

The Bound Listener

1-100 (remix)

#4 (transcript)

*Charles Bernstein*

The alphabet is frozen sound.

In *The Dialectic of the Enlightenment* (1947), Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer focus on *The Odyssey* as foundational to what they call the Enlightenment thinking of Western Civilization. While they don't comment on the performance history of the text, their reading helps to understand the significance of the epic's historical movement from open and variable in performance to a fixed, authoritative text; the movement, that is, from oral culture to alphabetic inscription. (Revising Pound's definition that the epic is a poem including history, we might now say that an epic is a poem fabricating history.)

With phonic writing, a strata of spoken language appears to lie under the alphabetic script (this is indeed the lie or *geist* of the spoken). This ghost of speech (what Jack Spicer calls "low ghost") would have been all the more acute during the several hundred years that the oral epic was transcribed through the newly invented Greek alphabet. As Eric Havelock emphasizes, the significance of classical Greek literary art is that it provides a record of the transition from an oral to an alphabetic means of cultural reproduction and storage. The new technology of phonetic writing could be said to have rationalized, or dominated, speech, and this form of rationalization is experienced, in retrospect, as a kind of fall, a break from the unity of word and thing that music and poetry *may be felt to reverse*.

The rupture of word and thing is the repressed trauma of writing-as-rationalized-speech. In the act of recording speech, writing cuts its umbilical chord to sonic embodiment. The verse line is the scar of this cut. In every account of the history of sound, one finds, consciously or not, the projection of a prelapsarian – *a priori* – state, whether by means of a neo-Primitivism or a psychoanalytic presymbolic. This is the ontological illusion of the rationalization of language, it is as imaginary (and as palpable) as the mirage of water in a desert. It is this repressed ontology that literally (and literarily) underwrites teleology.

For Adorno and Horkheimer, the story of Odysseus's triumph over the Sirens through cunning is a key to the ontological status of song in Western culture. In this view, interior to any song is the memory of the traumatic breaking of the unity of speech and things, and, indeed, of the sacrifice of the Sirens on the alter of rationalization. Odysseus, like a modern day Professor of Literary-Cultural-Historical-Transnational Studies, stuffs the ears of his charges with wax, so they will not succumb to the irresistible power of the Sirens' song. They may look but not hear, nor can they communicate with one another. Odysseus, in turn, is bound to the mast so that, while he

may be ravished (enraptured) by the call of the Sirens, he will be unable to respond. (This is what has come to be called mastery.) Later, he will report what he had heard to his charges, who must take him at his word. But when the ship of Enlightenment sails by those enchanting voices, Odysseus's men will be oblivious to his pleas to set him free. In the end, Odysseus will be free, the lord of his newly dominated dominion; while the Sirens, spell broken, are forever more bound in those special cages reserved for fallen creatures of the wilderness, in the sideshow of literature.

In hearing the Sirens' song without abandoning himself to it, Odysseus rehearses the conditions of language reproduction, whether alphabetic, magnetic, or digital, in which one hears voices but their source are necessarily out of bounds, unreachable.

Odysseus recognizes the archaic power of the song even when, as a technically enlightened man, he has himself bound. He listens to the song of pleasure and thwarts it as he seeks to thwart death. The bound listener wants to hear the Sirens as any other man would, but he has hit upon an arrangement by which he as subject need not be subjected to them... The Sirens have their own power, but in primitive bourgeois history it is neutralized to become merely the wistful longing of the passer-by.

Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (New York: Continuum, 1972), pages 59-60.