

Brief interludes into tendency, a conversation between Patrick Farmer and
Mark Peter Wright

MPW. There's a line early on from Yew Grottesque that jumped out at me, almost like a declaration of intent. It reads:

"Grey picks up himself. Shuts his eyes, looks in the mirror and says: this isn't about how to listen, or what to listen to". I want to say *what* is Grey rather than *who*? Can you talk about the central character of your book: how did he emerge? What does he represent? What is his relationship to listening?

PF. It's interesting that you ask *what*, as my friend Sarah Hughes and I have been talking a lot lately about the *qualities* of listening, as opposed to qualities of the listener. Essentially I think the two, listening and the listener, are inseparable, but it's an intriguing premise, one based of necessity around speculation. When asked, *what*, Grey is, I can only assume that he is the summation of the two *phantoms* in the book, Buñuel and Lorca, who are essentially projections of Grey's mind, the forced inner world the book revolves around, they're not characters per se, yet they have total power over him, for reasons I hope I'll get into later. I think that most of my understanding of *Yew Grottesque* has arrived since I've written it, interpretations, or flashes of comprehension, just keep turning up unannounced, even yesterday – as I was thinking about your question – I read this in a book by Robert Walser, "...when a person has you as a listener, it's a pleasure to speak", and I couldn't help but think of Grey's inner speech, as if I'd somehow confronted a development of my understanding of him and it. The reader is faced with Grey both as a concentric listener and thus concentric speaker, both are causes and effects of the other and of themselves.

Due to the onset of Grey's medical condition and his, what you might call fugue state, an effect of receiving the diagnosis, his relationship with listening is one that revolves around a possible concept of auditory homeostasis. The book is a medium in which I wanted to investigate this phenomena, curious as to the precarious natures of balance and equilibrium in the context of listening and what it is to listen. In order to consider whether there is an *prime* state of balance within listening, comparable say, to the optimal temperatures of the human body, I tried to incorporate as many different possibilities / pitfalls / benefits and circumstances of listening as I could (regardless of whether I felt any affinity with them whatsoever), and to look at them using Grey as a lens, or prism. I felt it necessary to guide him toward the other end of the scale, to flush his listening out, to think towards somehow becoming empty of it, just as I tried to fill myself with listening's qualities.

With this in mind, I might imagine your publication, *Tasked To Hear*, as trying to observe how a prolonged series of exposures might eventually lead the listener, the one with a desire to hear, towards something other than themselves, through the sheerness

and demand of the task set? Leading one to, you might say, a state of a listening outside of oneself..

MPW. For TTH I was interested in realising dual positionalities, being both inside and out – to accept sound’s porous tendencies as an affirmation of relational (site/body, human/non–human) difference and productive antagonism. By structuring TTH within an onerous framework, literally re–visiting my own shoe imprints on the same time each month for a year, I wanted to unpick those relations ever so slightly.

I always think of my body like a piece of Swiss cheese, up close the skin is full of holes. Sound doesn’t just enter and hang out in there, it continually exits as well. So yes, there’s a definite sense of flushing out in TTH, like Grey perhaps an evacuation of sorts, but then there’s also the anchor of subjective corporeal presence, for me that’s how the experience of listening operates, between these antagonistic relational ends.

Going back to something you mention about balance, if there is a prime state of balance in listening what would the consequences be? Would listening become an elitist/virtuoso practice by proxy?

PF. Underlying certain elements of YG’s makeup is a line of modernist tropes, William Carlos Williams’ epic poem of place, *Paterson* in particular, and a prevailing theme or preoccupation in such texts is that of the microcosm – Paterson is a city in New Jersey that Williams took it upon himself to *document* in a diverse number of ways – it’d take far too long to unfurl all of the particularities and intensities of the poem – but in particular I was interested in the interconnectivities inherent in thought and architecture, in social behaviour and light, in the resonance of objects and perceptual/bodily response. In Williams’ poem, Paterson is both man and city, so the poet himself, and the history of the city, the modern mind and the modern territory sharing the same cartography, and as I read it out, so often out loud, I started to think about balance, about the possibility of a middle ground, not one that denotes any such abstractions as hierarchy or relevance, but positions unique to the individual, that ostensibly mean nothing to an–other (this might mean something as simple as it being imperceptible, as opposed to a more abstracted level of emotion and empathy), even though the patterns, I would assume, must at points intersect. In YG I wanted to explore this through an issue of semantics, what happens when environment becomes a disease within the mind and body of the individual, what happens when both environment and individual are internal? When writing YG I had no desire to seek a fixed point, or even a definition, but rather to observe what was happening in front of me, in the development and shapes of the lines, to try and live inside that which speculatively only has an inside. The best way I could think to do this was to consider certain notions of trauma, shock in particular, and to think about the resultant inner speech of a solipsist, though not one by choice, if that even comes into it.

With all this in mind, what are your feelings about separation with regards to inner and outer listening, about listening to one’s inner speech and listening to the external world? Do you feel these methods are mostly different, or does the notion

of separation perhaps carry with it certain weighty connotations that are dominant in our perceptions of the so-called distance between human kind and nature? And do you think that, if they could be called separate, that there are ways in which they may be reconciled?

And what would you say about the possibility of simultaneity with regards to the potential of dual positionalities? Do you think this has anything to do with subjective meaning, i.e. what the listener makes of a state or event which itself, seemingly, exists independently of perception?

MPW. I think there's an entanglement to a Western/European life that's irrevocable. I presume we're both typing this on mac laptops, connected to the web of the Internet. I'll try and have an ethical lunch but something in there won't be – maybe it's me? That's what I'm interested in drawing out: the anomalies and asymmetry of a situation. I think there's a productive political undertow in such questioning that begins to touch upon things like difference, power and agency. So I try to put the emphasis on difference rather than separation. I struggle to envisage balance when I look at the world we live in and see inequality all around me, exploitation of gender and race, environments, resources, forced refuge: abuse of all kinds inflicted by neo liberal hegemony.

Amongst all that I find it really difficult to hear my own thoughts sometimes, or maybe I choose not to, maybe I'm easily distracted or, living in London, maybe I'm just too caught up in the flow of activity. For me a practical listening experience is often built out of such lags and lacks, dissonance and anxiety, between what's here and what's there, heard and not, inner and outer. These things are always tearing and demarcating the fabric of experience. How can I hear that? How can I listen to myself? How can I listen to listening? Those questions really prompted TTH and I think they're peppered throughout YG as well. There's a line you write that reads: "How anxiously I wish to listen to myself, but I can only move. To even hear myself would be something".

I wanted to ask you something about Melancholia. It weighs heavy throughout the book. Is this connected to the loss of meaning you talk of? Do you think listening carries with it an inevitable melancholia, and is the real effort of hearing tied to the excavation of memory?

PF. Near the beginning of all this you wrote, 'Sound doesn't just enter but continually exits as well.' I was wondering whether you might elaborate on this through the context of agency? Do you feel that this process happens in layers? It seems apt to say that such a thing is always happening, but there are many different ways in which it can happen, mostly relating to disposition and experience... I often think of being empty, and emptying, and filling and being full, as ways of considering the listening process, as states of difference, neither one pertaining a claim to exclusivity. It's a state of mind, or a distant image, that can be pulled in so many directions at once, especially in relation to language, falling into the empty words, or of letting/sensing words empty. Though I also think that appending these adjectives

and verbs to the concept as a whole doesn't really tell us much, other than the fact that we may be lost.

There is certainly a predominant malady eating its way through the book, infecting the ambivalent relationship between listening and choice, the conception of location, of where one may reside between emptiness and melancholia, which, depending on their use, could as easily be either conjunctive or disjunctive. Again, I feel it is about the fluctuation of balance, about knowing when not to listen as much as when to listen. It's being able to manipulate the potentialities of material, rather than becoming undone by possibility. In my reading of it, the narrative interjection towards the beginning of YG, is where this first comes to light. Grey pictures a series of empty boxes, or quadrants, inside the dimensions of the room, and no sooner does this happen that everything begins to become audible. You could say this is analogous to the modern concept of abundance, or over-saturation, of the desire to escape noise because it has become somewhat of a generality, and that this can be found reflected in the thought patterns of the individual, as I have already stated, where one shakes with the intensity of their listening.

I think we share the tendency to concentrate on notions of difference, rather than separation, but it does often lead me towards a contemplation of ambivalence, the curious observation of our own conflict, that must lay somewhere outside of us too. In YG, the projections are, I feel, two states of listening, that themselves carry as many other states or permutations as the reader does, Buñuel and Lorca are like two imperfect circles constantly traced on top of each other, they are geometries the protagonist tries to align throughout the book, which doesn't last very long, so he doesn't get very far. The whole of YG is the product of mistaken relation, I suppose, the effect of an unwitting cause. As Grey tries to put things in order a sort of illusory dichotomy arises, one that is focused on separation, and so doubles ensue, cuttings of himself, and the more he tries to excavate himself from himself, the deeper the ambivalence burrows, as he tries to remove himself from his own mind by not listening. Of course there are moments of lucidity in YG, but they don't last long, they are fused together but as separate as ears on either side of the head.

YG, in its way, is a call to difference, portrayed through a series of opposites. On occasion I like to think that the world outside is an image of the world inside, and so it follows that Grey's slow hysteria, his tumultuous mind in search of an unperceivable nothingness, can only serve to cancel out his perceptions of anything but himself, creating a perpetual state of similarity, or repetition. The more he tries not to listen, the more he listens to himself, and in his attempts to annihilate the outside his insides can only increase.

MPW. There's lots of art and literature around "the body" in terms of agency but with a pinch of imagination, I think sound can exhibit it too. Not in terms of an attribute but a doing, more in conversation with a performance in that respect. I'm sure this idea of entry and exit, into and out of the body, happens as you say in different ways. On one level it's simultaneous and I think that probably comes through

in the dominant discourse around sound being an immersive medium with no distinction between inside and out. But I think it's important to at least sympathetically acknowledge the thresholds and transference points. For me the dual/simultaneous nature of listening is down to sound's agential ability to move from one place to another: to be in one ear and another. I take that as an affirmation of difference rather than an absolute dissolution of boundaries. In that sense listening can become social and reciprocal process tied to the acknowledgement that 'things' are listening to me too. When I make a piece of work like TTH I'm articulating that difference through aesthetic choices, usually at the level of gesture rather than any type of hard or rational distinction. It's an imperceptibly fine line.

I love this idea you mention about being full or empty of listening. It's bringing lots of absurd images to mind! I can vividly remember feeling completely empty on my last TTH entry. After 12 months of returning to the exact same spot and going through all types of procedures like body temperature readings, humidity statistics, note taking and recording, it felt like I had nothing left in the tank. Even the apparatus gave up on me in that last entry, everything was literally breaking down, including my back! But thinking about it ambivalently I could also say I was actually full to the brim and all this listening had somehow inflated inside of me and technology, to the point of exhaustion.

Maybe this leads onto a question I wanted to ask about mirrors. Grey interacts with a mirror frequently. In that sense it feels like a very definite device you employ. What's the mirrors function?

PF. I've written somewhere, I don't know how much I agree with it though, that Y.G. is concerned with what happens when listening becomes the object of desire, rather than that which one accommodates, or utilises, in order to get closer to said object. If you catch me at the right moment I might think that the book is like an aural hall of mirrors... with Grey watching himself in the mirror as he watches himself in the mind, each action prolonging the other. A sentence that I remember going something like, *for Jean Cocteau mirrors were portals, for Jack Spicer they were obstacles*, has stuck with me throughout all of Y.G., though I can't remember where it came from – it was probably something by Ron Silliman or Daniel Katz, but it could well have been Robin Blaser, or not – the mirror is the place where YG happens, nothing moves through it, the protagonist isn't perplexed by it, it just continues him, it's like a frame, in the same way that a line break could be considered a frame, or the boundary of a local radio wave, or an ecotone. It makes me think that a predominant quality of listening, what it is to listen, is a relinquishment of control... at least that's how I understand it in the book sometimes. That gets back to balance, in a way, because most of the time one needs to listen in order to understand, in this context let's say, to listen in order to be silent for another, or to understand what silence means to another, but, listen too much, as we so often do, and you might hear very little. The latter thought could be placed into circumstances beyond the book quite easily I think. Did you ever find that was the case on your visits for T.T.H?

MPW. Thinking of YG as an aural hall of mirrors makes a lot of sense. I guess that would equate it to a hall of echoes? I really got that sense from reading the book, I mean the palpable feel of it was like a heavy velvet curtain piling itself over me and the room I was in; there was a thickening of air almost, a sort of reverberation and decay to my reading that also textured physical space. This effected pace and time too, as if I was caught in a series of echoes.

In that sense listening can be a form of entrapment. An obsession that, as you say, may actually loosen what you hear or understand, which I think can have both positive and negative consequences. In terms of listening too much, I'm very conscious of finitude, it's in my face everyday through the draining of fossil fuels and capitalisms rampant obsession for consumption. I've written about this before in parallel with sound and listening: what would happen if sound was a finite resource? Every time someone sucked another sound out of the air with a microphone the world would become a quieter and quieter place, eventually there would be nothing left.

By structuring TTH within a constrained processional framework – literally re-visiting my own shoe imprints on the same time each month – I tried to induce a generative sense of aural finitude throughout. Also, because of a persistent back problem I have to be very economical with my own body and so I've become somehow more frugal with my listening. I am aware as I write this however what we're talking about comes from its own position of privilege: we have a decent range of hearing. Choosing to hear less is not an option for everyone so it seems important to remember that.

Can you talk about the title of your book and how it connects to the previous two works?

PF. There are so many strands that I could follow into that title, I have no idea where I'd start... I'll try and say something about the corresponding meanings between them and see if anything comes out of that. Try I bark was simply meant to reflect the blindness of the book, by which I mean the detached state in which I wrote the thing, not at all knowing what was happening, which to me is quite a special event, one which portends a state of both running away and towards your own aplomb, like a cockerel competing with its own echo, you want to go back there, but don't want to spend all your time trying because the competition will slowly outweigh the event. Since then I've managed such a thing in sporadic waves, little fragments here and there, which of course I don't realize until after the fact – I tried to plant this in the syntactical nature of the title – the same as Wild horses think of nothing else the sea, which to me is actually three different titles, macrocosms of the process of writing the book. To cut a long story short, Try I bark then, was something of the outside, as Wild horses was much more of an internal thing, Yew Grotesque, reflecting on the positions of those figures, choose to sit in the middle ground – asking questions of both that I found I couldn't really answer – and hopefully not losing any limbs. The title, just quickly, was partially a nod of admiration towards Clarice Lispector:

No, I did not describe the mirror—I was the mirror

In particular her book, *Agua Viva*, which is where the above line is from, the entirety of her oeuvre will always best me. And also a quiet shoveling, as if it were possible with the naked senses, in order to perceive in clear light that which has been swallowed, portraying the many possible faces underneath the physiognomy of the gargoyle, or the life cycle of an aril, eventually plucked from the Yew and passed through the bird.

Having knobbed off all such honky swagger, perhaps it was just the abundance of yew trees in the Lake District, where I wrote the thing, and the relics of Grizedale Hall library that sat buried only 30 feet away from where I slept. I'd love to talk with you more about your Ballardian premise of a figurative world of gradual absence, not only with regards to microphones hovering up sounds out of the air, but also the sounds of thought. Leaving us with the thought of sound? Anyway, another time eh.

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