

DIGRESSIONS ON HELL

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Chris McCormack

Could we exist without one brother overshadowing the other? In my mind there is no Venn Diagram of overlap and difference, only one circle of doubled being perfectly overlaid, no apparent misalignment. Not siblings, nor solely brothers, but indivisible identical twins. The faint outlines of each body part as if drawings in a book: empty, generic, rendered to that of sameness. An inconceivable, unpossessable physicality becoming something sharable, even swappable. A line rendered by the exact same hand that belongs to another, as if continual redescriptions of each other's bodies that overwrite one another – a nose, a toe, an eyelash – each aspect of flesh more a physical predicament, an invitation to compare, rather than a remembered detail that belongs to someone. To try and remember when our faces were still not far from each limb, when my arms and legs were not yet jettisoned away into adult proportions; to hold onto the dimensions of a body before it was swept by dread, or better, by the sheer panic of being fixed by another's look.

But then again, maybe this was all blissful? Here you might rightly ask, where is the broader essay on Leslie Thornton's *Peggy and Fred in Hell*? Why this abstracted digression on differences between siblings (of *being* a twin)? The invitation to write more expansively about a work Thornton began in 1985 – beyond a more straightforward, critical analysis – led me to home in on its specific aspects; specifically, my sibling relations, the singing of castrati and sopranos, and the ways in which the listener parses differing vocal modulations attached to gender. Thornton's extraordinary cycle begins with an image of the slow, careful movement of a cog or wheel, followed by black-and-white endoscopic footage of a human larynx. The tight, muscular opening at times resembles a face, a pigeon, or the beak of a mollusc – an organ that convulses, flutters during speech or singing. It also bears a visual resemblance to the erogenous capacities of other orifices, its contractions a reminder that all speaking – voluble, whispered, or flatly stated – is coterminous with apprehensions of gender and sex.

Over this opening we hear the Peruvian soprano Yma Sumac's voice span several octaves in the self-styled 1954 track of Latin exotica 'Gopher Mambo.' (Her late 1987 appearance on the *Late Show with David Letterman* signals her enduring fascination for audiences; her deliberate, mystical appearance and otherworldly voice sell the fantasy of an imagined equatorial south to those in the north). This is followed by an aria from Handel's *Rinaldo*, 1711. The aria tells the moment of our titular hero being lured by the sounds of sirens who offer visions of paradise, tricking him to believe that he will find Almirena, his true love. It is believed that Handel had initially thought of this role being played by a castrato singer, yet no known recording of a castrato singing this aria exists. Many consider the death knell of castrati singers to have occurred when the Vatican began to phase out their employment around 1903, with the last known castrato singer being Alessandro Moreschi, who died in 1922. Today it is largely female sopranos or male countertenors, voices more commonly termed *false alto*, who have filled the breach.

The development of castrati singing started during the mid-sixteenth century due to the ecclesiastical ban on women singing in church choirs. Castrati singing reaching its peak

in the early-seventeenth century, before gradually falling out of fashion by the late eighteenth century. It was popular throughout Italy, centring on cities such as Venice and the Umbrian town of Norcia, but the practice also spanned parts of Spain and France. Acts of castration to preserve the higher ranges of the voice into maturity were largely enacted on boys born into poverty, with choirmasters promising parents future riches from their son's unique vocal range. (Wealthy parents were more concerned with the preservation of their bloodline, as it would typically be the eldest boy that was given up for such purposes.) Immediate financial burdens on the family would also be relieved, as their son would be fed and looked after by the conservatoire. Excuses to conduct these unofficial surgeries included concocting accidents from horseback riding to swan and pig bites. During surgery, he would be doused in opiates and submerged into a cold milk bath to confuse and disorient before the excision would be made. The optical placidity of milk cloaks the image of this sharp removal. Deprived of testosterone, the larynx of a castrato would not have descended in the throat as it normally does in growing boys, nor would his vocal folds have thickened. Presumably the elaborate laryngeal system of cartilage, bone, hinges, muscles, membranes, and ligaments retained a childlike suppleness and predisposition to flexibility into later years. For many boys, testosterone deprivation would have prevented the bones of the ribcage from fusing to the sternum at the usual time in the growing cycle; would have continued to grow, creating an overdeveloped chest cavity resembling a keel or pigeon chest. Composer Giovanni Paisiello used to say of some castrati who couldn't sing that they had been castrated in bad weather.

I am going to tell you I have a body, although it often feels my hand might pass through it. As an identical twin, I often touch this benignly functioning ghost as if it were not mine own. As if I were the division of something, not the impenetrable functionality of living, but life itself. Your head against a football, a ball, a light ball turned a bowling ball. A head pressed against mine, onto mine, upwards in search of air. Cranial. A type of game. A view of a park. A sack of sex worn across a shoulder and relievedly taken off after a long day. A camera click. The way you move into air. On a good day. On a bad day. The way a breath might smell. Watching the forward pass and then retreating. All that generosity. A voice barely carried.

Those who undertook the removal of testicles in boys to preserve the higher ranges in singing had often practiced eviscerating (*Latin*: 'unmanning') cattle. Historically, castration was used during centuries of slavery to make men less aggressive; as globules of power taken and displayed in the spoils of war; or as part of religious cults. The practice has been in recorded existence since 2100 BCE, with surviving cuneiform tablets from the city of Lagash, in modern-day Iraq, giving the earliest written evidence of the systematic castration of men.

Using the procedure for an aesthetic means of voice control, an imagined 'angelic' voice, issues from a different order of power, furthering control over working class bodies and their reproductive lives. But the boyish voice, or what remains of it after it 'breaks,' owing to its thin and effeminate quality, often comes to be regarded by others as something 'unnatural.' As the name suggests, *false alto* vocalisation is inscribed by falsity – it is a voice that not only hides its true nature, but also raises curiosity, or more accurately, suspicion. It is likely,

if only anecdotally, that this vigilance and interest around the voice have increased of late, given today's compulsory proximity to perceived gender roles and the heightened tensions and violences of those who step beyond them – particularly concerning the gender identities of children. It is perhaps this dextrous interest in voice modulation that makes Thornton's film so striking, particularly when we hear a set of recordings that demonstrate the preferred key of 'male' and 'female' voices, with the listener instructed to try and determine the different pitch between two repeated phrases. Physiognomically, larynxes in both sexes enlarge during puberty. (Studies of intersex children's larynxes are minimal if non-existent.) The male larynx grows from anterior to posterior (front to back), resulting in an anterior protrusion of the larynx, giving the neck its distinctive apple; the female larynx similarly enlarges, but more in height and width, resulting in a slightly rounder shape. A Scandinavian study, following that of an earlier American study, proposed that voice change is occurring in increasingly younger boys, although its results were inconclusive. However, the median age for voice mutation is fourteen years and three months old, with voice change divided into three time periods: the pre-mutation, the mutation – the specific period of vocal instability – and the post-mutation.

Our morbid fascination with physical difference is perhaps most acutely visible in taking part in twin research programmes, where our differences are closely tracked and compared through a series of tests – from grip strength to eye tests, bone density and microbiome diversity, to memory games and fluency of reading. The tests are conducted separately, sombrely, without one's twin, to avoid any conflict or competitive attitudes. One can only imagine the assembled people present and imagine their double while sitting in the waiting areas, their other absent yet somehow continually reconstructed – as one might invent in one's mind a figure in an empty chair. During a break, I spoke to one woman over a free sandwich who talked quite despairingly of being the 'failed' fraternal twin, and how she desperately wished to beat her sister at something. Twin studies reveal that genetics predispose one's physical and mental expressions, including height, weight, intelligence, job satisfaction, and religiosity – among many other things – rather than determine them.

In Thornton's film we then cut to an image of young American boy, Fred, who is sitting in the cluttered but brightly lit environment of what might be a kitchen. He is wearing a white suit jacket over a T-shirt with an ironed-on print of the Superman logo. He repeatedly sings folksong-like refrains while Thornton shoots close-ups of his mouth, forcing a visual synonym of the earlier footage of the larynx, the shadowy desires of a mouth talking, speaking, singing. We then see the second sibling, Peggy, who stands in a different room to her brother; what looks like a painting of fireworks is behind her. She then sings Michael Jackson's song 'Billie Jean,' almost without breath. Thornton's film ventriloquises Michael's male voice through that of a young girl, as if to make apparent his preternatural and distinctive range of hiccups and beatboxing styles; as an adult, Jackson could often still reach high notes, evoking his brand of childlike cosplay. His fascinations with the nostalgia of childhood are today fractured by accusations of paedophilic abuse and million-dollar-plus out-of-court settlements. Peggy's uncertain, girlish voice strips Jackson's impassioned pleas about a lying and obsessed, stalker-like fan – 'she's just a girl who claims that I am the one' – unhooking its rhythms and

isolating the lyrics. It condenses, like warm air on glass, the slipperiness of Jackson's own public and private identities.

Compared to girls of the same age group, there is a surprisingly large range of commercially available CD recordings of ten to fifteen-year-old boys.

As children we hated being topless, our thin white bodies exposed to the cool light of northwest England. The need to have our bodies covered was as if we were somehow expressing the modesty of women, that we did not have a direct line to masculine visibility. How we would pull a face when told what puberty was. To feel the inexorable threat of something that we knew we could not control. Our identity had a particular smell, one that necessitated that we withdraw each other's visibility; the doubled hearing of a voice effeminately reaching around the same set of words in a classroom struck silent. The impossible tells of the movement of a hand reduced rigidly in a tight whirlpool of self-surveillance. To try and cover the smell of each other takes an effort that is tightly orchestrated, barely breathable. In a sense, instead of brothers, we were always each other's plus one, as if we were an undiagnosed gay couple from birth, waiting to be named as such. And named we were. A common misreading is that we are a couple, and not brothers. In certain public occasions, it is still almost easier to go along with this projection of incest rather than confront our interlocutor with the stranger fact that we are twins. People very rarely look closely enough.

Addendum: a description of Hell.

Do you know what is meant by being frightened out of one's senses? A boy wanted to frighten two other little boys. In the daytime, he took some phosphorus and marked with it the form of a skeleton on the wall of the room where the little boys always slept. In the daytime, the mark of phosphorus is not seen; in the dark, it shines like fire. The two little boys went to bed, knowing nothing about it. The next morning, the first boy opened the door of the room where the other two little boys had been sleeping. He found one boy sitting on his bed, staring at the wall, out of his senses. The other little boy was lying dead. This was Hell.