

# THE BODILY SOUNDS OF THE ABYSS

Olga Goriunova

Hiccups, stomach gurgling, coughing, teeth grinding—the sounds of the body are framed as something best left unheard. Children around the age of six rejoice in competitive belching as they are trained to suppress and control what is at their disposal. Unless controlled or instrumentalised, the body's sounds are artefacts of living matter. By-products of vitality, in cultural history they are usually connected to sensuality, sex, gastronomic pleasure, material abundance, and symbolic excess. Alexander Pushkin, the happy sun of Russian poetry, wrote in his late twenties: 'Widow Clicquot or famous Moët / The wine to me is always blessed / In frozen bottle for the poet / It's on the table quickly placed. // But gushing out hissing foam / Disturbs my stomach, that is why / To be more modest I prefer / And drink Bordeaux—a prudent wine.'<sup>1</sup> A bon vivant has good bowel movements and dies suddenly. A decadent lingers on, smelly and full of sounds—prisoners of the organic processes. Mikhail Artsybashev, 24 at the time, wrote less than a hundred years later: 'The room was stuffy and smelly. Their sweaty bodies were spreading anxious, heavy, ill scent. Their eyes glistened muddily and their voices sounded faltering and gloomy, like a wheezing of satanic raging beasts...'<sup>2</sup>

Such materiality is essentially perverse. Matter has no normality, except when one of its forms stops working, and is succeeded by another. If the bodily nonvocal sounds of pleasure or intestinal success haven't found a place at the summit of the Judaeo-Christian symbolic system, the sound of disease has. The sound of pain, of the suffering body, is allowed: the Book of Revelation describes the gnashing of teeth that accompanies the Last Days. Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* has at least eighteen episodes of gnashing teeth.

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1. A. Pushkin, *Eugene Onegin*, tr. V. Balmont (Moscow: Filin, 2018) xlv–xli, 64.

2. M. Artsybashev, *Sanin* (1904), tr. P. Pinkerton, <<http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/9051>>.

The sound of disease is a core component of the sonic landscape of the apocalypse, formed by the sounds of suffering. The pain of bodies conjoined with the suffering of souls are sonic constructions that are immediate and intimate and open outwards into the metaphysical abyss.

The intuition of the abyss comes through pain. The sound of shock: a ringing in the ears, a high-pitched buzz in silence. Heart pumping in the temples. Muscle contraction, the sound of puking, mucus, incontinence. Unsound pus. Sonic frequencies of cellular death. The apocalypse is with you, in your own body, connecting its organs to the devil.

In the Russian North (in Archangelsk, Komi, and Udmurtiya, but also in the Urals in Siberia) the word ‘hiccups’ is used to denote something else than usual hiccupping: a form of involuntary speaking, believed to be produced by a little creature called a hiccup.<sup>3</sup> The hiccup gets inside through the mouth when it is left unguarded for a moment, or can enter through any other orifice. Women speak of giving birth to a hiccup. The hiccup has a voice distinctly different from that of the host, and leads the good life of a parasite, but quite openly. It may demand treats or drink, swear, offer a live commentary on life’s happenings, talk about itself, have a gender, a name, and can generally either torture or coexist peacefully with its victim/host. Without any fixed appearance, they can first present themselves through spasmodic hiccupping and near-lethal yawning. Hiccups and yawning can thus be a biological manifestation, Christian devils (hosts are often Christian and regard hiccups as diabolical tricks), or mythological creatures of dark magic (such Christianity is often a veneer on paganism).

Demonic hiccups, though today largely considered one of a range of conditions described in the nineteenth century as hysteria (an effect of the hard life of the inhabitants of the North), is also a cultural myth that had to be passed on, like a fairy tale. To be maintained, though, hiccups need to be enacted, performed by the body, positioning a specific bodily expression and a particular sonic experience as a metaphysical claim. Physical becomes metaphysical, hiccups lead to demons.

In the *The Poetic Outlook of Slavs about Nature* (1865–1869), Alexander Afanasyev describes the numerous devils of diseases that torture the bodies they parasitize:

The main personification of the evil spirit was Morena or Marena or Morana (from Sanskrit *mri*—to die)—the goddess of death, winter, and night, a name related to darkness,

3. O. Christoforova, *Икота: Мифологический персонаж в локальной традиции* [Hiccups: A Mythological Personage in the Local Tradition] (Moscow: Moscow State University for the Humanities, 2013).

twilight, not knowing, poison, stench, thick fog, rain and frost... Illnesses that generated strong fever and all body rash related to the fire [...] The red spots of rash were called fiery. All devouring fire, but also golden and yellow colour, and light, were relatives of those diseases. One of seven sisters of the shakes, the fifth one, is called the golden one, yellow disease [...] Agni, the god of the heavenly and earthly fire, punished the mortals by throwing fiery sparks that left traces on their bodies and lit up the inner fire of fever. To treat measles, a golden ring is used, or, to treat vision complications, flint and stone, to strike sparks into the eyes.<sup>4</sup>

More than just an animism, the objectification and personification of pain that has its own sonic expression, something that was still alive in the mythology in the nineteenth century, at that time ran in parallel to the newly-emerging practice of listening to the organs through a stethoscope. Mediate auscultation—the technique of listening to the sound of the movements of organs, air, and fluids, is described as a hydraulic hermeneutics, generally ‘charting the motions of liquids and gases through the body’.<sup>5</sup> Just as the hiccup speaks for itself with little regard for its host, so vascular noise, the resonating chamber of the thorax, bodily textures, and the rotation of bones speak, via the stethoscope, with a voice that overpowers that of the patient. The ‘moist crepitous rattle, the mucous, or gurgling rattle, the dry sonorous rattle, the dry sibilous rattle, the dry crepitous rattle with large bubbles or crackling, utricular buzzing, amphoric resonance’<sup>6</sup> described by Laennec, the stethoscope’s inventor, heralded the birth of a medical acoustic culture. Today, a sonic closure of the mitral and tricuspid valves, followed by the closure of the aortic and pulmonary valves and the ‘subtleties of pitch, rhythm, and dynamics in a murmur [that] express particular physiological changes’<sup>7</sup> are still active diagnostic tools in cardiothoracics, unlike, for instance, the sound of the movement of water through the kidneys, which is no longer listened to. Vascular sound also figured in early discussions of the telephone, which, it was proposed, could be used to diagnose at a distance. The idea of listening to the sounds of the body on the phone gave way to self-management of the quantified self, and, for instance, its

4. A. Afanasyev, author translation.

5. J. Sterne, ‘Mediate Auscultation, the Stethoscope, and the “Autopsy of the Living”: Medicine’s Acoustic Culture’, *Journal of Medical Humanities* 22:2 (2001).

6. *Ibid.*, 14.

7. T. Rice, ‘Learning to Listen: Auscultation and the Transmission of Auditory Knowledge’, *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 16:s1 (2010), S41–S61.

visualizations of the heartbeat, just as auscultation is today considered a 'dying art', losing out to visualization by means of (the misnamed) ultrasound.

Medical modernity stopped listening to the sonic motions of viscera. It's not that devils stopped parasitizing bodies; it's just that what is not unsound, what is already audible and locatable, was no longer of interest. Listening to, hearing visceral hydraulics was firmly placed within the framework of medical rationality and ontology of reason. Hearing Northern Russian hiccups can only be understood in relationship to metaphysics. Today, these are networks nested within ecologies: connecting lines that spread far and wide. With increased attention to the precise configurations of entangled matter, embodied practices, and complex coexistences, the body is no longer simply made of organs and fluids, but is co-produced with stuff (bacteria, free radical particles, products of pharmaceutical industry, classrooms, cities) at every layer. The haptic sound of inhabiting the environment, transmitted partly through bone conduction, is core to new techniques for the design of interaction and control: bioacoustics, biofeedback, whole-body vibration. The focus on self-produced sound (in audio-haptic interaction, for instance) goes beyond the tinkling of bronchi, taking in the sound of sleeping, sneezing, clearing throat, finger flinching, clapping, scratching, arms waiving, fighting, the sound of footsteps, clothes rustling, of biting, and drinking. So what is the sound of the apocalypse now?

Distributed bodies—distributed apocalypse. Metaphysics everywhere. Your body is coupled with environments both immediate, distant, and microscopic; it is bound to the internal abyss, the eternal possibility of the annihilation of 'you' at any moment. The internal abyss is mirrored in the external abyss. Hell was, for Sartre, other people. Today, hell is, first of all, yourself, and then, hell is everywhere. The bass of the Last Days is a resonance between the inside and an ecology of indefinable boundaries.