

## Derrida on the Line

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### Abstract

By offering us a voice that is both at a distance and inside one's own head, the telephone causes interference in thinking and writing. But despite the multiple telephones that echo in and across Jacques Derrida's work, and specifically his writing to and with H  l  ne Cixous, it is only since Derrida's death that critical interest in the phone has fully emerged, with work by Royle (2006), Prenowitz (2008), Bennington (2013) and Turner (2014) stressing the value of staying on the line. Engaging with Derrida, however, is not simply a matter of picking up the receiver. For the telephone is also, Derrida insists in *H.C. for Life* (2006), a 'poetico-technical invention', that is, the telephone is 'thought itself'. This paper is about how the telephone 'thinks' Derrida, about how it remembers Derrida, and about how it offers us a line for re-imagining his voice. Bound up with the uncanny mechanisms of the telephone, it invites readers to participate in long-distance calling – listening across species, texts and worlds.

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But once again, a terrifying telephone [...]

- Derrida 2007, 242

Yes, yes, this call begins. I can hear you, yes; can you hear me?

Reaching Jacques Derrida on the line requires speaking to the telephone. But this is not simply a matter of picking up the receiver. For the telephone is also, Derrida insists in *H.C. for Life*, a 'poetico-technical invention', that is, the telephone is 'thought itself' (Derrida 2006, 100). Therefore, this call is about how the telephone 'thinks' Derrida, about how it remembers Derrida, and about how it offers us a line for reimagining his voice. Bound up with the uncanny mechanisms of listening and of writing as calling, I'm talking about the remains of a telephone that continues to ring long after the caller has returned the receiver to its cradle. And in saying this, I call upon you to 'read with your ears' (Ronell 1989, xv) and to imagine how speaking to the telephone in Derrida's work might contribute to opening the lines between different texts, different species and different worlds.

Hello? Are you still there? Can you hear me?

Yes. I'm still here, yes.

The telephone echoes in and across a number of Derrida's works – including *The Post Card* (1987), 'Ulysses Gramophone: Hear Say Yes in Joyce' (1992), and *H.C. for Life* (2006). But despite the multiple telephones that structure his writing, and specifically his writing to and with Hélène Cixous, it is only since Derrida's death that critical interest in the phone has fully emerged, with work by Nicholas Royle (2006), Eric Prenowitz (2008), Geoffrey Bennington (2013) and Lynn Turner (2014) stressing the value of staying on the line. There's something about the phone, this suggests, that speaks to us in complex ways about presence and absence; its insistent ringing and its clamouring silence disrupt our metaphysical assumptions about proximity and distance, being and not-being. For Bennington:

[T]his economy of the telephone already complicates significantly the relations we usually posit without thinking, between here and there, the near and the distant, the present and the past, and it muddies the waters or obscures the map that we have laboriously drawn up, and especially, perhaps, complicates the relation between life and death. (Bennington 2013, 274)

By offering us a voice without a body – a voice that is at once at a distance and right inside our heads – the telephone causes a peculiar kind of interference in thinking and writing. For Avital Ronell, it 'abolishes the originariness of site; it undermines the authority of the Book and constantly menaces the existence of literature' (Ronell 1989, 9). But this destabilizing force is one that we might celebrate rather than avoid, for the effects of telephony lead us to reappraise not simply acts of speaking and listening, but also the means, medium and materiality of the text. So if this text is a telephone message, it is one that attempts to open up the operation of deconstruction to a vast switchboard; it is a thinking that embraces rather than attempts to eliminate the mysterious and uncertain effects of telepathic transference, as well as all the ecstatic interruptions that continue to rattle down the line. It is one that seeks not only to explore, but also to play out the effects of telephony on language and form, addressor and addressee, listening and speaking; in so doing, it asks us to read with our ears, to listen again, to hearsay yes.

So imagine, if you will, that what proceeds is a series of messages left on Derrida's answering machine; although they play out in ways you might not be expecting, I hope you both can hear me.

### **Voicemail 1: Yes**

'In the beginning, was the telephone', you say at the International James Joyce Symposium in 1984 (Derrida 1992, 270). Joyce's *Ulysses*, you point out, taps into a haunting exchange,

where voices continually interrupt and speak over one another to generate a plethora of crossed lines. You argue: ‘We can hear the telephone constantly ringing’ (Ibid.) in the novel (a claim that one might also make with respect to your own work). You pay particular attention to the passage in *Ulysses* headed ‘A Distant Voice’, where we encounter Professor MacHugh on the line. The telephone whirs immediately prior to the start of this passage: ‘I’ll answer it, the professor said going’ (Joyce 1992, 173). He continues: ‘Hello? *Evening Telegraph* here ... Hello?... Who’s there?... Yes... Yes... Yes....’ And then: ‘The professor came to the inner door. / - Bloom is at the telephone, he said’ (Ibid.). Yes, he is. Yes. In *The Space of Literature*, Maurice Blanchot argues that the very act of reading is always bound up with the yes: it is a ‘freedom that welcomes, consents, says yes, can say only yes, and, in the space opened by this yes, lets the work’s overwhelming decisiveness affirm itself’ (Blanchot 1982, 194). If, as Blanchot says, the ‘pure yes’ is the ‘essence of reading’ (Ibid., 197), and if, as you say, ‘in the beginning, was the telephone’, then the telephonic yes is a reading that begins with the ears. An early eerie yes, an earsay, an ears-yes, an essayer.

But what makes the professor’s yes so uncanny is that it foretells ‘the most famous yes in the history of literature’ (Parvulescu 2010, 16); that is, Molly Bloom’s Yes with which the novel concludes: ‘and yes I said yes I will Yes’ (Joyce 1992, 933). This is a yes that arrests the narrative but ensures that we keep on reading. Remarking on the innumerable yeses in *Ulysses*, you begin with the end, fold the end into the beginning:

[T]he *yes* comes from me to me, from me to the other in me, from the other to me, to confirm the primary telephonic ‘Hello’: yes, that’s right, that’s what I’m saying, I am, in fact, speaking, yes, there we are, I’m speaking, yes, yes, you can hear me, I can hear you, yes, we are in the process of speaking, there is language, you are receiving me, it’s like this, it takes place, it happens, it is written, it is marked, yes, yes. (Derrida 1992, 297)

It is also, for you, an internalised yes, ‘from me to the other in me’ (Ibid.). In fact, you are quick to pick up on the internal nature of the call in *Ulysses*, noting the repetition of the ‘inner’ and the ‘inside’ (Ibid., 271). This inward topology you describe as a ‘telephonic interiority’: a multiplication of interior voices, a kind of ‘telephonic *technē* [...] at work within the voice’ (Ibid.). Blurring the lines between proximity and distance, presence and absence, silence and speaking, this telephonic *technē* is in operation in every voice. It is no longer simply a matter of listening out for those electrical impulses that reach us down the line; there is a multiplication of interior voices within every word. In ‘Language (*Le Monde* on the Telephone)’, you argue that the telephone conversation depends ‘on a context which is not immediately linguistic. It is a larger and always open text that is not limited to discourse’ (Derrida 1995a, 172). Explaining therefore that your ‘yes’ may be either

constative or performative, you say that ‘by itself a *yes* never states anything more than a *hello*; it answers, obligates, appeals’ (Ibid.). This is a point you make in relation to Joyce’s work, too. But although you say that the telephonic *yes* ‘amounts to marking, simply, that we are here, present’ (Derrida 1992, 270), this *here* is on unstable ground, complicating the relation between the living and the dead. For this reason, your own *yes* is most haunting. Certainly, the telephone has long had an uncanny hook-up with the afterlife. Its ‘spooked circuitry’ (Ronell 1989, 261) is evident in *Ulysses* at Paddy Dignam’s funeral, where Leopold Bloom wonders for a moment if Dignam is still alive: ‘They ought to have some law to pierce the heart and make sure or an electric clock or a telephone in the coffin and some kind of canvas airhole’ (Joyce 1992, 140–1). But ‘No, no: he is dead, of course’, Bloom confirms (Ibid.). Dignam is dead, and you are too, of course. Yes, yes.

But hang on don’t go keep a while please stay on the line.

Are you there? Yes, I imagine you saying, because in your own words, ‘for a very long time, the question of the *yes* has mobilized and traversed everything I have been trying to think, write, teach, or read’ (Derrida 1992, 287). Indeed, for John Caputo, your desire is always ‘to keep the lines open, to prevent telecommunicational “systems” and “networks” from becoming scenes of totalization and control’ (Caputo 1997, 187). And so yes yes – for the ‘yes implies always a repetition, a (Yes) Yes’ (Kamuf 1991, 462) – so (yes) yes, you say (but once again), explaining that ‘When the professor says, “Bloom is at the telephone”’ he means that ‘he is always there, he belongs to the telephone, he is at once riveted and destined there’ (Derrida 1992, 272–4). Might we not also say that you are always at the telephone, destined there, perpetually setting the conversation in motion again? (Yes) Yes. Offering us this ‘*yes phenomenon*’ (Ibid., 297), you keep *us* at the phone too. It’s more than hearsay: in everything that you write we hear your yes yes, I’m still here, reminding us all the more of our loss.<sup>1</sup>

## **Voicemail 2: Echographic Whispers**

I’m calling to say that I think your yes yes is played out in advance, or echoed backwards, many times over. I’ve seen you with my own eyes. I’ve heard you with my own other ears. You’re there saying yes in Ken McMullen’s film *Ghost Dance* (1983). In the opening sequence, Pascale Ogier’s white cordless phone is chewed up and spat out by a shopkeeper,

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<sup>1</sup> But you don’t always pick up. You don’t always say ‘yes’. In the midst of your repeated calls to your beloved in *The Post Card*, you describe receiving a call from someone claiming to be Martin Heidegger – a call you refuse to answer. See further Derrida 1987, 25–26; Ronell 1989, 17–18.

but its interior voice cannot be digested and the telephone returns throughout the film. This return is perhaps most haunting when we find that later in the film you are on the line. This is the scene in which you, playing Derrida, meet Ogier in your office. She says to you (or your double, I'm never sure): 'Do you believe in ghosts?' ('Yes, yes,' you might answer, but instead:) 'That's a difficult question,' you respond. 'Firstly, you're asking a ghost whether he believes in ghosts.' You are interrupted by a ringing: 'Now the telephone is the ghost', you say, and you might be speaking of Bloom. You pick up the receiver: 'Hello? Yes?' There is silence. 'Yes'. More silence. 'Yes . . . Yes, Yes.' It's that (yes) yes, again. Hanging up, you say, 'Well, that was the phantom voice of someone I don't know....' The film is filled with phantom voices, yes, and it is a yes that we've heard before.

Perhaps that voiceless double on the other end of your line is Joyce: the telephone rings and you answer, echoing Joyce's yes yes. Does Joyce foresee or perhaps overhear or even hearsay your yes? Does he hear its uncanny echo ringing in the future? For like Joyce, you are always at the phone, your work tapping into multiple operations, transferring between calls. In Kirby Dick and Amy Ziering Kofman's documentary *Derrida* (2002), you're once again on the line: 'Agnes called me yesterday to talk about the meeting . . . it's canceled? Yes, . . . yes . . . [sic]' (Dick and Kofman 2005, 67). 'Yes', you repeat. 'Yes'. Always this yes yes, as the camera captures you with the phone to your ear, to your mouth. And even when the camera moves away, putting you out of ear-shot, I see you continuing to talk on the telephone through the glass, your yeses ringing in my ears, through the *glas*, yes yes, like that 'interminable network of listening lines *en allo*, in hello' in *Glas*, a ringing of the death knell (Derrida 1986, 118). I see you at the telephone: a ghost.

Throughout the film, I catch you at it, all those surreptitious shots of your mouth to the phone, of your yeses at the phone, of your untranslatable hello, *bonjour*, *oui*, *ja*, yes, even the yes that is deaf to my ears. Perhaps the most haunting image comes when you semi-materialise in a reflection in your glass office. If we were face-to-face rather than ear-to-distant-ear, I might show you now: peering through the window, there is this uncanny instant when the reflection of your body almost disappears. You ghost the screen. I can see right through you, through your yellow shirt, your wave of white hair. But right beside you, your telephone is larger-than life. Solid, hefty, it is ready-to-hand; while you vanish, the telephone still remains, yes.

### **Voicemail 3: Still Remains**

Remaining a while with pictures and picturing, I wonder if the remains of this telephone ring loudest in your discussion of Jean-François Bonhomme's work in *Athens, Still Remains* (2010). There are two telephone photographs in this work: telephone twins, doubles. I look at them, listen. In the first, a shot of 'Monastiraki Market', you point out that the telephone, which is not working, is 'on top of an old radio' (Derrida 2010, 43). This telephone, you remark, 'has a dial': 'Black and white too *en abyme*: the old telephone is black with a white spot in the middle' (Ibid.). The second image, of 'Adrianou Street Market', also features a telephone on top of an old radio. This telephone you say is 'younger'; 'it is a touchtone' (Ibid.). You note that these 'two telephones are both to be found in the *upper left*, in the displays of two different merchants' (Ibid.). Surrounded by radios, musical instruments and recording devices, these photographs, you insist, 'bear the mourning of sounds and voices' (Ibid.). In parenthesis, you wonder '(what was the last message to be interrupted at the moment of disconnecting these conveyers of voices)' before arguing that these defunct telephones 'resonate like echographic whispers', and in so doing, 'allow us to hear all that much better the spectral echo of what they silence' (Ibid.). The remains of these two telephones remind me above all of that which still remains.

Discussing 'telephonography' in Bonhomme's photographs, you say that 'there are at least *two old telephones* for sale' (Ibid.). It's interesting that you say 'at least two', because I think I can see three. Perhaps I'm mistaken, but in the image of Adrianou there appears to be a black telephone on the left hand side, half way down. Do you really not see it? A black, rotary dial, with a white spot in the middle. Is this the ancestral telephone from Monastiraki? Its identical twin or double? Perhaps I am seeing-hearing things, but maybe it's there to remind me that there is always another telephone, another call, another line. I think I can hear a faint ringing...

When I listen carefully, when I listen with my other ear, I hear an echographic whisper: a haunting yes. For if the telephone is an uncanny medium, then the photograph is too. Though one appeals to the voice and the other to vision, both are bound up with the thanatographical. You taught me this. In *Athens, Still Remains*, you write that each photograph 'signifies death without saying it' (Ibid., 2). Each photograph, you say, 'recalls a death that has already occurred, or one that is promised or threatening' (Ibid.). Your reading of Bonhomme's work foregrounds this spectrality, incorporating an obsessive return to the expression '*nous nous devons à la mort* – translated as 'we owe ourselves to death' (Ibid.). This refrain ensures that the book is framed by death, returning to it throughout the text, much like – Gerhard Richter suggests in his introduction to *Copy*,

*Archive, Signature* – ‘reprints of a photograph that enact a central characteristic of the “clichés,” which in this context could also be translated as “stills”’ (Richter 2010, xxx–xxx). In each ‘still’, then, the photograph ‘stills’ death and brings it forward; it reminds me that death still remains, yes, and so when I see these photographs of telephonic remains, I cannot help but want to get you back on the line, so to speak.

The telephone, I used to think, gives voice. But these phone-photos suggest that the apparatus does not speak. Referring to this apparent silence in *Right of Inspection*, you argue that the photograph is ‘in deathly silence’ (Derrida 1998, np). You are addressing Marie-Françoise Plissart’s photographs here, and you insist that although her pictures may include images of words, ‘one never hears the least word, not one is ever cited as *having been spoken in the present*’. The photograph, you say instead, can be compared to ‘thinking’; it is ‘a pensiveness without a voice, whose only voice remains suspended’ (Ibid.). The photograph is thinking; despite its ‘silent obstinacy’, however, you go on to admit that it is ‘a machine for making talk – inexhaustibly’. If a photograph thinks, it does not speak in the present; yet if it thinks, it makes talk endlessly. Recalling that you describe the telephone in similar terms in *H.C. for Life* – an apparatus for ‘thought itself’ – could we say that the photograph of a telephone is thinking and speaking double?

All this telephone talk is doubly played out in the very form of *Right of Inspection*, which is structured itself as a kind of internal telephony. ‘Now you are beginning to tell stories, or at least to describe’, says one voice, while the other answers: ‘Not at all, I am referring to the images, I am looking and following your gaze’ (Ibid., np). The doubleness of telephonic remains, then, are built into the very structure of your text. And the telephone, itself, is always double. The invention of the telephone bears witness to this doublespeak: Alexander Graham Bell was only ever able to conduct his experiments with the help of his assistant Thomas Watson, who remains at the other end of the line. Certainly, Ronell points out that although we think of ‘its atotality as apparatus, its singularity’, the telephone in fact always ‘presupposes the existence of another telephone, somewhere’ (Ronell 1989, 3). Its very structure demands another ear. We see the telephone, and we hear its double ring. (Yes) yes.

#### **Voicemail 4: The Double**

Speaking of the double, or passing from one to another: Hélène Cixous is always already on the line. She is the other ear, the other voice, the voice on the line, in your head, in my head, in our hearts, the ear of the heart, the earsay yes. In her essay ‘Writing Blind’, she

insists, 'I owe books and books to the telephone', and she returns over and over to a 'love for the telephone', where it becomes third party to her interior conversations (Cixous 2005, 189). So you are both on the line. Moreover, as Bennington points out, you have a 'primarily telephonic relation' – a relationship that is 'essentially telephonic, but also analytic, teleanalytical' (Bennington 2013, 271).

Drawing on Sigmund Freud's description of the psychoanalytic method in terms of the telephone – the doctor 'must adjust himself to the patient as a telephone receiver is adjusted to the transmitting microphone' (Freud 2001: XII, 115–16) – Bennington reveals that you were both 'in telephonic analysis with each other for years' (Bennington 2013, 271). You even admit that you spoke 'infinitely more' on the telephone than you ever spoke face-to-face: 'Between the lines of what we have been writing, for decades, that is to say, for people of our generation, throughout a whole lifetime, between so many lines of writing, there will probably have been the unique infinity of a telephone line' (Derrida 2006, 17). These are the very operations that occupy your exchange. Thus, as Bennington says, the 'alterity of the other' structures the principle of the telephone: 'the other whom I am addressing is perhaps already on the telephone, fleeing me at the very moment I try to make sure of his or her precious "presence"' (Bennington 2013, 274). The remains of this voice may well echo in the ear of my heart, but the yes is already departed, flown off somewhere else entirely.

Cixous specifically addresses your telephonic relation in *Hyperdream*. Here, it is the very possibility of telephoning you that allows for her survival. She explains that 'every time I needed to get away from the place I was in, all I had to do was give him a call, and *voilà!* My flight was booked' (Cixous 2009, 46). 'This was the line', she writes, 'that kept me alive for forty years wherever I happened to be' (Ibid.). This telephonic economy was her 'insurance policy' (Ibid.): 'I didn't even need to telephone, I had the possibility' (Ibid.). But following your death, the line is cut. She tells her brother:

'I had just realized I will never again in my whole life telephone my friend, that is to say, a certain essential thread or line of communication for my kind of being and my kind of writing had been irreparably cut. This of all lines. It is an awfully serious sentence for someone like me: Thou shalt not telephone.' (Ibid.)

Cixous mourns the loss of telephonic flight afforded her by the possibility of calling you. This is of course, Bennington says, a 'mortal and telephonic cut', it is a real and irreparable cut, but it is 'also a cut without cut' (Bennington 2013, 275). For later in *Hyperdream*, you are granted 'special leave' and Cixous hears again 'my friend whose voice I heard inside me telephoning' (Cixous 2009, 141, 89). Bennington points out that this is evidence that we are

‘still accompanied by the internal telephonic voice of J.D.’: ‘in telephonic contact there is also something other than presence or absence, and by this very fact there is something like a virtualization already under way’ (Bennington 2013, 278, 273). So although the cut is mortal and real, the telephone’s interference with relations of here and there ensures that something remains. It is this that gives me a direct line to your radically (im)possible voices, that keeps me imagining you still on the line. But there are other voices on the line, too.

### **Voicemail 5: Mother on the Line**

Yes, yes, I said to my mother this morning on the telephone. Yes, I’m still writing about calling, still thinking through ringing. I don’t tell her the trouble that I’m having here. How could I explain that these faraway voices are at an impossible distance and right inside my head? I hear her from afar too, inside my ear. Cixous calls it ‘*the far in the near*’; for her, the telephone is the ‘sublime voice directly to the ear of the heart’ (Cixous 1997, 38, 49). But I don’t tell my mother, who knows more than anyone about the ear of my heart, I don’t tell her that for Cixous the telephone is akin to the relationship a ‘*pregnant (mother) woman has | With her child*’ (Ibid.). In ‘From My Menagerie to Philosophy’, Cixous sets out the maternal properties of the telephone, writing that ‘the need to telephone has always existed because it’s vital to recall the mother. All mammals bear the trace of the first telephone cord’ (Cixous 2000, 47). She’s quick to point out, however, that she refers here to the ‘mother figure’ who ‘may also be a son a husband a lover’ (Ibid., 48); it is someone with whom you ‘share a life reciprocally: “Are you there?” “I’m here”’ (Ibid.). Yes, yes, I said to the telephone, to my mother/son/husband/lover, on the telephone this morning, yes I’m still writing about calling.

In *Ulysses*, of course, Stephen Dedalus speaks to the maternal line, imagining the umbilicus as a telephone cord: ‘The cords all link back, strandentwining cable of all flesh. That is why mystic monks. While you be as gods? Gaze in your omphalos. Hello. Kinch here. Put me on to Edenville. Aleph, alpha: nought, nought, one’ (Joyce 1992, 46). Stephen thus taps into the maternal network. But for Cixous in *Hyperdream*, this telephonic relation with the mother is one that suffers all kinds of interference. On the one ear, she can’t bear to listen to her ailing mother, admitting ‘I try not to hear, but I can’t, I don’t listen to her; but she comes through loud and clear, naturally I can’t plug my ears’; on the other, she wants ‘to hear every last one of my mother’s words’ (Cixous 2009, 59). Her mother is always picking up the metaphorical telephone, calling Cixous to her aid: ‘She calls me, I respond, she doesn’t hear. I shout: Yes! I’m here! I’m coming! I’m coming!’ (Ibid., 115), but

this falls on deaf ears: 'It's me, it's my voice my mother doesn't hear' (Ibid.). The not-hearing sends mixed messages: 'I'm coming! I'm coming! Oh! The crazed voice, driving me crazy. In the trees. Down below. On the phone' (Ibid.). The failure of this call-and-response is part of an inherent fault on the line. She explains, 'I can't call my mother', not only because she is deaf, but also because 'she is here. She is even the Here-and-Now in person' (Ibid., 51). It's a double bind, an extra twist of the telephone-umbilicus cord – and one that 'plunges [Cixous] into the depths of despair' (Ibid., 86). The risk of the mother's silence is also the potential for the line's failure.

In line with this possible failure, the telephone not only connects us to the mother, but also – as Elissa Marder points out – 'mobilize[s] anxieties about the maternal function' (Marder 2012, 6). She argues that while the telephone operates as an extension of the maternal body, its reproductive technologies also unsettle that operation. The telephone issues forth the spectrality of the mother; by keeping the 'archaic mother' 'permanently available and on hold', the telephone at the same time announces the 'ghost of her presence' (Ibid., 120). For you, too, the ghostly mother is repeatedly on the line in *Circumfession*, where you speak to the 'presently present survival or life by provision of Georgette Sultana Esther, or Mummy if you prefer, which cuts across everything' (Derrida 1993, 73). Circumfessing the 'death agony of [your] mother' (Ibid., 120), you explain that your mother is 'still alive at the moment [you are] writing this, but already incapable of memory' (Ibid., 22). She no longer recognizes you, she no longer calls you by name. In her final months, you explain that you find talking to her extremely difficult. You try to make her speak: "What have you got to say? – Don't know. - ... - What?", or "What have you got to tell me? – What have I got to tell you? – Yes – Nothing" (Ibid.). However, it is via the telephone that you find a passage for the voice:

She responds better on the telephone, whose apparatus comes down to making the world sink away to leave the passage of the pure voice toward the depth of memory, and thus a little while ago she pronounced my name, Jackie, in echo to the sentence from my sister passing her the receiver, 'hello Jackie,' something she had not been able to do for months and will perhaps do no more [...]. (Ibid.)

The telephone thus opens up the lines of communication. But even without this receiver, your relationship is structured by telephonic doublespeak. You describe a conversation on February 5, 1989, when you ask if she is in pain. She replies: "I have a pain in my mother," as though she were speaking *for* me, both in my direction and in my place' (Ibid., 23). Telepathy: she hears your voice inside her head. And this isn't the only occasion when she appears to speak with your voice. You describe a situation on December 24, 1988, when

already unable to ‘answer to the normal rule of human exchange’ (Ibid., 37), she nevertheless ‘pronounced clearly, in the midst of confused groanings “I want to kill myself;”’ a sentence you say ‘is a sentence of mine, me all over, but known to me alone’ (Ibid., 37–8). So your mother picks up and amplifies your most secret voice down the line. And at the same time, the very language and form of *Circumfession* is structured by the call as you wait for the phone to ring with the inevitable news; the death of your mother, you say, ‘would come to sculpt the writing from the outside, give it its form and its rhythm from an incalculable interruption’ (Ibid., 207). The text depends on this impossible to predict interruption, ‘as though each syllable, and the very milieu of each periphrasis were preparing itself to receive a telephone call, the news of the death of one dying’ (Ibid.). The text itself waits for the telephone to ring.

### **Voicemail 6: The Bell**

Forgive me for calling again, for speaking again to the mother. For there is another spectral parent on the line. I’m sorry, make that two, at least two, and that’s not even counting my own, who is, as I say, always calling me up. The inventor of the telephone demonstrates a particularly strong attachment to the mother. For Bruce, this may be because Bell developed ‘a special ability to bypass his mother’s ear tube and communicate in a low voice close to her forehead’ (Bruce 1990, 20). Bell always saw his own vocation as a teacher of the deaf, and the tragic deaths of his brothers, his mother’s impaired hearing, and the subsequent move to Canada, ensure that the invention of the telephone is tied up with the call to the mother: ‘that is,’ writes Ronell, ‘he was caught up in taking her place, multiplying her, folding her invaginated ears into those of the pair of brothers left behind in Europe’ (Ronell 1989, 335). Thus, as Marder explains, ‘the telephonic offspring that he conceives is endowed with maternal properties’ (Marder 2012, 117). Bell’s telephone, then, is about keeping the mother on hold, and its conception involves all the usual labour pains.

In fact, Bell’s assistant Watson also displays a strong maternal attachment, and the pair, with their mothers as midwives, give birth to the speaking and listening apparatus. In his autobiography, *Exploring Life*, Watson repeatedly returns to the mother, and when his work with Bell finally forces him to leave the family home in Salem, he admits that he ‘hated to leave [his] mother’ (Watson 1926, 89). As soon as he is able, Watson sells enough Bell Telephone Company stock ‘to carry out the desire that had been in my mind ever since I was a schoolboy – to buy my mother a house’ (Ibid., 173). Not content with merely visiting his mother’s new home, ‘[he] moved there, too’ (Ibid., 174). It is the telephone,

then, that provides the connection to the most *unheimlich* receiver.

This maternal function is echoed in the metaphor of the birth of the telephone. As boys, Alexander and his brother Melville were challenged by their father to replicate Joseph Faber's 'speaking machine'. The boys divide the work, with Alexander focusing on the tongue and mouth, and Melville on the lungs, throat and larynx. The work involves gutta-percha jaws and soft rubber lips. By blowing through a tin tube and manipulating the mouth, they manage to produce a 'human-sounding gibbering in the quacking falsetto of a Punch-and-Judy show' (Bruce 1990, 37). With practice, they learn to approximate the voice:

The easiest combination of sounds – as every baby knows – came from opening and closing the lips while sustaining the basic vowel-sound 'ah.' The machine then cried out 'Mama!' Aleck and Melly tasted triumph when a persistent demonstration of this feat on the common stairway at 13 South Charlotte Street brought a tenant down to see 'what can be the matter with the baby.' (Ibid.)

Extending the metaphor of this strange infant, the telephone is 'born' on 2 June 1875 (Ibid., 147). Moreover, its growth is frequently outlined by its parents in terms of child development. Watson explains that 'Getting that famous first sentence through the telephone seemed to exorcise some of the tantalizing imps that always pester the babyhood of a new invention as infantile diseases do a human baby' (Watson 1926, 80). He goes on to note that 'about six weeks after I signed the contract Bell decided his baby had grown big enough to go out doors and prattle over a real telegraph line, instead of gurgling between two rooms' (Ibid., 91); it is at this point, Ronell argues, that Bell and Watson discover that 'Bringing up baby is another matter' – a matter that she suggests leads to Watson's '*fort/da* with his mother' (Ronell 1989, 258, 260). This call, too, is a matter of *fort/da* with the mother, isn't it? Back and forth? Here and there? Present and absent? Where has my mother gone? Where and when is yours? Is she still on the line?

I say this with some trepidation, of course, not only acknowledging the dangers of bringing my mother into the picture at all, but also because the relationship between technology and the feminine is always troubled, with a number of faults on the line. Bennington points out that 'Taking the risk of saying that it's called "mother" is also to recognize that one no longer has a very clear idea of what a mother is' (Bennington 1993, 207–8). Even if the telephone connects us to the maternal, the mother figure refuses to be pinned down, causing interference between inside and outside, life and death. So when I say my mother, of course, I mean more than, or other than, I say. As Cixous reminds us, I may be referring to my husband or son or lover. Or even my cat. For Lynn Turner argues

that in your writing on the telephone, both you and Cixous ‘open the thought of a posthumanist ethics’ (Turner 2014, 160). Opening up the lines between the living and the dead, and between the human and the non-human animal, she points out that this version of the call ‘insist[s] on an ongoing complexity vis-à-vis what counts as the living’ (Ibid.), and that the telephone call is able to thus ‘vouch for an originary technicity *and* that the mother is not buried in the ground of nature but able to be recalled’ (Ibid., 161). Rather than relegating the telephone and umbilicus cord to a ‘fantasy of communication’, then, Turner argues that it also opens up to ‘the possibilities of disconnection’ (Ibid.), tapping into lines that reach beyond our species.

### **Voicemail 7: Cat-Calls**

Yes, yes, in getting the non-human animal on the line, I’m calling about the cat. Joyce’s cat, Cixous’s cat, Watson’s cat, Bell’s cat, your cat, my cat –we’ve all got them. My mother calls me to tell me that the cat has kidney failure, that the cat is dead, and I hear an uncanny mewling down the line. Indeed, we can always trace the cat back to the origins of the telephone. For when Bell and his brother were challenged to recreate the speaking machine, they did not stick to experimenting with wood and rubber, but ‘decided to sacrifice their pet cat to science’ in order to understand the workings of the larynx (Bruce 1990, 36). Calling upon a friend, a medical student, they were distraught when he tipped nitric acid in its mouth. Bruce notes: ‘Only after it had raced around in agony for some time could he be persuaded to open an artery and end its suffering’ (Ibid.). Horrified, they settle on a sheep’s larynx, donated by a butcher.

Watson is haunted by a phantom feline too. For him, ‘the cat was an important member of our family and when she died our sorrow was attested by general weeping’ (Watson 1926, 5). However, hoping to lessen his grief, a friend stuffs and mounts the creature, but, Watson says, ‘it was not a success’: ‘Its ugliness scared me, especially the mouth, which was badly puckered and showed the straw inside, and the glass eyes that glared on me alarmingly’ (Ibid.). Reading this scene, Ronell suggests: ‘what horrifies Watson in this passage to a mummified beloved is the mouth whose ugliness takes the shape he will soon assign to the face when telephoning’ (Ronell 1989, 238). In fact, Ronell points out that Watson, like Bell, turns ‘the pussy [...] into a machine (Ibid., 239).

Even Watson goes on to admit that he eventually uses the moth-eaten fur ‘as an exciter for a frictional electric machine’ (Watson 1926, 5). For Watson and Bell, the cat is embodied in the telephone: it seems that in order for the phone to come to life and speak,

the cat must be killed. The birth of the telephone is no less than a catastrophe.

But what about your cat? As far as I see it, cats are always stalking the line. In ‘The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)’, for instance, you describe the destabilization of identity that occurs when you find yourself embarrassed at your own nudity before your cat. Remarking on the ‘impropriety [*malséance*] of a certain animal nude before the other animal’, you call it ‘a kind of *animalséance*’ (Derrida 2002, 372), crossing the wires between human and non-human, life and death, psychoanalysis and the telephone. But once again, Joyce is already on this line. In ‘Calypso’, we find Leopold Bloom thinking about breakfast when the cat enters and says ‘Mkgnao!’ (Joyce 1992, 65). ‘O, there you are, Mr Bloom said’, and when the cat ‘mewed in answer’, Bloom muses: ‘They understand what we say better than we understand them. She understands all she wants to’ (Ibid., 65–6). The cat communes, thus disrupting our long-held assumption that the human animal is the only being to speak. And Bloom’s cat is particularly vocal: ‘Mrkrgrnao! the cat said loudly’ (Ibid., 66), and ‘Gurrhr! she cried’ (Ibid.). However, it is by listening to the cat speak that Bloom listens to his own voice. Outside the bedroom door, he says softly to his wife:

- I am going round the corner. Be back in a minute.
- And when he had heard his voice say it he added:
- You don’t want anything for breakfast? (Ibid., 67)

The conversation with the cat prompts Bloom to witness his own voice. It comes back at him, as if coming down the telephone wire. Moving beyond a conception of language that is limited to human communication, you say that ‘if one re-inscribes language in a network of possibilities that do not merely encompass it but mark it irreducibly from the inside, everything changes’ (Derrida 1995b, 284–5). Talking to the cat, for Bloom, changes language – and that includes his own.

The importance of listening to the cat, for Cixous, is crucial. She says that to fail to hear the cat speak ‘comes close to being a sin and a transgression’ (Cixous 2007, 397). For her, the cat is ‘the most sublime species’ (Ibid., 413), and to not bring it into the picture, she says, ‘would be to show, I believe, a lack of respect toward Jacques Derrida’ (Ibid., 396). So in *Hyperdream*, as she grapples with her loss, she listens to the cat: ‘Philia with her dizzying eyes begs for something to eat. No way to pretend I didn’t see the voice of her eyes’ (Cixous 2009, 22). Like Bloom’s cat, Cixous’s cats speak, but she is well-attuned to the kind of listening involved: ‘I receive the SOSs of my cats before the messages are sent and vice versa’ (Ibid., 96). They communicate telepathically, telepathicitilly: ‘Yesterday I did see death coming, and I wasn’t the only one. The cat saw, and I saw what Philia saw for we communicate bodies and fears’ (Ibid., 121). Elsewhere it is Thea, who Cixous notes

‘speaks to me only with the utmost seriousness, intensity, and reasonableness’ (Cixous 2000, 41). She speaks in a ‘foreign tongue’, ‘patiently, as a mute person, as if to a person who doesn’t understand her language, she sends me innumerable messages, trying to gain access to that ear in my head that hasn’t yet been born’ (Ibid.). So the cat speaks to the other ear, addressing the whole body. For Cixous, these ears ‘are spacious extensible velvety of the necessary size, courageous also never closed and my eyes which are other ears’ (Cixous 2005, 188). ‘The rest’, she continues, ‘is connected to the telephone exchange’ (Ibid., 188–89).

So the cat inevitably leads us back to the telephone:

That’s what my cat and I found out about: we’re going to telephone each other person-to-person. In this way she comes over several times a day to give me a little phone call in the leg, briefly using her own body as telephone, to dial the number she rubs: everything OK? ‘Everything’s OK.’ And she hangs up reassured. As for me, who can call long-distance, several times a day, to dial her number, I whistle three notes like this : : : and from the ends of the earth she appears, everything’s OK. Two lives of different species that come to life through one another, through contact. (Cixous 2000, 48)

Touching through the telephone, this is a call beyond the human voice. It demands listening with other ears – ears that are courageous and never closed. This is long-distance calling, calling across species, texts and worlds.

### **Voicemail 8: But once again, yes**

In ‘Eating Well’, you ask if the ‘animal hear[s] the call that originates responsibility?’ (Derrida 1995b, 278). ‘Does it question?’ you wonder; ‘is friendship possible for the animal or between animals?’ (Ibid.). Cixous insists: ‘Philia, Aletheia, and I, and, I’m sure, Jacques Derrida as well, we say yes’ (Cixous 2007, 397). And, like Cixous, ‘I can only say yes’ (Ibid.). (Yes) yes: ‘a yes can never be counted’ (Derrida 2000, 105).

But once again, yes. And so, following Joyce and Cixous, following you, following the mother, following the cat, I say yes, and fold the end into the beginning in order to keep you on the line. Yes, yes, this call begins. I’m here, yes. I can hear you, yes; can you hear me? Reading with the ear puts us in touch: these voices come to life through one another. Even as the telephone wires perpetually signal the possibilities of death or disconnection, we use our bodies, our cats, our ears as early eerie telephones in order to listen differently. And it is for your voice I listen now. So I end this message using words of your own: ‘I would have liked to keep talking to you, to keep you on the telephone’ (Derrida, 2006, 17–18).

Hello? Are you still there? Can you hear me? Please stay a while.

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