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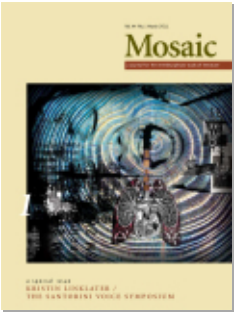


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This paper explores some philosophical presuppositions about the human voice that have been dominant since Plato. It sees in the work of Kristin Linklater a theoretical and practical application of ideas in Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Jacques Derrida that challenge the ancient presuppositions.

# The Moment of Nothing: A Philosophical Note on the Work of Kristin Linklater

DAVID FARRELL KRELL

"The moment of nothing" means everything to Kristin Linklater. In the course of her initial instructions concerning the role of the diaphragm in breathing, she describes the instant prior to the impulse to breathe, that is, the instant that follows full exhalation and that precedes every inspiration, as an instant in which nothing transpires. It is the instant that lies beyond the reach of our desire for control, an instant and instance of the autonomic nervous system, one that our thought and our will can only disturb. It is an uncanny instant, and yet a breathing creature must learn to enjoy it.

One of the very first words of Kristin Linklater's *Freeing the Natural Voice* is "pleasurable" (7). She is writing about the pleasures of the voice, more specifically, the "pleasurable state of self-awareness" that comes with voice work. Not far into *Freeing Shakespeare's Voice* we read that an enriched enjoyment of vowels "should be thought of as consciousness-raising" (19). And yet work is required for us to get to such enjoyment and pleasure. One of the most productive tensions in Kristin Linklater's work,



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it seems to me, arising from a certain antithesis (one of her favourite words, derived from Shakespeare's favourite figure of speech), is that between the voice as a natural birthright—two to four octaves of emotion-expressing and thought-articulating voice is everyone's heritage by right—and as the site of the massive suppression of that right. "When a baby is born," she writes,

> breath is its life. The connection of survival impulses with the baby's breath and voice is essential to its life, and a baby's voice communicates essential information long before words are learnt. A baby's voice *is* emotion: happily gurgling and crowing, yelling angrily, crying—a potent wordless message is sent and received. The baby's whole body swells and deflates, ripples and convulses with the forces of breath, emotion and sound that inhabit it. That is the "natural" function of our voices. The "selfhood" of the baby is undivided instinct-impulse-emotion-breath-voice-body. (*Freeing Shakespeare's* 5)

We know what happens to that natural voice, however: noisy, petulant little children do not get the chocolate-chip cookie, not until they have developed the super-polite and coy little voice that asks *nicely* for a treat. Pleasure requires repression, even all these years after Freud. And the larynx seems to be at the heart of that repression—if I may mix the bodily metaphor. One of the least pleasant tasks of philosophy in our time is to show how old and how ingrained such repression is. And that is a part of my task today.

Plato's Socrates twice defines thinking as the *silent* dialogue of the soul with itself. In *Theaetetus*, at 189e–190a, he says, "Thinking is discourse that the soul has with itself about whatever it wants to investigate." He quickly adds, "An opinion is spoken discourse, although not spoken to another and not with sound—rather, spoken to oneself in silence." And in *Sophist*, at 263e, the Stranger says, "Thus thought and speech are the same, although what we call thought is the inner dialogue of the soul with itself without sound [Οὐκοῦν διάνοια μὲν καὶ λόγος ταὐτόν· πλὴν ὁ μὲν ἐντὸς τῆς ψυχῆς πρὸς αὑτῆν διάλογος ἄνευ φονῆς . . . διάνοια]" (263e 3–4). Since then the philosopher has been allowed to raise his or her voice in silent thought alone—noiselessly. Φωνή is phony, inessential and inauthentic. Behind this conviction, of course, is the Socratic-Platonic suspicion of the human body, the noisome noise-maker, as the source of all our troubles, the infamous "prison-house of the soul." For the next two thousand years, Christian philosophy tries to emancipate the soul from its prison, from the dungeon of the body's pains and pleasures, and this by mortification, which is the practice of killing oneself off in small doses and thus dying ahead of time,

instant by instant. An expert in mortification takes his pleasure there, finds his dignity there. For Augustine, the superiority of silence over noise extends to music itself, and he prides himself on his ability even to sing silently: *Et quiescente lingua ac silente gutture canto quantum volo* ["And with stilled tongue and silent throat I sing whenever I like"] (*Confessions* X: 8). There is a kind of wilful pride and even will-to-power involved in this repression of the voice, and the story of that repression is immensely complex. One of the philosophers I want to talk about is Jacques Derrida, who in a very early book, *Voice and Phenomenon,* published in 1967, offered a strikingly original interpretation of the philosopher's love of and need for silence. In a moment I'll say something about his chapter called "The Voice that Preserves Silence." But back to Linklater.

For there is another aspect to the suppressed natural birthright of the voice. All modernity seems to be against the voice, partly because of Descartes's emphasis on cogitation and mechanics rather than carnal human being, but also because of the technological "progress" that tends to banish the voice—as though modern and postmodern technology were doing the work of Platonism and Cartesianism. Early on in *Freeing Shakespeare's Voice* Kristin Linklater writes:

> The industrial revolution, the technological revolution, the rapid growth in literacy and the influence of print have diminished the need for the human voice over the past one hundred and fifty years, and we are moving at breakneck speed, in evolutionary terms, further and further away from tens of thousands of years of oral/aural civilization. The oral tradition kept the voice alive in the body but now the *experience* of thought and language has moved from the body into the head. In general, the *experience* of "who I am" now exists in the head, behind the face. The function of the body is merely to transport the "I think, therefore I am" person from one place to another and to organize its fuel intake and output. The body has become a vehicle for a "self" that lives above it. (4)

There is something biblical about such technology. Recall that wonderful scene in Monty Python's *Life of Brian* in which one of Brian's first disciples urges the company, "Do not think of the things of the body, but of the face and head!" As e-mail replaces so many of our chances to talk on the phone, that is, so many chances to hear in the voice how friends and family are really doing, we become the cerebral digital technocrats who are valued solely for their life above the eyebrow line, their functionality.

Yet let me hasten to continue the passage from Linklater's Shakespeare book, inasmuch as her experience of the decline of the voice seems to have engendered ideas and practices that reinvigorate the voice. She writes: "The basis of all my work is the belief that voice and language belong to the whole body rather than the head alone

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and that the function of the voice is to reveal the self. This book, in consequence, has a more ambitious aim than that of a verse-speaking manual. It aims to recondition both mind and body so that the voice can express the visceral and spiritual urgency that was its subject matter in Shakespeare's day" (4). *Visceral* and *spiritual*—two words that are seldom if ever conjoined. Linklater's soul is not, or at least does not want to be, refuses to be, a prisoner. She loves the word ψυχή in its oldest Homeric senses, as the "blood soul" and "breath soul" located in the region of the heart and lungs. Some classical philologists argue that the word for soul originally meant "the diaphragm." Empedocles, whom Linklater also loves, in a book called *Cleansings*, Καθαρμοί, says that our thoughts flow through the bloodstream, through and about the heart. Thinking, for the early Greeks, is pericardial. Samuel Beckett preserves something of this pericardial thinking in our own time when, in *Texts for Nothing*, he writes, "so given am I to thinking with my blood" (37); "so given am I to thinking with my breath" (38). Yet something of this early Greek conception survives in Plato as well. It shows up even in Plato's *Phaedo*, the dialogue that proves the immortality of the soul by stressing the corruptibility of the body, the body that is so deserving of death that the philosopher is encouraged to keep one foot in the grave his whole life long. And yet.

Philosophers will remember the argument of Simmias, in Plato's *Phaedo*, who proposes convincingly that the psyche is something like the harmony of the body, that the soul is in fact the attunement of the body and is thus inherent in the living body. Untune that string and, hark! what discord the human body and the human soul would be! I trust I will not shock the philosophers when I say that Simmias's argument puts all of Socrates's arguments concerning the immortality of the soul to shame, and that his, Simmias's, conception of bodily harmony is the properly Platonic sense of soul—against the entire history of Platonism. In the light of that history, I hope it is not too perverse of me to claim that Plato's *Phaedo* has as its main theme not the immortality of the soul but the pleasures of human bodies in conversation: ἡδονή, "pleasure," is one of the principal words of the dialogue. Recall Socrates rubbing his legs and stressing the inseparability of pleasure and pain, which he says are Janus-faced; and recall his warnings concerning mis-logy or philosophobia, which happens when young people no longer take pleasure in serious discussions. One of the strangest things about the overcoming of Platonism is that Plato—the writer and thinker—often comes to our aid, as though he had nothing to do with the history that loves the soul and hates the body. More about Plato, then, a little later, and not for the philosophers alone.

Linklater, for her part, affirms the complete psychophysical integration of the human being, an integration she sees in "a balanced quartet of emotion, intellect, body, and voice" (*Freeing the Natural* 9). Or, in greater detail:

> The result of the work will be to produce a voice that is in direct contact with emotional impulses, shaped by the intellect but not inhibited by it. Such a voice will be a built-in attribute of the body. It will have an innate potential for a wide pitch range, intricate harmonics, and kaleidoscopic textural qualities and will be articulated into clear speech in response to clear thinking and the desire to communicate. The natural voice is transparent, it reveals, not describes, inner impulses of emotion and thought, directly and spontaneously. The person is heard, not the person's voice. (8)

This holistic approach is exciting for philosophers, precisely because it refuses to sacrifice any one quality or aspect of the human being for the sake of another. The speaker's body is emphasized throughout the work, but for the sake of the creative imagination and what Linklater does not shy from calling "the exigencies of the text" (9). If the body is encouraged to move in new directions, to break conditioned, habitual movements, it is not because the mind has been left behind. Linklater sets her sights on at least two problems: "Blocked emotions are the fundamental obstacle to a free voice. Muddy thinking is the fundamental obstacle to clear articulation" (25). Throughout the Shakespeare book as well, Linklater's devotion to the text is paramount: Shakespeare's words, rhythms, and rhymes will do most of the work for the attentive and assiduous actor. There is, if I may be forgiven this patronizing remark,

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nothing touchy-feely about Kristin Linklater's work; it is old school, ancient school, both tactile and tactful, textual and textural alike, with full emotional power and smart as a whip. A philosopher has to be humbled here. And he or she should think twice before presuming to add anything to the program. And yet there are two issues I would like to raise, one concerning the diagnostic side of Linklater's work, and another concerning the more practical aspect, the exercises themselves.

First, with regard to the diagnosis of the threatened voice, the suppressed and repressed voice: the repression is as old as Platonism and all the puritanisms of our religious and moral traditions. Moreover, that repression seems to be built-in, so that liberation of the voice would be a monumental task. In his book *Voice and Phenomenon,* Derrida shows that when we hear and understand ourselves while speaking—and in French this hearing and understanding are said by the single word *s'entendre*, so that the *s'entendre-parler* is our hearing and understanding ourselves simultaneously as we speak—we have the illusion that our thoughts are wholly present to us and we are wholly in possession of "our" thoughts. It is as if the voice were the stairway to the heaven of thought. Nothing from the outside seems to intrude—at least as long as we talk to ourselves quietly, even silently. Otherwise, our spoken language could itself seem to be interrupting thought. When we were children we would take a word like *aardvark*, the first word of the dictionary, and say it over and over again until the word lost its sense and became the croaking or barking of a strange little animal, *aardvaaarrrrk*! Ah, but when the voice remains silent, I have the feeling that I am fully present to my heaven of ideas, from aardvark to zymurgy; I own them; they are my playthings; I am the philosopher. According to Derrida, the *written* text destroys the intimacy of the *s'entendre-parler*, and so does the spoken phoneme when it obtrudes. Derrida's favourite phoneme was *gl-,* the very glottal combination of letters that makes us feel, not that we are speaking, but that we are about to vomit. In his dialogue called *Cratylus*, Plato singles out this gamma-lambda, or *gl-,* to name whatever is sweet, the glucose, which, while at first slippery and gliding, smooth and glabrous, soon becomes sticky and gluey (427b-c). The obtrusive phoneme makes out the visceral quality of Shakespeare's language that Linklater loves, a language so celestial and so streetwise by turns. For her, it would not be the philosopher's illusory *s'entendre-parler*, which suppresses the body of language, its signifiers, in order to float with meanings, or signifieds; rather, it would be something like a *sentir-parler*, or a *ressentir-parler*, to *feel* oneself while speaking, not adrift in some cloud-cuckoo-land of ideas, nor like an aardvark, but nonetheless acutely aware of the signifying body of one's speech. If I had to recommend only one philosophical project that develops this more visceral sense of language, it would be the project of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, in

his books *Phenomenology of Perception, Signs,* and *The Visible and the Invisible.* One passage from each book, if I may. In *The Visible and the Invisible,* left incomplete at the time of his death in 1961, Merleau-Ponty develops his extraordinary idea of the *flesh of the world,* here in terms of the voice:

> Like crystal, metal, and many other substances, I am a sonorous being. Yet I hear the vibration of me from within; as Malraux says, I hear with my throat. It is a matter in which, as he also says, I am incomparable; my voice adheres to the mass of my life as no one else's voice does. Yet if I am close enough to someone talking to hear his or her breath, to hear the effervescence or the fatigue, I attend in them, almost as I do in myself, the terrifying birth of vociferation. Just as there is a reflexivity of touch, of the view and of the system tactility/vision, so is there also a reflexivity of the movements of phonation and hearing: they have their sonorous inscription, the vociferations have in me their motor echo. This new reversibility and the emergence of the flesh as expression are the point of insertion of speaking and thinking in the world of silence. (VI: 190/144–45)

From the very outset of speech, according to Merleau-Ponty, I am for myself not only a locutor but also an allocutor, both someone speaking and someone spoken to, even if I am only talking to myself. It is as though language were talking to itself alone, as Novalis suggests in his "Monologue." Merleau-Ponty elaborates: "To the extent that what I say has meaning, I am for myself, when I speak, another 'other'; and to the extent that I understand, I no longer know who is talking and who is listening" (*Signs* 121). This otherness of the voice, the exteriority that shatters the dream of perfect presence to ideas, is heard by Merleau-Ponty also in his *Phenomenology of Perception.* He is speaking of the noise that language invariably makes, in spite of all the enforced silence of past philosophy:

> Thought is nothing "interior"; it does not exist outside of the world or of words. What deceives us in this respect, what makes us believe in a thought that would exist for itself prior to expression, is the existence of thoughts that are already constituted and already expressed and that we can recall to ourselves silently, thoughts by which we give ourselves the illusion of an interior life. But in reality this so-called silence is buzzing with speech [*bruissant des paroles*]; this interior life is an interior language. "Pure" thought can be reduced to a certain emptiness of consciousness, an instantaneous wish. [. . .] Thus thought and expression are constituted simultaneously, when our acquired culture mobilizes itself and puts itself in service to this unknown law, just as our body suddenly adopts a new gesture in an acquisition that will become habitual. Speech is truly a gesture and it contains its meaning as the gesture contains its meaning. That is what makes communication possible. (*Phenomenology* 213–14)

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Second, with regard to the more positive or practical side of Kristin Linklater's work, I want to add a note on "the musicality of the vowel," which she stresses in the early exercises contained in *Freeing the Natural Voice*, but also in the Shakespeare book (*Freeing Shakespeare's* 13). She calls the phoneme *AAAAA*, for example, "that wide, uninhibited channel" (17), an expression that reminds us of two further philosophical texts I would like to recommend. The first is Jean-Jacques Rousseau's wonderful *Essay on the Origin of Languages,* which identifies the vowel with music and with the gracious climates of the south, of Italy and Greece and meridional France. The consonants, by contrast, he identifies with those chilly peoples of the north who are too busy working to sing: consonants kill aardvarks. The language of vowels, says Rousseau, is the language of love: to hear it serenaded, the girls gather around the water well and the boys notice how thirsty their cows are. As a classic Linklater exercise has it, *MA-AA* goes to, or comes from, the heart (*Freeing the Natural* 25). Workaholics will find my conjunction of Linklater and the Romantic Rousseau sentimental. And well I know that in the course of this week I will feel the whip of the Linklater method across my back, and that I will be made to sweat. Yet everyone will forgive me for saying that Linklater *writes*, and no one writes without romanticism. Listen to these words of hers on the ancient Greeks: "The huge stories told by the Greeks call for huge vocal and emotional capacity. The stories can only be told in poetic language that treads on the skirts of melody and trips into chant or song whenever the choruses carry the tale" (*Freeing the Natural* 354). There are consonants here, of course, but they are there to set the rhythm of the phrases, to articulate the melody of the thought.

While we are on the subject of vowels and consonants, I want to recommend another text, one I have already referred to twice, namely, Plato's dialogue called *Cratylus*. The main question raised in *Cratylus* is whether there is a natural language, a language that speaks from the very heart of things—what the Hebraic tradition calls the Adamic language. Plato too lives after Babel, so he knows that the sheer existence of multiple languages dampens our otherwise enthusiastic celebration of our own language as "the" natural language: while a cat is a *Katz* is a *gato* is a *chat*, it is also true that a dog is a *Hund* is a *perro* is a *chien*, so that words don't always seem to mime the being of things. Yet Socrates, throughout a large part of the dialogue, lets himself get carried away by the dream of a divinely legislated language, one whose noises suit the essence of the things. He even tries to find out the essence of the letters. Concerning the letter A, or alpha, for example, he says that "among letters, it's the big one," whereby "big one" in Greek uses the very alpha to sing the praises of the alpha: Τὸ δ᾽αὖ ἄλφα, he says, τῷ «μεγάλῳ» ἀπέδοκε (427c 3–4). To be sure, the dialogue is a

comedy, and as we laugh at Socrates it makes us sceptical about the Adamic language. Merleau-Ponty comes to the rescue again, however, when in the *Phenomenology of Perception* he stresses that *within any given language* it is not at all foolhardy to look for the natural kinship of sound and emotion and even sense. And he would be the first, with Kristin Linklater right beside him, to insist that "natural" here derives from *natus est* and refers to the birth of the living body, one's own body, a body that can find "the emotional essence" of vowels and words with which *de chanter le monde,* "to sing the world" (*Phenomenology* 218).

I began by speaking of a tension in Kristin Linklater's work on the natural voice, born free yet everywhere in chains. There is another tension, a very fertile one, that I sense everywhere in the midst of her most rigorous instruction. One must work to free blocked emotions and one must seek to clarify muddy ideas—and yet in both cases we must be prepared to *let* liberation and clarification *happen*. In Linklater's texts we find constant reminders of the necessity of what the medieval mystic Meister Eckhart and the recent thinker Martin Heidegger called *Gelassenheit*, the ability to *allow* things to occur and not to insist on control and manipulation. The music of vowels, for example, which Rousseau celebrated, is a music, according to Linklater, "that *happens*, and that cannot be *made* to happen" (*Freeing Shakespeare's* 19). In bold italic type, on page 21, where *MMMMMM* is being contrasted to *NG,* she writes: "*Try*

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*not to impose ideas on the sounds—let THEM tell YOU who and what they are.*" Later, in the context of Shakespeare's "Words and Images," she instructs: "Your exercise is to *do* nothing but allow a great deal *happen* to you" (35). "There will be an answer—let it be," we hear Paul McCartney pleading. *Gelassenheit*, or "letting-be," occurs even when "brain muscle" is getting a workout. Antithesis, Shakespeare's predominant figure of speech, is equal to Hegel's dialectic in its complexity; yet once again it is *listening* that Linklater stresses. While treating the antitheses in *Richard III,* she writes: "In acting terms this means that the most important element in the playing of the scene is LISTENING. The characters do not know that they are speaking in a series of brilliant antitheses. They HEAR/FEEL what is said, and the words that they hear/feel stimulate a related and oppositional word/feeling response. The actor's process must be to *absorb* the experiential meaning of the words into the body, *absorb* the form and logic of the antithesis and then LISTEN for the trigger words in what the other person is saying. The trigger words spark the apparently unpremeditated response" (*Freeing Shakespeare's* 85).

Note here the double verb, *hear/feel*, which is the Derridian or Merleau-Pontian paraphrase I was seeking earlier with *ressentir-parler*. This leads me to a final expression of the fruitful tension between letting-be and disciplined work. Linklater sees everywhere the need for a deconstruction of the prefabricated modes of our everyday language; she refers grimly to "the daily lassitude of our prose-ridden minds" (*Freeing Shakespeare's* 153). And she cites Pablo Neruda's wonderful desire, not merely to hear words, but to touch them and twist them and crumple them (*Voy a arrugar esta palabra / voy a torcerla, / si*), as though we have to relearn hearing through sight, touch, taste, and feeling (31). Not even iambic pentameter is guaranteed to shake us out of our lassitude:

> The only problem is that these patterns can feel like "me"; they can define who I am, and yet they are only a tiny proportion of "me." The actor must shake loose the acquired, unconscious patterns in order to allow the imprint of a completely different pattern of speech belonging, for instance, to a character in a play quite unlike himself or herself. We have a myriad of possible rhythms in our brains, and exercising them releases varying shades of communication and varying shades of who we are. Anyone who says, "This is who I am and how I speak" has locked the door on "I wonder who I really am and what I might become, and what my real voice is, and what I might say if I spoke my thoughts out freely through my real voice." (128)

Kristin Linklater loves the theory of κάθαρσις as Martha Nussbaum develops that notion in *The Fragility of Goodness.* "Purgation," "cleansing," "purification" is what the Linklater method is all about, not only for the individual actor in search of a voice but for the role of theatre in our society, "catharsis within the community," as

she puts it (196). Yet here again a kind of letting-be is at work, inasmuch as κάθαρσις is "clarification," as of wine in the barrel. The precipitation of a colloidal dispersion can occur quite suddenly, or it can be allowed to happen over time, through a kind of "settling." Here too activity and passivity engage in an interactive drama, hard work and *Gelassenheit* in the pursuit of pleasure and enjoyment. When Kristin Linklater instructs her students to breathe out, to exhale fully, she says, "See if you can't make it a moment of *pleasurable relief and release!*"

Note that I have spoken throughout of a tension, not a contradiction, in her work. The thinker of *Gelassenheit*, Heidegger, spoke of the need for a *Destruktion* of the entire history of metaphysics, an *Abbau* or dismantling of the entire philosophical tradition, but all for the sake of letting thinking *be*. Thinking? Of what? Of, among other things, the moment of nothing, which Heidegger calls *the* nothing, *das Nichts.* And Derrida, the thinker of deconstruction, was always at pains to show that texts were doing this deconstructing to themselves, they were not waiting for him, he was there simply to let it happen. What others might call an inconsistency in Linklater's method I would call its philosophical-thoughtful heritage, its finest flower. While flowers need the hard work of horticulture, they are there to be enjoyed.

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