



# **The Senses' Festival**

## **Inszenierungen der Sinne und der Sinnlichkeit in der Literatur und Kunst des Barock**

**Festschrift zum 65. Geburtstag  
von Rolf P. Lessenich**

Herausgegeben von Norbert Lennartz

unter besonderer Mitarbeit von  
Petra Jakob, Diana Loew und Daniel Sänger

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Postfach 4005, 54230 Trier

Tel.: (0651) 41503 / 9943344, Fax: 41504

Internet: <http://www.wvttrier.de>

E-Mail: [wvt@wvttrier.de](mailto:wvt@wvttrier.de)

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## 'A Litanie:' John Donne and the Speaking Ear

Matthias Bauer

## I. Silent Ears

My approach to the phenomenon of the ear as an organ of sound, which led me to Donne's 'A Litanie,' began with one of his most responsive readers, George Herbert.<sup>1</sup> In Herbert's poem 'Deniall' the speaker begins by describing a moment of inner crisis and even despair:

When my devotions could not pierce  
   Thy silent eares;  
 Then was my heart broken, as was my verse:  
   My breast was full of fears  
   And disorder: (1-5)

Critics have wondered at the strange phrase "silent eares" in line 2, one of them suggesting that this unusual synecdoche "reflects the inner confusion of the persona, who 'expects speech from the organ of hearing.'"<sup>2</sup> Of course the speaker emphasizes his own "disorder" which prevents him from finding a rhyme for the last line of the stanza. (All the first five stanzas of the poem end with an unrhymed line, only in the last one is a rhyme found.) But I doubt if Sharon Cadman Seelig is right in regarding the expectation of a speaking ear merely as a sign of confusion. On the contrary, it can be argued that it is the condition for the speaker's being healed and his rhyme mended that the ear, as it were, begins to speak.

Firstly, however, it should be remembered that Herbert did not coin the phrase "silent ears," he could have found it, for example, in the fourth group of eclogues from Sidney's *Arcadia*, where the shepherds Strephon and Klaius in their "Hart-broken" despair ask the "Gote-heard Gods" and other (semi-)divine beings to "Vouchsafe" their "silent eares to plaining musique."<sup>3</sup> The Gods', Nymphs' and Satyrs' ears are "silent" simply because they are used to "quiet forests."<sup>4</sup> In Herbert's sacred parody of the lovers' despair, however, the notion of the silent ears is a far more pointed one, for the despair is caused not by a third party (a lady who fails to return the young men's affection) but by the apparent unresponsiveness of the very ears the speaker strives to "pierce." They should not, and indeed, cannot be silent for it is

1 See, for example, the poem (in Latin and English) written in answer to Donne's 'To Mr. George Herbert, with one of my Seal(s), of the Anchor and Christ' *The Works of George Herbert*, ed. Francis E. Hutchinson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1941), 438-39. Herbert is quoted from this edition.

2 Sharon Cadman Seelig, *The Shadow of Eternity: Belief and Structure in Herbert, Vaughan, and Traherne* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1981), 26; this has been discussed by Paul Franssen / Ria van Daalen, "'Silent Airts': A Musical Pun in George Herbert's 'Deniall,'" *Notes and Queries* 239 (1994), 155.

3 No. 71 in of the 'Poems from The Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia' in *The Poems of Sir Philip Sidney*, ed. William A. Ringler (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962 [1971]), ll. 4, 11, and 23.

4 *Ibid.*, l. 3.

impossible, as Herbert has it in 'Longing,' that "*he that made the eare*" does "*Not heare*."<sup>5</sup> Furthermore "the first name, by which God called man," as John Donne points out, "is *Ish* [...]: Man has his name from crying" he is "born dead" if "he be not heard cry,"<sup>6</sup> and therefore, as Herbert has it in 'Gratefulnesse,' to "crie, and crie again" (line 25) is the characteristically human way to obtain from God a living, grateful heart. God's ears may prefer silence, just as those of the pagan deities, but it is a preference which makes the very silence speak loudly. As Herbert put it oxymoronically in 'The Familie' (line 20): "What is so shrill as silent tears?" Almost a homophone of "silent ears," "silent tears" which are shriller than anything else show that the impossible may, after all, be possible. What is silent may not be silent at all.<sup>7</sup>

## II. An Absurd Notion

But in which way could this be true for the ear itself? Does Herbert, in 'Deniall,' expect his readers to accept what amounts to a physiological absurdity? The organ of hearing is merely receptive, whereas the eyes and the mouth emit (tears, breath) as well as receive.<sup>8</sup> The very notion of absurdity, however, is highly suggestive. 'Absurdity' could very well have been the title of Herbert's poem, for its meaning covers exactly what Herbert shows. This is the etymology of *absurd* as given by the *OED*:

*absurd-us* inharmonious, tasteless, foolish, f. *ab* off, here intensive + *surdus* deaf, inaudible, insufferable to the ear.

In the seventeenth century, the musical sense of *absurd* as "out of tune" was still being recognized.<sup>9</sup> When Herbert's speaker exclaims, "O cheer and tune my heart-

5 Lines 34-35. For a brief survey of Herbert's treatment of the ear and the eye, see David R. Pollard, 'The Organs of the Eye and Ear: *The Temple*,' *Cithara* 222 (1983), 62-72, especially 71.

6 John Donne, *The Sermons*, ed. George R. Potter / Evelyn M. Simpson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1953-62), II, 79.

7 Herbert here seems to respond to Donne's reading of Psalm 38:12 in the Vulgate (the version following the Septuagint; cf. 39:12 in the Authorized Version, which follows the Hebrew), "[...] for, as David sayes, *shall not hee that planted the Eare, heare?* So we may say, Shall hee upon whom *God* hath planted an Eare, be deafe? *Gods* eares are so open, so tender, so sensible of any motion, as that *David* formes one prayer thus, *Auribus percipe lachrimas meas*, O Lord, heare my teares; he puts the office of the *Eye*, too, upon the *Eare*;" *Sermons*, VI, 244.

8 Bartholomaeus Anglicus, for example, on the one hand emphasizes a traditional theory of seeing (going back to Plato and Empedocles; cf. Aristotle, *De sensu* II.437a-438a) when speaking of the "beame of light" coming "from either eie," and on the other hand stresses the receptive quality of the ear when deriving the Latin name "Auris, of Haurio, to take and catch." See *Batman vppon Bartholome His Booke De Proprietatibus Rerum* (1582), ed. Jürgen Schäfer (Hildesheim: Olms, 1976) fol. 39<sup>r</sup> and 41<sup>r</sup>. This was not the only concept of hearing available in Donne's time, however, as will be shown below.

9 See *OED* I. "absurd:" "A. adj. †1. Mus. Inharmonious, jarring, out-of-tune. Obs. rare. 1617 Janua Ling. 773 A harpe maketh not an absurd sound."

lesse breast," he testifies to his being *absurd*, a state which is marked by musical as well as intellectual disharmony. Thomas Cooper's Latin dictionary of 1578 puts it, as it were, in a nutshell, when it translates *absurdus* as "against all ryme and reason." There is no harmony and no rhyme in the speaker's heart and words until God hears him. It is the listening that provides the harmony and the rhyme; if it does not, the ear is as *surdus*, i.e. deaf (or silent) as the sound which is either inaudible or insufferable. Putting, as it were, the office of the ear upon the eye,<sup>10</sup> Herbert makes his readers see that the absurdity is only the speaker's who doubts that God's ears have been open all the time. For the adjective "silent" may have well been chosen for the very fact that it is an anagram of *listen* – just as the poem's title, 'Deniall,' anagrammatically indicates that there is no denial at all but that there will be (or already has been) an answer to be heard with the eyes; it is provided by him to whom the human speaker is indebted for the final, rhyming words: "I end all."

## III. 'A Litanie:' The Speaker's Own Voice and the Ear

While in Herbert the silence of the ear turns out to be a speaking one, it is Donne who, in an acute poetic realization of *credo quia absurdum*, explicitly presents the notion of an ear that is asked to produce a sound. He does so in 'A Litanie,' which was probably written in 1608 and is, accordingly, one of his earliest religious poems.<sup>11</sup> As Donne himself pointed out in a letter to Henry Goodyer,<sup>12</sup> it was written at a time of sickness, which was also a time of personal and spiritual crisis. Scholars who have interpreted 'A Litanie' biographically have taken the remarkable use of the first person singular pronoun as a clue.<sup>13</sup> Donne's usage is striking because the litany, as a traditional part of church liturgy (going back to the fourth

10 The *locus classicus* for this kind of procedure is of course the last line of Shakespeare's Sonnet 23 ("To hear with eyes belongs to love's fine wit"); unless otherwise indicated, Shakespeare is quoted from the compact edition by Stanley Wells / Gary Taylor (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998). Right next to Sonnet 23 comes Bottom's "The eye of man hath not heard, the ear of man hath not seen [...] what my dream was" (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*, IV.i.205-07); the latter not only refers to 1 Cor. 2.9-10, as R. A. Foakes points out in the New Cambridge edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), but also to Rev. 1:12 ("I turned to see the voice"). For the notion of seeing in order to hear, cf. Inge Leimberg, "To hear with eyes: Eine Interpretation von Shakespeares 30. Sonett," *Miscellanea Anglo-Americana: Festschrift für Helmut Viebrock*, ed. Kuno Schumann / Wilhelm Hortmann / Armin Paul Frank (Munich: Karl Pressler, 1974), 335-50. I am grateful to Inge Leimberg for the critical response to my essay, and for a number of suggestions.

11 Helen Gardner, in her edition of Donne, *The Divine Poems* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952), xxiv, thinks that it is Donne's second religious poem (after *La Corona*). 'A Litanie' is quoted from this edition.

12 John Donne, *Letters to Severall Persons of Honour*. (London, 1651. Repr. Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlag, 1974), 31.

13 Scott R. Pilarz, "'Expressing a Quintessence Even from Nothingness: Contextualizing John Donne's 'A Litanie,'" *Christianity and Literature*, 48 (1999), 413.

century), is a prototypically communal or public form of prayer.<sup>14</sup> The difference between Donne's poem and the liturgical prayer becomes evident when we hold its beginning side by side with the beginning of the litany in the *Book of Common Prayer* (going back to Archbishop Cranmer's version in 1544):<sup>15</sup>

The Litany (BCP/Cranmer):	John Donne, 'A Litanie' (1-4):
O God the Father of heaven: have mercy	Father of Heaven, and him, by whom
upon us miserable sinners.	It, and us for it, and all else, for us
	Thou madest, and govern'st ever, come
	And re-create mee, now growne ruinous:
	[...].

The emphasis on individual prayer may be connected with Donne's own statement that he regarded the word "litany" in its literal sense of supplication, and that he considered the poem a "meditation in verse."<sup>16</sup> Donne wrote a poem rather than a public liturgical prayer; we are presented with "a" litany of the poet as distinct from "the" litany of the church. The augmentation of the beginning in the *Book of Common Prayer*, which is turned into a résumé of basic facts of the Christian faith, makes perfectly good sense, but in his concentration on pronouns ("him," "It," "it," "us," "mee") and prepositions ("by," "for," "for") Donne presents God's creation as a complex and syntactically dense set of relations which makes the speaker all the more painfully aware of his own "ruinous" state.<sup>17</sup> He believes that he does not belong any more to "us" for whom everything was made, just as we were made for heaven. (Compare "have mercy upon us" and "come / And re-create mee.") But this separation of the first person singular does not continue through all the twenty-eight stanzas of the poem. Whereas the first half, after the opening lines, is characterized by the use of "I" and "me" and "my," this is given up after the Invocation of 'The Virgins' in stanza 12. By the middle of 'A Litanie,' "we" and "us" have entirely replaced again the first person singular.<sup>18</sup> Quite remarkably, the sense of hearing comes to the fore at this stage, in stanza 14. The Lord hearkens to the prayer of all the saints in heaven (whose aid has just been invoked) but this implies a great

14 On the relationship between the canonical form and the individual state of mind, see Dominic Baker-Smith, "'The' old broad way in applying:" John Donne and his "Litanie," *A Day Estivall: Essays on the Music, Poetry and History of Scotland and England, and Poems Previously Unpublished, in Honour of Helena Mennie Shire*, ed. Alisoun Gardner-Medwin / Janet Hadley Williams (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1990), 48-57.

15 See Francis Procter / Walter Howard Frere, *A New History of The Book of Common Prayer* (1905; London: Macmillan, 1965), 405-29, and James E. Wellington, 'The Litany in Cranmer and Donne,' *Studies in Philology*, 68 (1971), 177-99.

16 Donne, *Letters*, 32.

17 For a detailed analysis of the beginning of 'A Litanie,' see Wolfgang G. Müller, 'Liturgie und Lyrik: John Donnes "The Litanie,"' *Literaturwissenschaftliches Jahrbuch* 27 (1986), 69-70, who regards its complex syntactical and pronominal structure as an image of the speaker's very own mode of thought and expression, which indicates (and brings about) a heuristic process.

18 A. B. Chambers, *Transfigured Rites in Seventeenth-Century English Poetry* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1992), 6, notes that "a loose pattern can be seen in that singulars outnumber plurals in early stanzas but disappear later on."

danger, too, for the speaker's own prayer must not be forgotten (stanza 14, lines 125-26):

Heare this prayer Lord, O Lord deliver us  
From trusting in those prayers, though pow'r'd out thus.

"Deliver" is the key word for the Deprecations and Obsecrations in stanzas 15 to 22 (Donne is following the traditional sequence of the parts of the litany here), whereas the last part, comprising the so-called Suffrages, focuses entirely on the imperative "heare." And this is where the striking image of the speaking ear is introduced:

#### XXIII

Heare us, O heare us Lord; to thee  
A sinner is more musique, when he prayes,  
Then spheares, or Angels praises bee,  
In Panegyrique Allelujaes,  
Heare us, for till thou heare us, Lord  
We know not what to say.  
Thine ear to'our sighes, teares, thoughts gives voice and word.  
O Thou who Satan heard'st in Jobs sicke day,  
Heare thy selfe now, for thou in us dost pray.

#### XXVII

That learning, thine Ambassador,  
From thine allegiance wee never tempt,  
That beauty, paradises flower  
For physicke made, from poyson be exempt,  
That wit, borne apt, high good to doe,  
By dwelling lazily  
On Natures nothing, be not nothing too,  
That our affections kill us not, nor die,  
Heare us, weak echoes, O thou ear, and cry. (199-207 / 235-243)

Helen Gardner speaks of a "disproportionate emphasis on the sense of hearing"<sup>19</sup> in these stanzas (the five stanzas forming the Suffrages, before the final, 28th stanza), a criticism to which one might reply, with Sir Philip Sidney, that "one word cannot be lost but the whole work fails."<sup>20</sup> For the words themselves, and their repetitions, imitate, embody, mime their meaning.<sup>21</sup>

Donne's speaker, at the mid-point of the poem, admonishes himself not to rely too much on the intercession of others.<sup>22</sup> It is not enough that the Lord listens to the

19 Donne, *The Divine Poems*, 90.

20 *An Apology for Poetry*, ed. Geoffrey Shepherd (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1973), 122.

21 More specifically, as Louis Martz points out in connection with 'A Litanie,' quoting from Ignatius's *Spiritual Exercises*, "the consideration of [a] word, so long as he finds meanings, comparisons, relish, and consolation in thoughts about this word" is part of the meditative author's practice. See Louis Martz, *The Poetry of Meditation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1962), 220.

22 For the context, in particular in Donne's sermons, see Roman R. Dubinski, 'Donne's "A Litanie" and the Saints,' *Christianity and Literature* 41/1 (1991), 5-26, esp. 15.



prayers of those who are in heaven anyway but he must hear the speaker's own prayer, here and now, which is ultimately God's: "Hear thy self now" (207). When we hear "hear," the adverb "here" is implied too; in the way it was to be used in Donne's Holy Sonnet "At the round earths imagin'd corners:" "here on this lowly ground, / Teach mee how to repent." But it is remarkable that at the moment when the speaker realizes the need for his own personal voice the first person singular pronoun is entirely replaced by the plural one. This paradoxical structure corresponds exactly to the paradox of the speaking ear, which serves to express that hearing and speaking are not two separate acts by two separate persons but interdependent or even one and the same, and, accordingly, a communal act. The speaker gives up his isolated perspective exactly when he becomes most fully aware of the need for his own utterance; this is also when he realizes that his own affliction and crisis make him become part of a community of strugglers "in warfare here."<sup>23</sup> Thus, in the line "Hear thy self now, for thou in us dost pray,"<sup>24</sup> *us* refers both to the community of those who pray and to the community of speaker and listener. The paradox that the speaker's words are in fact God's is, as it were, the logical consequence of the beginning of the poem, namely that man is created (and must be re-created) by God and therefore even his groans and cries for help must be those of the Lord.

#### IV. The Ear that Cries

Herbert Grierson's early twentieth-century commentary<sup>25</sup> helps us see that Donne's emphasis on the sense of hearing is by no means disproportionate, as it makes clear that hearing and its implications form a central notion of 'A Litanie.' As Grierson points out, in the unusual line "Hear us, weak echoes, O thou ear, and cry," the "'cry' of the editions is surely right. God is at once the source of our prayers and their answer. Our prayers are echoes of what His grace inspires in our hearts."<sup>26</sup> Grierson then goes on to quote from Donne's letter to the Countess of Montgomery,

23 Stanza 14, l. 119, referring to the Church Militant. For the notion of interconnectedness being expressed in terms of sound, cf. Donne's 17th Meditation; "Now, this Bell tolling softly for another, saies to me, Thou must die," which includes his famous statement, "No man is an Iland." See *John Donne, Devotions upon Emergent Occasions*, ed. Anthony Raspa (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), 86-87. The ear's affinity to the bell is compared to the eye's affinity to the sun; *ibid.*, 87: "Who casts not up his Eie to the Sunne when it rises? [...] who bends not his eare to any bell, which upon any occasion rings?" He who listens "will heare [the] voice, in this bell" of "him for whom this bell tolls" (*ibid.*, 17th Expostulation).

24 When saying "dost pray," Donne suggests the homophone "dust pray[s];" the reader is reminded of the fact that dust indeed prays when a human being is inspired to address God. Cf. Herbert's 'Longing' (41-42): "Thy pile of dust, wherein each crumme / Sayes, Come?" With its insistence on the sense of hearing, 'Longing' can be seen as being inspired by 'A Litanie.'

25 See *The Poems of John Donne*, ed. Herbert J. C. Grierson, II (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1912 [1963]); Gardner, *The Divine Poems*, 92, briefly refers to Grierson.

26 *Ibid.*, 241.

in which Donne refers to writing a sermon which the Countess had heard some time before:

I know what dead carkasses [sic] things written are, in respect of things spoken. But in things of this kinde, that soul that inanimates them, receives debts from them: The Spirit of God that dictates them in the speaker or writer, and is present in his tongue or hand, meets himself again (as we meet our selves in a glass) in the eies [and ears] and hearts of the hearers and readers.<sup>27</sup>

Similarly, when the speaker in 'A Litanie' cries out to God, that cry must be God's, and when he asks the ear of his listener to cry, he wishes it to be a mirror of himself.

Like Grierson, therefore, I would reject the emendations and manuscript variants of the original edition,<sup>28</sup> but furthermore, it seems plausible to me to read "cry" not only as a noun (which, by implication, could refer to both the speaker and God) but as a verb: God is asked to hear us and to cry. In the line "Heare us, weake ecchoes, O thou eare, and cry," the two nouns, "ecchoes" and "eare" are framed by two verbs, "Heare" and "cry;" together they create a scene of mutual reflection in which the speaker weakly throws back the sound to the ear which itself is an echo-chamber but from where the sound came in the first place and from where it is hoped to emerge again, reinforced and amplified, as another cry. In addition, the crying ear may imply the equally striking notion of an ear assuming the office of the eye in that it 'cries' in the sense of shedding tears.

But why should God cry, apart from weeping in grief and pity?<sup>29</sup> Donne, as so often, uses English words with their Latin equivalents in mind.<sup>30</sup> And in the context of the speaker regarding himself as an echo, it is particularly intriguing to see Donne's "cry" as alluding to Latin *clamo* or *clamor*,<sup>31</sup> words which are echoed by *amo* and *amor*:<sup>32</sup> our love of God is an echo of his cry or call, just as his love is the answer to our cries. The speaker's hope for a cry coming back from the ear<sup>33</sup> to which he cries as an echo of God's own creative words, which called him to life as *Ish*, as a cry, coincides with his desire to be re-created: "that new fashioned / I may

27 Donne, *Letters*, 25; "and ears" is not in this edition but in Grierson, 241, who quotes Gosse. For a similar notion of exchange (God's message delivered by the preacher, "passing from the ear to the heart" of the listener and returning to the Lord, who is asked to hear), see Herbert's *A Priest to the Temple* ("The Author's Prayer before Sermon;" *Works*, 289).

28 See also Gardner's commentary, 91-92, the main variant being "eare and eye."

29 Cf., e.g., Luke 19:41 and John 11:35, and Vaughan's two poems on these texts, both called 'Jesus weeping.'

30 For further examples, see my 'Paronomasia celata' in Donne's "A Valediction: forbidding mourning," *English Literary Renaissance* 25 (1995), 97-111.

31 Cooper's *Thesaurus* has "Clamor, clamôris. Plin. A cry or clamour" and "Clamo, clamas, clamâre. Cic. To call: to crie."

32 In Athanasius Kircher's *Musurgia Universalis* (Rome, 1650; repr. Hildesheim: Olms, 1970), Part B, 267, *clamore – amore – more – ore – re* is his prime example of a manifold echo. See also the illustration on p. 264 and John Hollander, *The Figure of Echo: A Mode of Allusion in Milton and After* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), 3.

33 Georg Philipp Harsdörffer uses the term "Ohrenspiegel" ("ear-mirror") for a cavity that reflects sound. See *Delitiae Philosophicae et Mathematicae: Der Mathematischen und Philosophischen Erquickstunden Dritter Teil* (Nürnberg, 1653; repr. Frankfurt: Keip, 1990), 375.

rise up from death, before I'm dead."<sup>34</sup> In his sermon on 1 Thess. 4:17,<sup>35</sup> fittingly used as a text for Easter-day,<sup>36</sup> Donne refers to this recreation when he sums up and paraphrases the verses in Thessalonians, "Then, when the dead in Christ are first risen, and risen by Christs comming down from heaven, in clamore, in a shout, in the voice of the Archangel, and in the Trumpet of God, Then, when that is done, We that are alive, and remain, shall be wrought upon, and all being joyned in one body [...]."<sup>37</sup> Thus,

though you thinke thou heare sometimes Gods sibilations, [...] Gods soft and whispering voice, [...] yet thinke not thy spirituall resurrection accomplished, till, in this place, thou heare his loud voyce; [...] Till thou heare him *In clamore*, in this cry, in this voyce of Penetration, of perswasion, of power, [...].<sup>38</sup>

This cry of recreation, like the "voyce at the Creation," has the power to make itself heard even where there is no organ of hearing, "no cooperation, no concurrence to the hearing or answering this voice;"<sup>39</sup> thus, paradoxically, it is the voice that makes us able to hear, just as, in 'A Litanie,' it is the ear that provides the cry.<sup>40</sup>

In 'A Litanie' the implicit explanation of God's mysteriously hearing himself speak when listening to the speaker's prayer is the speaking ear: "Thine ear to our sighs, tears, thoughts gives voice and word." This statement is quite startling if it is not played down as merely figurative. But there are reasons for taking it literally, which belong to the spheres of physiology, etymology, and epistemology. And while nature, language, and knowledge corroborate the concept of the speaking ear, they also confirm the speaker's hopes for re-creation.

## V. An Active Organ

In a standard anatomical or physiological handbook of the time, Helkiah Crooke's *Mikrokosmographia*,<sup>41</sup> the ear is described not simply as a receptive but also as an active organ: "There are many parts of the Eares which serve as well for the reception of the sound into them, as also for the intension [i.e. intensification, *OED* III.] thereof."<sup>42</sup> Sound is transmitted from the outer ear by means of the "Hammer and Anvil." The names of these bones point to activity and to musical harmony when we think of the story of Pythagoras discovering musical harmony when passing a

34 'A Litanie,' stanza 1, lines 8-9.

35 "Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord."

36 Donne, *The Sermons*, IV, 63-88; Potter and Simpson date the sermon on Easter-day, 1622.

37 Ibid., 64.

38 Ibid., 70.

39 Ibid., 69.

40 The ear that is asked to cry could therefore be seen as the paradoxical exaggeration, by means of conceiving it quite literally, of the speaker's prayer in Psalm 39:12, "give ear unto my cry."

41 Helkiah Crooke, *MIKROKOSMOΓΡΑΦΙΑ: A Description of the Body of Man* (London, 1615).

42 Ibid., 574.

blacksmith's shop. Hammer and anvil transmit the sound "to the air implanted in the eare."<sup>43</sup> Hearing is explicitly called the "action" of the ear, which "imitateth,"<sup>44</sup> by setting in motion this internal air, the "form of the sound."<sup>45</sup> This 'speaking' quality of the ear is probably also the reason for early constructions of speaking-trumpets imitating the helical shape of the organ of hearing,<sup>46</sup> as can be seen in this example from Athanasius Kircher's *Musurgia Universalis*.<sup>47</sup>



It should be noted that the bell of the trumpet is shaped in a way that amplifies the sound not only in the direction of the listener, forming as it were a second, outer ear, but that the trumpet could of course also be used to emit and amplify sound in the opposite direction: the megaphone<sup>48</sup> (or the musical instrument) is shaped like the ear. Speaking and hearing, in these conceptions, are not only to be regarded as complementary but also as similar to each other. This implies a certain kind of mutuality: the ear is responsive in that it imitates what it receives.

As to the hammer and anvil of the ear, the very word for word, Latin *verbum*, was derived from hitting upon the air or ear, "ab aere verberato" or "quod aurem quasi verberent."<sup>49</sup> Speaking of etymologies, it is an additional proof of the activity of the ear that its Latin name, *auris*, was, via *audire*, to hear, connected with the Greek

43 Ibid., 596; this is an Aristotelian notion; cf. 611.

44 Ibid., 603 and 606.

45 Ibid., 607. Jonathan Rée, *I See a Voice* (London: Harper Collins, 1999), 55, reminds us of Rousseau's emphasis on hearing being the only sense connected with an active organ; an emphasis he may have derived from Buffon.

46 Donne's awareness of this shape becomes obvious in his prayer that we may "rectify those labyrinths aright" (218), see Gardner *The Divine Poems*, 91: "Cf. 'Labyrinth of eares' in *The Second Anniversary* (l. 297). The first use of the word anatomically, for the passages of the inner ear, which *OED* records is in 1696."

47 *Musurgia Universalis*, Part B, 305.

48 Kircher was very much interested in the construction of megaphones which were quite similar to the speaking-trumpets; see Joscelyn Godwin, *Athanasius Kircher: A Renaissance Man and the Quest for Lost Knowledge* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1979), 70, for Kircher's conviction that "the helical shape was most effective [...]. There are symbolic, if not scientific, grounds for this in the shape of both the outer and the inner ear." In England, a generation after Donne, speaking-trumpets (i.e. megaphones) were brought to public attention by Samuel Morland in his *Tuba Stentoro-Phonica: An Instrument of Excellent Use, As well at Sea, as at Land* (London, 1672).

49 Quintilian, *Institutio*, I.vi.34 and Augustine, *De dialectica*, VI.9; both quoted from Robert Maltby, *A Lexicon of Ancient Latin Etymologies* (Leeds: Francis Cairns, 1991), 636.



ἡ αὐδὴ, 'voice, speech, sound.'<sup>50</sup> To put it simply, hearing is called hearing because of speaking. The metonymy in which the recipient becomes the sender, and in which the ear has a voice or cries thus turns out to be physiologically, as well as etymologically, quite plausible.

Perhaps even more significantly, however, there is an epistemological context to be considered when one comments on the conceit of the speaking ear. Since Aristotle the faculty of hearing had been considered especially important for the mind: it "indirectly [...] makes the largest contribution to wisdom"<sup>51</sup> since discourse, the use of words, belongs to the realm of sound. By the faculty of hearing, as Crooke put it in 1615 (referring to and interpreting Aristotle's *De anima*), "things are signified to our selves, as by our voice and tongues we are able to signify any thing to another."<sup>52</sup>

Thus there is, firstly, the emphasis on hearing as the sense belonging to language and the use of verbal signs (we should keep in mind that letters are, in this tradition, secondary, for they are merely signs of signs, so to speak, i.e. signs of verbal sounds).<sup>53</sup> This is also why George Puttenham, for example, regarded hearing as the most important sense.<sup>54</sup> Learning, and in particular religious knowledge, the transmission of the word of God, is its domain. In the Bible this is most succinctly expressed in St. Paul's letter to the Romans (10:17), where he says, "so then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God;" as Donne himself put it in one of his sermons, "The Organ of the Gospel is the Ear, for faith comes by hearing."<sup>55</sup>

But secondly, in Crooke's rendering of Aristotle's view, speaking and listening (hearing) are not described as active and passive or sending and receiving components of the communicative process; both are active:<sup>56</sup> as voice and tongue allow us to signify things to others, hearing 'speaks' too in that it signifies things to ourselves. If this parallel (or sequential) activity is considered a mutual or interdependent one,

50 See Maltby, *Lexicon*, 68, referring to Lactantius, *De opificio Dei*, 8,8 and Isidore, *Differentiae*, 2,55 and *Etymologiae sive origines*, 11,1,46; another explanation of *auris* is from *haurio* (to draw off or exhaust a voice). Maltby also cites Varro's etymology (*De lingua latina*, 6,83), according to which *auris* is derived from *aveo*, to be eager. A still very informative source on metaphors concerning the ear, and in particular its activity, is Herman Schrader, 'Das Ohr in sprachlichen Bildern und Gleichnissen,' *Zeitschrift für deutsche Sprache* 7 (1893/94), 401-08, 441-50.

51 *De sensu* I.437a; quoted from Aristotle, *On the Soul*, *Parva Naturalia*, *On Breath*, with an English translation by W. S. Hett (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1957), 219.

52 Crooke, *ΜΙΚΡΟΚΟΣΜΟΓΡΑΦΙΑ*, 612; he refers to the end of the third book of *De anima*.

53 Donatus's standard definition: "Littera est pars minima vocis articulatae;" see his *Ars Grammatica*; *Probi Donati Servii qui feruntur de arte grammatica libri*, ed. Heinrich Keil (Leipzig: Teubner, 1864), 367. Cf. Ben Jonson in *The English Grammar*: "All Letters [...] are principally knowne by their powers. The Figure is an Accident;" Ben Jonson, ed. C. H. Herford / Philip Simpson / Evelyn Simpson, VIII (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), 468.

54 George Puttenham, *The Arte of English Poesie*, ed. G. D. Willcock / A. Walker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1936), 197.

55 Donne, *Sermons*, VIII, 343.

56 Cf. Richard Brathwayt, *Essaies vpon the five senses* (London, 1635), 14: "The Eare is one of the activest and laborioust faculties of the soule."

we arrive at a concept of hearing which makes the activity of the ear a prerequisite for the sign to be a sign at all. In Donne's time this idea was epigrammatically expressed by Johannes Kepler in his *Harmonice Mundi* (dedicated to King James of England in 1619), where he asserts that "no one should say that any thing exists without its being known."<sup>57</sup> The origins of this concept are mainly to be found in (Neo-)Platonic philosophy, e.g. in Plotinus, who "rejected the concept of sensations as 'imprints' [...] made on a passive mind, and substituted the view of the mind as an act and a power which 'gives radiance out of its own store' to the objects of sense."<sup>58</sup> Shakespeare expresses a similar idea when he has Rosaline in *Love's Labour's Lost* point out, proverbially, "A jest's prosperity lies in the ear / Of him that hears it."<sup>59</sup> In a political and legal context, the concept lurks behind the notion of having a hearing,<sup>60</sup> which means that a cause is actually to be put forward and voiced (and reminds us of Donne's speaker considering himself excluded from essential causes at the beginning of 'A Litanie').

## VI. The Ear as an Organ of (Re-)Creation

Seen against this background, the ear in 'A Litanie' that is asked to cry has lost nothing of its paradoxical power but can be somewhat more clearly connected with the meaning of the line "Thine ear to our sighs, tears, thoughts gives voice and word." Only the fact that God is actively listening gives existence to the speaker's prayer, i.e. turns it from indistinct or insubstantial phenomena (sighs, tears, thoughts) into meaningful, verbal signs, establishing the reality of the communicative act. As distinct from the view that listening is the condition for speaking, and from the view that the listener creatively illumines what he or she perceives, in

57 "Neque dixeris, rem esse posse, ut scientia ipsa rei non sit: [...]" quoted from *Harmonices Mundi*, *Gesammelte Werke*, VI, ed. Max Caspar (Munich: C. H. Beck'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1940), lib. IV, cap. I, 223.

58 M. H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (1953; London: Oxford University Press, 1971), 59, referring to *Enneads*, IV.vi.1-3. Among the Metaphysicals, Thomas Traherne repeatedly dwells on this concept, as when he puts it into a little allegorical scene in his poem 'News' (see *Poems, Centuries and Three Thanksgivings*, ed. Anne Ridler [London: Oxford University Press, 1966], 79-81), in which the news "[T]was wont to call my Soul into mine Ear; / Which thither went to meet / Th'approaching Sweet" (4-6); a bit later the soul is even said to "hover[d] there / As if 'twould leave mine Ear" (9-10). Only by the activity of the soul or the mind can the news be received or, to follow Kepler, there is no news if it is not known, not received in this active sense. On Traherne's version of *percipi est esse*, see Robert Ellrodt, *L'inspiration personnelle et l'esprit du temps chez les poètes métaphysiques anglais*, Part I, II, (Paris: Librairie José Corti, 1959), 309-10.

59 *Love's Labour's Lost*, V.ii.847-48. This is the passage in which Rosaline sets Berowne the task of "Visit[ing] the speechless sick" (837) and try his wit on them if he is to win her; this task is to remove the "wormwood" of mockery from his brain. The sickly ears are unlikely to pay attention to him since they are "Deaf with the clamours of their own dear groans" (850). These groaning ears are quite the opposite of God's crying ear in Donne, for they are incapable of communication.

60 See *OED*, "hearing," *vbl.* n. 3. The first reference is from 1576.

Donne's 'A Litanie' God's ear is actually said to create the utterance of the speaker. Donne gives expression to this mystery in the notion of an ear that cries. In God's case, who is the Word, anything heard by him must become a word, and what is signified to himself, by his active ear, is spoken to us as well. This is why, in 'A Litanie,' the activity of the ear is not only directed inwards but may also be conceived as being directed outwards. Donne in 'A Litanie' thus turns round the verse in Romans 10 quoted above: when hearing comes "by the Word of God" then God's hearing will ensure that the word is being spoken. The interdependence itself is already to be seen in the Biblical verse, for it is the spoken word that creates the faculty of hearing,<sup>61</sup> and in the Psalms hearing appears as the cause of speaking (e.g. 116:2): "Because he has inclined his ear unto me, therefore will I call upon him as long as I live." Accordingly, the re-creation so fervently desired by Donne's persona is achieved in the listening: as long as the speaker does not know what to say, he is a nonentity, nothing, like sin itself (252: "As sin is nothing, let it no where be"). He comes into (new) existence only with the partner in the exchange, i.e. with the ear that turns out to be the author of his words.

This concept of the partner as the "begetter" of one's own words reminds us that the notion of an existence which is brought about by a responsive partner is a traditional concept of love theory and poetry.<sup>62</sup> Most frequently this is based on the sense of vision, of which Shakespeare's Sonnet 24 is a well-known example. Its very beginning, "Mine eye has played the painter," emphasizes the creativity of perception, and when the speaker points out that the partner's eyes "Are windows to my breast," he recognizes himself by being looked at. Here we notice again the Neo-Platonic concept that the eye must be active, radiant like the sun, in order to see the light.<sup>63</sup> In a religious context this mutual activity of seeing and being seen, which is an act of recognition, of love, and even of generation is, to mention a prominent example, connected with the story of the Annunciation as Luther, for example, interprets it in his *Magnificat*. He emphasizes that the most important act of God with regard to Mary was that he looked at her.<sup>64</sup>

61 Cf. also Donne's sermon on 1 Thess. 4:17 quoted above.

62 In Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis* (published 1593) this can be seen in Venus's very despair at the way in which Adonis responds. At long last he has spoken, if only to reject her advances, and his words to her are "Melodious discord, heavenly tune harsh sounding / Ears' deep sweet music, and heart's deep sore wounding;" ll. 431-32. It is Venus's, the listener's, own ear that makes the "deep sweet music" here, for Adonis, whom she has given her heart, feels nothing; only she, who has got his (i.e. has not got any), feels a deep wound (370: "My heart all whole as thine, thy heart my wound").

63 This idealistic concept corresponds to the old physiological assumption (to be found, for example, in Empedocles and in Plato's dialogues *Theaetetus* and *Timaeus*) that rays of light are emitted from the eyes in the process of perception. See David W. Hamlyn, *Sensation and Perception* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1961), 6-7.

64 "Als das erste Werk Gottes an ihr bekennt Maria, es sei das 'Ansehen,'" quoted from Inge Leimberg, "Heilig öffentlich Geheimnis:" *Die geistliche Lyrik der englischen Frühaufklärung* (Münster: Waxmann, 1996), 46; cf. Luke 1:30: "thou hast found favour with God."

This emphasis on vision has its counterpart in the tradition (going back to early Christianity) according to which Mary conceived by the ear (*conceptio per aurem*): the word of Gabriel's message becomes the Word of God itself, which, according to the Gospel of John (1:14), was made flesh. Thus, in many representations of the Annunciation, the dove of the spirit is not aiming at Mary's womb but at her ear.<sup>65</sup> The ear is thus, at least implicitly, considered a vulva-like organ of generation.<sup>66</sup>

In 'A Litanie,' the creative act of God's perception is described by Donne as an act of making the speaker new or whole again and purging him or taking away his sins by listening to him (a concept not entirely unlike the principle of auricular confession). It is a "hearing that begets faith," as Donne put it in one of his sermons,<sup>67</sup> for "the seed is the Word of God."<sup>68</sup> Poetically, this is realized by the activity of the listeners' ears, which are both God's and ours, the readers'. The re-creation desired in 'A Litanie' consists in a union of speaker and listener brought about by God who, in human prayer, cries out to himself, and whose hearing thus becomes an exclamation. In Herbert's poem 'Deniall' God's ears do not cry but they do not remain silent either. We, the readers (or listeners) of the poem, are encouraged to find assurance of God's favours which become audible when he listens: in the last two lines, the rhyme that was absent from the ends of all the other stanzas is, at long last, found or provided:

They and my minde may chime,  
And mend my ryme.

The musical chiming or sounding together of words, the rhyme, thus serves to give evidence to divine activity: whenever the human outcry or prayer sounds harmonious this must be the work of the ear which turns it into an air (in the musical sense of the word) and thus heals both heart and verse. As Donne's speaker in 'A Litany' epigrammatically points out:

A sinner is more musique, when he prays,  
Then spheres, or Angels praises be, (200-01)

This capacity of the speaking ear to turn the poet's agonized cries of "hear," "hear" into something more musical than spheres and to hear "praise" when the human speaker "prays" is described as a quality of the divine listener who by listening

65 Ernst Guldán, "'Et verbum caro factum est:' Die Darstellung der Inkarnation Christi im Verkündigungsbild," *Römische Quartalschrift für christliche Altertumskunde und Kirchengeschichte* 63 (1968), 157-58; see illustrations 26 a-c for the tympanum (itself an expression pointing to the ear) of the Lady's Chapel at Würzburg, where the spirit is shown to come to earth by means of a kind of umbilical cord connecting the mouth of the Father with Mary's ear. See also Hanns Bächtold-Stäubli's entry on 'Ohr' in *Handwörterbuch des deutschen Aberglaubens*, ed. Bächtold-Stäubli, VI, (1935, Berlin: de Gruyter, 1987), 1205, and Wes Folkerth, *The Sound of Shakespeare* (London: Routledge, 2002), 47 and 72.

66 A comical reflection of this notion can be seen in *Twelfth Night*, when Viola speaks to Olivia of her "most pregnant and vouchsafed ear" (III.i.88). A grotesque variant is the birth of Gargantua in Rabelais' *Gargantua* (book I, ch. 6), mentioned by Bächtold-Stäubli.

67 Donne, *Sermons*, VI, 142.

68 Luke 8:11.

gives back to the speaker his own sounds but endows them with (new) sense. Accordingly, to George Herbert, "Heaven" is sounded by echo, as can be seen (or rather heard) in his poem of that name, in which heaven is not so much a locality as a voice that demonstrates that "thou in us dost pray." For example, the Bible itself is an echo, as we read in lines 10-11:

Are holy leaves the Echo then of blisse?  
Echo. Yes.

The "Yes" (which could be pronounced "Yis" in the 17th century)<sup>69</sup> is the ear-mirror's confirmation that echo is not a more or less insubstantial nymph but a revelation of what actually *is*. And, accordingly, in Herbert's poem the leaves are an echo for him who be-lieves; being and existence are brought about in the process of speaking and listening actively. This emphasis on being as the result of auditory exchange is found in Donne's words too:

That our affections kill us not, nor die  
Hear us, weak echoes, O thou ear, and cry. (243-43)

When one begins to read line 243 it almost seems as if the echoes themselves are asked to hear us ("Hear us, weak echoes"), until we notice that "us" and "echoes" are in apposition and the addressee is the ear: we sigh, the ear listens, gives voice and word to our sigh, we echo this word, the ear again listens, and cries, i.e. both makes a sound and sheds tears. And when the strong hint of "weak echoes" is taken up, the fruitfulness of the exchange becomes audible in the very outcry, "Hear us, O hear us" and "Hear us, for till thou hear us" (203), in which the "ear" itself is heard as the echo of "Hear," but of course syntactically the echo is a verb, an imperative: 'Ear us, for till thou ear us / We know not what to say.' The soil of ourselves, "This red earth" as the speaker calls himself at the beginning of 'A Litanie' (7), has to be eared so that the seed of the word becomes fruitful. The echo is corroborated by another pun, "till" in 203 (which, as a verb, is a synonym of "to ear," and, as a sound, like the later "kill" serves to remind us of the illness that is to be overcome).

Donne, who wrote this poem at a time of illness, has his speaker implicitly compare his situation with "Job's sick day" (206) and in line 217, at the beginning of stanza 25, he speaks of "our ears' sickness" that is to be cured. Accordingly, speaker and listener are called "patient and physician" in the penultimate line of the poem. The recreation of the red earth, Adam, thus appears as a cure of the ear by God's *clamar*, which consists, as the figure of the speaking ear has made abundantly clear, in becoming 'sound' again.

69 E.J. Dobson, *English Pronunciation 1500-1700*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968 [21985]), II, 568, § 77; see the example from Thomas Smith (1568).

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