

The Haunted Answering Machine: Linda Pastan's Telephonic Ghosts

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Linda Pastan's poem "The Answering Machine" (2000)¹ dramatizes a situation which is as strange as it is, in the present media-technological context, familiar, or even inevitable. The poem's speaker calls a dead friend's answering machine and hears his voice in the greeting that has become a vocal relic but also, in a way, a posthumous communication.

The dead friend's voice recorded on the machine has the uncanny quality of emitting from beyond the grave. He, or his voice, performs what would be impossible or supernatural without the existence of devices capable of preserving and reproducing audio. What formally, audibly, resembles the scandal of a speaking corpse is naturalized into being a commonplace of the residual or posthumous existence of human beings in the age of sound technologies. But the dead person's voice still retains spectral implications, although it originates, to coin a preposterous neologism, from a pre-posthumous period.

The double potential of the answering machine as dramatized in the poem—the preservation of voice after the speaking subject's death and the implication of making supernatural contact—harks back to the early history of sound technologies. That the recorded voice could survive its articulator was a recurrent figure already in the first accounts of sound-reproducing devices (Sterne 287-333). The supernatural aspect of the ways in which sound technologies were thought of ran, and is still running, parallel with preservation, ranging from the telegraph, telephone, and phonograph to the computer and the Internet (Sconce *passim*.) Sound technologies were, thus, thematized as both auditorily embalming and conjuring the dead.

In the context of sound reproduction technologies, voice as a token of subjectivity, presence, and intentional personality turns out to be, counterintuitively, mutable. The residual voice of a speaking subject on the answering machine is, at least potentially, *always* that of an already dead person. In my reading, Pastan's poem, in spite of its apparent simplicity and straightforwardness reminiscent of Robert Frost, examines

the complex and vacillating nature of seemingly separate ontological states such as life and death; live voice and its reproduction; and the caller and the respondent. The answering machine could be interpreted as providing ambiguous space between presence and absence, where the mortal and spectral voices can meet and communicate. Given its subject matter and the ambiguous demarcation of its ontological oppositions, the poem reads as both a telephonic manifestation and a hauntological manifesto.

The Ghost in the Answering Machine

Pastan's poem allows for at least two sustained readings. The first and the most obvious reading follows the assumption that the dead person's recorded voice represents a ghost, since it is audible although its articulator is no longer alive. The poem's rhetoric supports this inference, at least to a degree. The first stanza explicitly dubs the dead friend's voice "a fledgling ghost." At the juncture of the third and fourth stanzas, the answering machine is said to be "haunted // by the timbre of your voice." The recorded voice is given attributes of a ghost or of ghost-like behavior. That the voice qua "fledgling ghost" longs for "human messages" does not necessarily mean that it is in need of live contact for communicative reasons. Rather, given the traditional spectral context, the ghost's need may be of graver nature. For a variety of reasons, "the dead person's soul must be appeased; otherwise his phantom will return to take vengeance" (Rickels 4). This demoniacal aspect may not apply to the poem's vocal ghost as such, but the effects it causes may relate less to benevolence than to obsessive-compulsive disorder.

Ghosts are customarily believed to haunt the abodes where they resided when still occupying living bodies. In Pastan's poem, the ghost does haunt its own house. Or more specifically, it primarily haunts the answering machine located *in* the house. The house is only exposed to the voice's spectral emanations when a telephone call switches the machine on. The difference may not seem crucial, but in the medial mode that a recorded voice primarily exists, it is. The answering machine is the home, the "house" of the voice recorded on it. The voice only briefly occupied the body that articulated it. The recorded voice is thus primordially disembodied because it is preserved in the memory of

the machine. Therefore, the recorded voice never left the house—neither the actual, nor the machinic—with the corpse.

One could even say that the machine, not the speaking subject's corporeality, is the recorded voice's actual *body*.² When in stand-by mode, the machine qua body hibernates, is in a deathlike state, and consequently the recorded voice qua ghost remains mutely confined in it. This may explain why the "fledgling ghost" still longs for "human messages." Those messages or, rather, plain calls momentarily conjure the ghost, make the reticent voice audible, by reviving its machinic body. The callers turn, as if by remote control, the voice's coffin into a voice box and silence into articulation.

Another way of thematizing the spectral soul/body problem would be to have, paradoxically, a look at the ghost's primordial invisibility. The ghost does not have a proper body, even doubly so. When still in the living body of its host, the immaterial part of human (the soul or spirit) is not called ghost; the ghost is engendered posthumously. The visible form of ghost is the body of another, an artifactual or prosthetic body, or an ambiguous entity like fog (Derrida 7, 126, 194). A corollary of this state of affairs is that visuality or, more accurately, physical resemblance is not the ghost's primary attribute. Not only does a ghost's appearance differ from what used to be its original bodily host. The ghost is also unidentical with its present physical appearance in the sense that it is traditionally believed to lack a mirror-image; therefore a ghost will not recognize itself in a mirror, but others will recognize it as one by this very token (Derrida 156). Still, a ghost is curiously characterized by "the tangible intangibility of a proper body without flesh" (Derrida 7).

In Pastan's poem, these spectral qualities emanate as the primacy and—counterintuitively—tangibility of voice: "the timbre of your voice, / more palpable than photographs / or fingerprints [...]" The poem's speaker thus conceives of the invisible and insubstantial voice or, rather, its characteristic quality—its timbre—as her dead friend's most tactile residual marker. It is as if the homophony of *timbre* and *timber* had made the voice appear as firm as wood.³ The very structure of otherworldly communication in the poem is, however, less solid.

The Haunting Caller

Pastan's poem also allows for another kind of reading, which reverses the relationship between the haunter and the haunted. The caller could be interpreted as haunting the answering machine and the poor soul locked inside it. The syntactic relations in the first stanza are ambiguous enough to make "a fledgling ghost still longing / for human messages" an apposite of "I" instead of the more obvious "your voice." The former alternative does not violate the logic or explicit content of the poem, for the caller does continuously long for the friend's (greeting) message.

On the other hand, the very longing organizes the haunter/haunted positions in the poem. Or perhaps it is the pivot around which the alternatives are turning, thus forming a classic piece of spiritualist séance props, a turning table, *une table tournante* (cf. Derrida 149, 192). The caller and her friend can be seen as alternately taking up the positions of the conjurer and the conjured. The poem's speaker, by calling the machine and triggering the recorded greeting, evokes the auditory markers of her friend's existence from a death-like state, and thus raises his voice. On the other hand, the friend, simply by the force of his incantation-like recorded greeting, conjures the caller, repeatedly making her act against her own will: "ashamed and resisting // but compelled, I dial again [...]". The exchange between the caller and the machine is clearly ritualistic. The form or structure of the "communication" between the agents is more important than the repetitious content of their "messages." The dead friend's voice repeats a recorded greeting, to which the caller repeatedly answers, as the poem's end suggests, with silence.

Both participants in this curious noncommunicative (or tautological) telecommunication perform conjuring tricks that are, too, curious. Normally, i.e. normally in the paranormal context, "[c]onjuration says in sum the appeal that causes to come forth *with the voice* and thus it makes come, be definition, what *is not there* at the present moment of the appeal" (Derrida 41; emphasis in original). The magical incantations performed in the poem are silent or at least nonvocal from the outset. The dead friend's recorded voice is heard only after the caller is conjured to dial the right number and to reach the answering machine. Before that moment of unspontaneous playback, his voice is silent. The caller, for her part, conjures the ghost in the answering machine by the sound generated by the telephone, not by her own vocal apparatus. She

telephonically activates the machine but will not leave a message. Instead, significantly, she hangs up.

Hauntological Hang-Ups

The ghost is not, thus, singular in Pastan's poem. Both the caller and the called occupy the spectral position, and both can be interpreted as returning to their old haunts, with the proverbial haunted house miniaturized into an answering machine. But the appearance of a ghost is never singular. A ghost's first appearance is reappearance; it comes forth by coming back. A ghost is a revenant, someone who returns—albeit as a spirit, after death. A ghost's ontology is hauntology, ontology haunted by the double-bind of singularity and repetition, of the first and the last time: “the singularity of any *first time* makes it also a *last time*” (Derrida 10; emphasis in original). Spectral presence derives from the ante-mortem past; its existence is posthumous from the outset. Appropriately enough, a ghost's preoccupations are of repetitious nature. *Haunt* is a frequentative verb; it implies repeating, iterative activities, for instance, “to visit habitually as a spirit or ghost”; “to recur persistently to the consciousness”; “to remain persistently” (*Webster's*, “haunt”). Appropriately enough, we either believe or not believe in ghosts, in the plurality of the supernatural but only rarely confess belief in *a* ghost, in the spectral singular.

The silent but obsessive quality of the poem's speaker is easily associated with the annoying or harassing caller. She is not an obscene phone caller, for she will not talk dirty, but formally she does resemble another telephonic nuisance, the caller who disturbs by dialing a number and then hanging up without saying anything. On the other hand, the caller does not want to annoy anyone, but acts driven by her desire. The caller is like a fetishist who, by definition, gets her pleasure out of things that are not functional or not used for their originally intended purpose. The use-value of a fetish object begins when it is out of service, when it is no longer useful in the ordinary sense of the word (Hollier 140). Normally, a nonfetishistic caller regards the greeting on the answering machine as something to be bypassed without further ado, as the necessary preamble before the beep, which signals the opportunity to leave one's message. For the fetishist, a phenomenon

precisely like the greeting can form the source of thrill, not the possibility to record one's vocal communication on the machine. "[T]he accidental mercy of machines" preserves, if not immortalizes, the transient, which makes it available for reverent reuse. That is not the intended use of the greeting, whose mode of being is constituted by mutability, i.e. re-recordability, rather than stability. Another corollary of this fetishistic state of affairs is that the caller does not listen to the greeting for semantic information proper but for the timbre of voice that articulates it.

In the second stanza, the caller asks herself whether she should leave a message on the machine. Whatever the caller does, in the situation given in the poem, she ends up in an awkward position. If she leaves a message for a dead person, she acts irrationally and could be considered mentally disturbed. If she does not and still continues calling her dead friend's number, she resembles not only a madwoman but also a harassing caller.

That the caller will call only to hang up could be interpreted as a telltale of her hang-ups, i.e. her preoccupations, fixations, or psychological blocks. What resembles a pathological state could, however, be thematized as an early stage in her grief work.

Tear and Mend: Grief Work by Phone

Many peculiar features in Linda Pastan's poem become understandable by emphasizing its spectral aspects. Another way of interpreting the poem is to read it with mourning customs, both religious and secular, in mind. The two strategies of reading are not mutually exclusive but are closely intertwined due to the very problem of dealing with death, that simultaneously unavoidable and scandalous phenomenon.

In Pastan's case, the most immediate context for a religious interpretation of mourning is Judaism. To bear with and process the overwhelming sense of loss caused by a loved one's death certain mourning customs have been developed in the Judaic tradition. For instance, distinct periods and stages of grieving have been ordained, as well as certain ritualistic habits relating to the body of the deceased and the house of the survivors. (Brasch 296-99)

Because "weeks" have passed since the friend's death, the poem's speaker has gone through the seven days of *shivah* and is probably in the period of "thirty" days of

sorrow, but has presumably not yet reached the eleven-month phase of kaddish (cf. Brasch 297). The silent calls could be read as traditional mourning customs performed by telephonic means. In the Judaic tradition, the body is not left alone but is always accompanied with relatives or special “watchers” (Brasch 300). In Pastan’s poem, the visual gives way to the auditory, and the dutiful watcher becomes a persistent listener on the telephone. During *shivah* friends make short visits to the bereaved to pray with them in honor of the deceased (Brasch 300); in “The Answering Machine,” the caller means the one who makes phone calls, but she may also be interpreted as honoring the dead friend.

The metaphors of ripping the fabric of life and the tear it causes, in the second stanza, allude to a Judaic funeral custom, to “the cutting of *k’riah*.” R. Brasch expounds on this gesture: “Before the coffin is closed, and in front of the dead, the traditional Jew makes a tear in his clothes as a symbol of the rent suffered in his heart, which can never wholly heal again.” (Brasch 300) The poem’s speaker agrees on the slowness of grief work but still implies that it can be terminated successfully: “this sudden tear will not / be mended soon or easily.” Traditionally, the tear in the garment was worn for the whole year of mourning. Besides a sign of grief, the tear or mourning garments in general were also worn for pre-emptive reasons: “the very origin of mourning clothes was not piety but superstition, not respect for but dread of the dead. The clothes were used as disguise so that the spirit of the deceased might not recognize and haunt the bereaved.” (Brasch 305) This possibility does not apply to the poem’s metaphoric tear; on the contrary, the speaker *wants* to be haunted—at least by the friend’s voice, by the vocal residue of his existence.

The very thing that conjures up ghosts in the poem also conjures them away. The answering machine makes haunting possible, but only as long as it is plugged in and kept in stand-by mode.⁴ The poem is situated in the middle of the process of emptying the deceased’s house, and this state of affairs is expressed prominently in the central third stanza. It is only a question of time when “others” unplug and remove the answering machine, just as they “roll up rugs” and “pack up books.” The electronically mediated ghosts will thus eventually be exorcised from the house, the stage in the work of mourning that it represents will be terminated, and the process of grieving will have to

move on to the next level. Or the process stagnates and mourning becomes melancholia. In that scenario, the haunting continues internalized in the melancholic's mind, which is both possessed by the dead loved one and doomed to repeat, machine-like, the attempt to get an answer to the impossible question that hauntology poses.

Notes

1. The poem is available online at http://www.poetrymagazine.org/magazine/0800/poem_30148.html . It is also reprinted in Pastan's latest collection of poetry, *The Last Uncle* (2002). The gender of the caller and the dead friend is not specified in the poem. To avoid the clumsy s/he and him/her formulations, I regard the speaker as female and the dead friend as male.
2. For voice and the history of the answering machine, see Levin.
3. There is also homonymic wordplay in the poem. "[T]his sudden tear" primarily refers to a fissure, but, in the context of mourning, the secondary reference to a drop of fluid from the lachrymal glands is also activated. I suggest another interpretation of *tear* in the last section of my essay.
4. In a way, the answering machine functions as both an electronic and spiritualist medium, which/who mediates spectral presence in the forms of the dead friend's recorded voice and the speaker's silent calls.

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