsurprisingly given that the technology they embodied was then highly experimental). That, and the fact that the Pompidou both obliged visitors to use them and also charged for them, made their inclusion in the exhibition highly controversial.

Eight years after *Les Immatériaux* Lyotard gave a paper at the Collège Internationale de Philosophie in Paris, entitled "On a Hyphen",² about the apostle

1 Nathalie Heinich, "Les Immatériaux Revisited: Innovation in Innovations". *Tate Papers* (online) 12. 2009. <http://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/tate-papers/les-immateriaux-revisited-innovation-innovations>.

2 Jean-François Lyotard, *The Hyphen: Between Judaism and Christianity* (Amherst, New York: Humanity Books, 1999).

Paul, thus anticipating the recent revival of interest in him by over half a decade. In it he gave a reading of Paul as exemplary of the hyphen between the words “Judeo” and “Christian”. Among Lyotard’s concerns in this essay is that of “the Voice”. Lyotard contrasts the inaccessibility of God’s voice for the Jews with its manifestation in the incarnation of Christ. This can be understood, in part at least, as a means for Lyotard to work through some questions of language, in particular the Judaic paradigm of the absent letter and the Christian model of incarnated language. It is in this context that the discursive and audio experiments of *Les Immatériaux* can be understood, as articulations of the relationship between Judaism, ethics and the text.

Lyotard opens “On a Hyphen” by saying that he will be “speaking of a white space or blank [*blanc*], the one that is crossed out by the trait or line uniting Jew and Christian in the expression ‘Judeo-Christian’”.³ Then, describing the Jewish experience of God, he continues: “The Voice leaves its letters without vowels unvoiced on desert stone. It leaves them to be pronounced by a people so that this people may rejoice in having been picked out by it”.⁴ Thus the Voice, which is not temporal, obliges the people to “act these letters”. Lyotard understands this to be the basis upon which what Christians would call the Bible or Scripture is received. The Hebrew word for the Bible is *Miqra*, which means “convocation, reading, festive celebration”, and it is the “commandment to act by way of letters left by the Voice without history” that “destines the people who accepts and receives this commandment to a historicity without precedent in human cultures”.⁵ In being destined thus, to a historicity that is both about what has happened, and about the temporal meaning and direction of that which has happened, the people find reality unfulfilled and therefore demand justice in everyday life.⁶ Because the Voice is not in time, time is the time of death, the time of the withdrawal of the Voice; but it is also the time in which the people “are called together, called upon to voice, to raise their voices together, to read aloud, and to celebrate the letters of protection and of the promise”.⁷ It is because Adam desired to speak the language of the Voice immediately, without suffering, complication or history, that he is expelled from Paradise, into historicity.⁸ This historicity, however, is also a call “to act the letter of the Voice”, inasmuch as the letters promise Paradise.

In order to explain this, Lyotard turns to what he calls a “[t]raditional exegesis”, one that finds in the Hebrew word for “orchard”, *pardes*, from which we derive our word “paradise”, the model of the four ways in which the *Torah*, the first five books of the *Miqra* or *Tanakh* (or what Christians call the *Old Testament*),

3 Ibid., p. 13.

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid., p. 13–14.

8 Ibid., p. 14.

should be read: *P* stands for *peshat*, the literal meaning; *R* for *remez*, the allusive or allegorical meaning; *D* for *drash*, the meaning to be exacted, the moral meaning; and finally *S* for *sod*, the secret, hidden or inaccessible meaning.

It is by means of the presence of this unattainable meaning in the tradition of reading that the Voice remains withdrawn, no longer as death in time but as the perpetually desired.⁹

Lyotard suggests that Paradise is the fulfilment of the four meanings, but he also asks what it means to fulfil a meaning that is *sod*, posited as estranged?¹⁰ It is at this point that he brings in St Paul – or, as he calls him, “Shaoul the Pharisee from Tarsus, a Roman citizen who goes by the name Paulus” – and through him unpacks the meaning of the hyphen in “Judeo-Christian”.¹¹ In effect, what Lyotard proposes is that “the mystery of the Cross” proclaimed by Paul sublates “the position ... that the reading of the letters by the people reserves for the Voice”.¹² Through Christ the Word is made flesh, and comes among us, and in doing so the “Voice voices itself by itself” and asks “not so much to be scrupulously examined, interpreted, understood, and acted, so as to make justice reign, but loved”. Thus “[t]he Incarnation is a gesture of love. The Voice that was in paradise banishes itself from this paradise and comes to live and die with the sons of Adam”.¹³ The hyphen between “Judeo” and “Christian”, then, is the “mortification of the first by the dialectic of the second. The truth of the Jew is in the Christian”. “Christian breath” reanimates the dead Jew, who is otherwise left to his letter.¹⁴

The Incarnation “expressly disavows the flesh of letters”, and, because it is a mystery, it “exceeds the secret meaning, the *sod*, of the letter left by the invisible Voice”, as it is “the voiced Voice, the Voice made flesh”.¹⁵ In the *Miqra*, the Voice can perform miracles, which act as signs for the people chosen by the Lord, who need signs. The Incarnation is not a miracle, however, but a mystery, which “destroys the regimen of every reading” and “offers nothing to be understood or interpreted”.¹⁶ With Jesus “[t]he Voice is no longer deposited in traces ... no longer marks itself in absence ... is no longer to be deciphered through signs”.¹⁷ “Reading is in vain” because “presence is real” in the Host,

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid, p. 14–15.

12 Ibid, p. 15.

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid, p. 22.

16 Ibid.

17 Ibid.

or in the experience of Doubting Thomas in putting his fingers in Christ's wounds".¹⁸

For Lyotard the dialectical sublation of the Jewish letter by the Christian Incarnation, in which the Voice voices, is ethically problematic. The Torah is not the Voice, but "its deposited letter" and the "language of the Other is not dead but estranged or foreign".¹⁹ Thus "the grounds for ethics ... has to do with respecting this foreignness".²⁰ The other is always a letter that requires the risky and lengthy process of "decipherment, vocalization, cantillation, setting to rhythm, translation, and interpretation".²¹ These are not incarnations of the Voice, and are subject to the interdiction against figuration, which is also an interdiction against incarnation, and against making the Voice speak directly and visibly.²² The Incarnation is the revocation of foreignness, whereas ethics is only possible if foreignness is preserved. By contrast with the Incarnation, "it is enough to want what the Other wants to say, what the Other means, to desire what it desires, to live its loving me enough for me to lose the love of myself; it is enough to have this faith in order to be justified, before the letter of any reading".²³

For Lyotard, the Christian dialectical sublation of the gap between Judaism and the Christianity necessitates the repression and forgetting of the former by the latter. Thus, for Lyotard, the "jews" (in lower case and plural) come to represent the outsider, the "other", who disrupts that which needs to be excised in order that the West can realize its dream of unbounded fulfilment and development. Thus, the Pauline dialectical move is part of the Western disavowal of heterogeneity and difference, a disavowal that will ultimately lead to Auschwitz.

It is with a discussion of Auschwitz that Lyotard begins his major work *The Differend*, which is also the book he had just completed when he started work on *Les Immatériaux*. Lyotard recounts Holocaust denier Robert Faurisson's claim that the gas chambers did not exist (on the grounds that there were no witnesses to their use) as an example of a *differend* inasmuch as the gas chambers' existence cannot be judged according to the standards of historical proof demanded by Faurisson.²⁴ There is a close connection between Lyotard's understanding of the impossibility of witnessing Auschwitz, and that of Giorgio Agamben, especially in the latter's book *Remnants of Auschwitz*, in which Agamben is also concerned with, among other things, the question of

18 Ibid.

19 Ibid., p. 24.

20 Ibid.

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid.

23 Ibid, p. 25.

24 Jean-François Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989).

testimony.²⁵ *Remnants of Auschwitz* is possibly Agamben's most controversial book, in that in it the camp is understood as a paradigm of the contemporary biopolitical apparatus of the state. Perhaps even more troublingly, Agamben seems to ascribe a kind of Christ-like status to the figure of "the *Muselmann*" (literally: the Muslim), the camp inmate who has given up any form of resistance and is thus marked for imminent death. *Remnants of Auschwitz* also involves a working-through of Agamben's antinomianism, inasmuch as he sees attempts to understand the ethical dimensions of Auschwitz in legal terms as misguided. This antinomianism will find further expression in Agamben's own engagement with St Paul in *The Time That Remains*.²⁶

It is interesting to note the number of points at which Lyotard's points of reference intersect with or parallel those of Agamben, including not just Auschwitz and Paul, but also the question of the Voice, and even the Talmudic exegesis of Paradise, or *Pardes*, discussed by Lyotard and described earlier. Indeed it is with this analysis that Agamben begins his essay "Pardes: The Writing of Potentiality". He recounts a story from the Talmudic treatise *Hagigah* (or "Offering"), which goes as follows:

Four rabbis entered *Pardes*: Ben Azzai, Ben Zoma, Aher, and Rabbi Akiba. Rabbi Akiba says, "When you reach the stones of pure marble, do not say: "Water, Water!" For it has been said that *he who says what is false will not be placed before My eyes.*" Ben Azzai cast a glance and died. Of him Scripture says: *precious to the eyes of the Lord is the death of his saints.* Ben Zoma looked and went mad. Of him Scripture says: *have you found honey? Eat as much as you can, otherwise you will be full and you will vomit.* Aher cut the branches. Rabbi Akiba left unharmed.²⁷

Agamben points out that "according to rabbinical tradition, *Pardes* ... signifies supreme knowledge", and in the *Kabbalah*, the *Shechinah* or "presence of God" is called "*Pardes ha-torah*, the paradise of the *Torah*, its fulfilled revelation", and the "entry of the four rabbis into *Pardes* is therefore a figure for access to supreme knowledge".²⁸ In this understanding, the cutting of the branches by Aher means the isolation of the *Shechinah* from the other *sefirot* – the attributes or words of God – and its comprehension as an autonomous power.²⁹ Inasmuch as the *Shechinah* is the last of the ten *sefirot*, by cutting the branches of the other *sefirot*, Aher separates the knowledge and revelation of God from other aspects of divinity.³⁰ This is identified with the sin of Adam,

25 Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1999).

26 Giorgio Agamben, *The Time That Remains: A Commentary on the Romans* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2005).

27 Giorgio Agamben, *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1999).

28 *Ibid.*, p. 206.

29 *Ibid.*

30 *Ibid.*

who, rather than contemplating the totality of the *sefiroth*, preferred to contemplate only the last one, and in doing so, separated the tree of knowledge from the tree of life.³¹

Agamben offers another interpretation, from Moses of Leon, author of the *Zohar*, the foundational work of the *Kabbalah*, which seems to be that also invoked by Lyotard in his essay on Paul. Moses suggests that the *aggadah* is a parable of the exegesis of the sacred text, and it is he who proposes the reading of the word *Pardes* in which *P* stands for *peshat*, the literal meaning; *R* to *remez*, the allusive or allegorical meaning; *D* for *drash*, the meaning to be exacted, the moral meaning; and finally *S* for *sod*, the secret, hidden or inaccessible meaning.³² Therefore Ben Azzai, who dies, is the literal meaning; Ben Zoma, who goes mad, is the Talmudic sense, to be extracted; Aher, who cuts the branches, is the allegorical sense; and Rabbi Akiba, who enters and leaves unharmed, is the mystical sense. From this perspective Aher's sin involves "the moral risk implicit in every act of interpretation, in every confrontation with a text or discourse, whether human or divine".³³ The risk in question is that "speech, which is nothing other than the manifestation and unconcealment of something, may be separated from what it reveals and acquire an autonomous consistency".³⁴ Agamben continues:

The cutting of the branches is, therefore, an *experimentum linguae*, an experience of language that consists in separating speech both from the voice and pronunciation from its reference. A pure word isolated in itself, with neither voice nor referent, with its semantic value indefinitely suspended: this is the dwelling of Aher, the "Other," in Paradise. This is why he can neither perish in Paradise by adhering to meaning, like Ben Zoma and Ben Azzai, nor leave unharmed, like Rabbi Akiba. He fully experiences the exile of the Shechinah, that is, human language.³⁵

The essay then goes on to suggest that the story of Aher, the "Other", is also a way of thinking about the work of Jacques Derrida.³⁶ For Agamben Derrida is Aher, the other, who cut the branches, and who remains still mired in metaphysics (and, by implication, Agamben himself is Rabbi Akiba). Jeffrey Librett suggests that Agamben sees Derrida as suffering from a "graphocentrism" as problematic as the logocentrism Derrida charges other philosophers with.³⁷ For Agamben philosophy is always already fixated on the "*gramma*", because the voice "even when it has been posited as origin, is always posited

31 Ibid.

32 Ibid., p. 207.

33 Ibid.

34 Ibid.

35 Ibid.

36 Ibid., p. 209.

37 Jeffrey S. Librett, "From the Sacrifice of the Letter to the Voice of Testimony: Giorgio Agamben's Fulfillment of Metaphysics." *Diacritics* 3 (2-3) (2007), p. 11-33.

as lost, as an origin that has already been replaced by the letter".³⁸ Libbett sees Agamben's "animus against the letter"³⁹ as "powerfully and explicitly overdetermined by Christian thinking, in the Pauline tradition, as the metaphysics that poses God qua logos by polemicizing, in favor of the living spirit (spirit as life), against the 'dead letter' of the law".⁴⁰ It is this that leads Agamben, in his book on St Paul, to criticize deconstruction as a "thwarted messianism" of "infinite deferment".⁴¹

Perhaps Agamben can be understood to be performing the very sublation and repression of the Jewish letter that Lyotard sees being undertaken by Paul. And perhaps *Les Immatériaux* can be understood as an attempt by Lyotard to resist this kind of sublation, in which the singular becomes a universal paradigm. Along with 25 or so other participants, including writers, philosophers and scientists, Derrida participated in an "experiment in collective, writings, interactive and at a distance, on microcomputers, equipped with word processing and communication software" that was launched two months before the exhibition opened. Each participant was lent an Olivetti M20, connected to the PTT network, and was asked to respond to a list of 50 words given to them by Lyotard. The results were then collated and made available to exhibition visitors on Olivetti M24 workstations, and also in the second of the two publications accompanying the exhibition, entitled *Epreuves d'écriture*.

Derrida remarks upon his participation in *Les Immatériaux* in his piece written on the occasion of Lyotard's death, "Lyotard and us". As is sometimes the case with Derrida, the essay is also a meditation on a phrase, in this case "there will be no mourning", which Derrida "extracted" from a piece of writing by Lyotard entitled "Notes du traducteur", or "Translator's Notes".⁴² In this piece, written for a journal special issue dedicated to Derrida, Lyotard, in Derrida's words, "plays at responding to texts which I had, upon his request, written in 1984, for the great exhibition *Les Immatériaux*."⁴³ Declining the opportunity to say more about "the calculated randomness of this exhibition and the chance J.F.'s invitation opened for me, namely the perfect machinic occasion to learn, despite my previous reluctance, to use a word processing machine – thus setting on a dependence which lasts to this day", Derrida chooses instead to discuss what he calls a "minor debt" which at first "seems technical or machinic, but because of its techno-machinic effacement of singularity and thus of destinal unicity, you will see very soon its essential link with the sentence I had to begin with, the one which had already surrounded and taken

38 Ibid., p. 12.

39 Ibid., p. 12.

40 Ibid., p. 15.

41 Giorgio Agamben, *The Time That Remains*, p. 103.

42 Jacques Derrida, "Lyotard and us," *Parallax*, 6 (4) (2000), p. 28–48.

43 Ibid., p. 37.

over me, 'there shall be no mourning'".⁴⁴ Though Derrida and Lyotard had always used the formal "vous", in his text for the exhibition Derrida

played with a "tu" devoid of assignable addressee, taking away from the chance reader the possibility to decide whether that "tu" singularly addressed the receiving or reading instance, that is, whoever, in the public space of publication, happened to read it, or instead, what is altogether different, altogether other, this or that particular private if not cryptic addressee – the point of all these both sophisticated and naive procedures being, among others, to upset, sometimes frighten, at the limit, the limit itself, all borders, for instance those between private and public, singular and general or universal, intimate or inner and outer, etc. In doing so, I had pretended to challenge whosoever was addressed by this *tu* to translate the idiomatic phrasing of many of my sentences, to *translate* it into another language (interlinguistic translation, in Jakobson's terms), or even to translate it into the same language (intralinguistic translation), or even into another system of signs (music or painting, for instance: intersemiotic translation). Accordingly, after this or that sentence which I considered untranslatable, and after a period, I would regularly add the infinitive form of the ironic order or the imperative challenge: "*traduire*" / "translate".⁴⁵

The challenge to translate that Derrida throws down in his texts for *Les Immatériaux* is what Lyotard responds to in his "Notes du traducteur". As Derrida puts it, Lyotard "seriously plays at imagining the notes of a virtual translator. He does so under four headings which I will only mention, leaving you to read these eight pages worth centuries of Talmudic commentary".⁴⁶

In the phrase "the limit itself, all borders, for instance those between private and public, singular and general or universal, intimate or inner and outer" I think it is possible to hear an echo of Agamben's description of the camp in his essay "The Camp as *Nomos* of the Modern":

Whoever entered the camp moved in a zone of indistinction between outside and inside, exception and rule, licit and illicit, in which the very concepts of subjective right and juridical protection no longer made any sense.⁴⁷

In his essay about *Les Immatériaux* from the "Landmark Exhibitions" issue of *Tate Papers*, reprinted in this volume, Antony Hudek (who was co-translator of the recent English version of *Discours Figure*) explicitly connects

44 Ibid., p. 37.

45 Ibid., p. 38.

46 Ibid.

47 Giorgio Agamben, "The Camp as the 'Nomos' of the Modern", in *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1998).

Les Immatériaux with Auschwitz. He quotes Lyotard's response to Michel Cournot's scathing critique in *Le Monde*, particularly of the technology such as the headsets. Referring to the "postmodern", a term Lyotard himself was responsible for propagating in his 1979 work *The Postmodern Condition*, Lyotard suggests that

Mr Cournot wanted to revel in the jubilation offered by the new mastery promised by the "technologists", by the prophets of a "postmodern" break? The exhibition denies it, and this is precisely its gambit – to not offer any reassurance, especially and above all by prophesying a new dawn. To make us look at what is "déjà vu", as Duchamp did with the readymades, and to make us unlearn what is "familiar" to us: these are instead the exhibition's concerns.⁴⁸

Lyotard continues:

The idea of progress bequeathed by, among others, the Enlightenment, has faltered, and with it a triumphant humanism. Greatness of thought – Adorno's for example (must I spell his name out?) – is to endure the fright derived from such a withdrawal of meaning, to bear witness to it, to attempt its anamnesis.⁴⁹

Following Lyotard's analysis of painting, Hudek suggests that *Les Immatériaux* offers the chance of an anamnestic working-through of the past, and offered him "the opportunity to work through the haunting of *La Condition post-moderne* ... providing him with a stage upon which to perform the transition from an epochal or modal postmodern into an allegorical or anamnestic one".⁵⁰ Hudek remarks that the subtitle for *Les Immatériaux* might have been *L'Esprit du Temps*, which echoes the name of the 1982 exhibition of painting, *Zeitgeist*, and suggests that Lyotard attempted to "reclaim the postmodern from the version of the term" made fashionable by such exhibitions.⁵¹ As Hudek puts it:

Lyotard's own version of a postmodern *Zeitgeist* at the Centre Pompidou was an affective hovering between the "post" he had imprudently prognosticated in 1979 and a lost modernism that could never again be brought back to life. This paradoxical temporal stasis would provide the clearest sign, not of the decline of the twentieth-century avant-garde as such, but of the end of the possibility of recuperating it to justify an increasingly complex and progressively dehumanised technoscientific environment. For Lyotard, the historical break in the telling of

48 Antony Hudek, "From Over- to Sub-Exposure: The Anamnesis of *Les Immatériaux*." *Tate Papers* [online] 12. 2009, reprinted in this volume, p. 79.

49 *Ibid.*, p. 79–80.

50 *Ibid.*, p. 81.

51 *Ibid.*

twentieth-century history is marked – as it was for many before him, particularly Adorno – by the mass murder of the Jews during the Second World War.⁵²

He goes on to quote Lyotard himself from the essay:

Following Theodor Adorno, I have used the term “Auschwitz” to indicate the extent to which the stuff [*matière*] of recent Western history appears inconsistent in light of the “modern” project of emancipating humanity. What kind of reflection is capable of “lifting”, in the sense of *aufheben*, “Auschwitz”, by placing it in a general, empirical and even speculative process directed towards universal emancipation? There is a kind of sorrow [*chagrin*] in the *Zeitgeist*, which can express itself through reactive, even reactionary attitudes, or through utopias, but not through an orientation that would positively open a new perspective.⁵³

Hudek singles out the word “sorrow” (“chagrin” in French), and suggests how striking it is that this element is overlooked in the literature of *Les Immatériaux*. He points out how it is a key term in the French experience of the “stalled remembrance” of the Second World War, as evinced in works such as Marcel Ophüls’ *Le Chagrin et la pitié* (*The Sorrow and the Pity*).⁵⁴ Taking his cue from *Le Différend*, Hudek suggests that *Les Immatériaux* stages an experience of temporal indecision, of the “Arrive-t-il?”.⁵⁵ In Hudek’s words, “*Les Immatériaux* staged an experience of ‘sorrow’ meant to give rise to a profoundly negative feeling – a feeling the visitor could not possibly have escaped as she wandered through the dark maze of the Centre Pompidou, confronted by the endless choices to determine a trajectory without any identifiable goal in sight”.⁵⁶

Thus, *Les Immatériaux* might be regarded as a kind of unconscious, pre-emptive response to Agamben’s form of Pauline, messianic politics. In its very difficulty and confusion it refused the sublation of Auschwitz into a universal category of contemporary human experience. It is perhaps worth thinking of *Les Immatériaux* as an alternative museological response to the Shoah, an alternative to the Holocaust museums that were beginning to proliferate at that time and which precisely risked (and continue to risk) the “museification” of what they contain, and its making sacred and paradigmatic.

Returning, then, to the earpieces or headphones, and the texts they relayed to the visitors to *Les Immatériaux*: among these texts were some by Samuel Beckett, the artist whose work Adorno had proclaimed as the most appropriate artistic response to Auschwitz, not least because it did not

52 Ibid., p. 82.

53 Ibid.

54 Ibid.

55 Ibid.

56 Ibid., p. 83.

attempt to engage directly with the Shoah. Yet perhaps even more apt – albeit unintentionally – was the fact that the headphones frequently malfunctioned, producing perhaps what André Neher, writing about Auschwitz, called “the silence of God”.⁵⁷

57 André Neher, *The Exile of the Word: From the Silence of the Bible to the Silence of Auschwitz* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1981).