'His father's voice': Phonographs and Heredity in the Fiction of Samuel Butler

Will Abberley

Some time after our father died, my brother and I were clearing out his office when we found his old Dictaphone tape recorder. It was filled with crackly old interviews recorded during his career as a journalist. Playing it and hearing him again was strange; not only because he was no longer alive, but because the recording, made in his younger years, echoed the timbre of our voices. The moment was a double shock, both temporarily reviving a voice of the departed and suggesting that this voice had in fact never departed, living on through hereditary transmission.

I begin with this personal anecdote to highlight the uncanny ontological disturbances which technologies of voice reproduction can wreak upon our sense of self. Where did our father's voice end and our own begin? What else had we inherited that we imagined as ours alone? This article aims to show that voice reproduction has been provoking such questions about heredity and identity since the days of Edison's phonograph. Further, uncertainties in the late nineteenth century about how heredity functioned and what exactly it transmitted rendered the phonograph a useful symbol for writers interested in biology. This article will explore these themes through the writing of Samuel Butler. It argues that Butler mediated his ideas about heredity, and his complex relationships with his family, through metaphors of phonographic transcription. Butler's strongly autobiographical novel *The Way of All Flesh* (1903) is persistently concerned with children echoing their parents. The forces of heredity and convention compromise the independence of both the characters' verbal expression and their physical voices. While Butler searched for ways in which a son might escape his father's 'voice' or speech, such escape often involved resurrecting other, countering voices or discourse from their ancestry. Conversely, as a bachelor, most of whose books enjoyed little success in his lifetime, Butler hoped to haunt future generations through his written works. Conflating biological and cultural inheritance, Butler considered ideas a form of personality passed from

intellectual 'fathers' to 'sons'. While heredity could be imagined through the metaphor of voice recording and reproduction, the persistence of ideas and intellectual 'voices' through history might be imagined through the operations of heredity. However, Butler also distinguished voice as a bodily index of heredity from literature as a more abstract line of inheritance. Walter Ong opposed writing and speech on the basis that 'speech is structured through the entire fabric of the human person', while 'writing depends on consciously contrived rules'.[1] Similarly, Butler imagined literature as more self-conscious and less tied to bodily structures than speech, rendering it the best vehicle for individualistic expression.

Victorian theories of heredity and technologies of sound recording both suggested ways in which individuals might persist beyond death, haunting their descendants. I will outline these developments before exploring how Butler engaged with them. Disputes over heredity came to revolve around Charles Darwin's theory of natural selection and Jean Baptiste de Lamarck's earlier model of the inheritance of acquired characteristics. Lamarck argued that organisms inherited characteristics acquired during their ancestors' lifetimes. Thus, according to the famous image, the giraffe lengthened its neck through generations of stretching at high vegetation.[2] Parents seemed to encroach upon the individuality of their offspring, passing on their habits as instincts. The radical writer George Drysdale wrote in his treatise *The Elements of Social Science* (1855), of which Butler would own a copy:

> We call each human being a distinct individual, because he has been produced by an act of generation, and lives independently. But in truth we are not distinct individuals. Each of us is formed of a part of his two parents, a part which is indeed separated from them, but which once was included in their individuality. Hence we are merely a part of our parents, largely developed, and existing independently; and therefore, a man who has given birth to children, does not wholly die at

[1] Walter Ong, 'Literacy and Orality in our Times', *Profession*, 79 (1979), 1–7 (p. 3).

[2] Stephen Jay Gould, *The Structure of Evolutionary Theory* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), pp. 188–89. For a general overview of heredity as an idea, see Staffan Müller-Wille and Hans-Jörg Rheinberger, *A Cultural History of Heredity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

> death, but a part of him survives in his offspring. In this way, man is in a manner immortal on this earth.[3]

Through the Lamarckian lens, reproduction might become a kind of reincarnation. This idea was later foregrounded by some theories of degeneration, which suggested that physical, mental, and moral capacities were shaped by ancestral experiences. The medical psychologist Henry Maudsley argued that idiocy, madness, and criminality produced by circumstances in one generation became hereditary in its descendants. Maudsley commented in 1886:

> Everybody may learn more of the deep foundations of his character — of what he is essentially and is capable of becoming — by the study of his relations than he will by the most scrupulously minute self-inspection; for he may observe in one or another of them the full development of what lies dormant in him, hidden and indiscernible — the actual outcome of the deep-lying potentialities of the family-stock.[4]

In this Lamarckian formulation, people appeared less as individuals than as composites of ancestral tendencies, unconsciously retreading the tracks of their predecessors.

Darwinian natural selection, by contrast, suggested a means of change without the hereditary transmission of experiences. It presented species evolving by random variations and the selective pressures of environments. Organisms developed not through some inner teleology but through the external conditions that killed off all except a privileged line of variants. August Weismann reinforced this view in the 1880s, concluding after several experiments that acquired characteristics were not transmitted in the germ plasm. However, Peter Bowler has highlighted the persistence of Lamarckism as a complement or alternative to natu-

---

[3] George Drysdale, *The Elements of Social Science*, 3rd edn (London: Truelove, 1886), p. 73; Sally Shuttleworth, 'Evolutionary Psychology and *The Way of All Flesh*', in *Samuel Butler, Victorian against the Grain: A Critical Overview*, ed. by James G. Paradis (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), pp. 143–69 (p. 157).

[4] Henry Maudsley, 'Heredity in Health and Disease', *Fortnightly Review*, May 1886, pp. 648–59 (pp. 651–52). On degeneration theory, see Daniel Pick, *Faces of Degeneration: A European Disorder, c. 1848–1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); and William Greenslade, *Degeneration, Culture and the Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

ral selection in *fin-de-siècle* biological debates.[5] The Darwinian model contradicted the intentionality that Butler would find in Lamarckism. Butler described the opposing Darwinian and Lamarckian views of inheritance as 'luck or cunning', with his support firmly behind the latter.[6] His choice of words reflected the transmission of personality in his interpretation of Lamarckian heredity. Organisms' perceptions and intentions drove their development through successive generations. Heredity was 'a mode of memory', and an organism's bodily form and behaviour expressed the collective 'cunning' of its ancestors (*Luck, or Cunning?*, p. 2).

Visions of ancestors persisting through their descendants dovetailed with notions in physics of the conservation of energy. By the mid-nineteenth century, researchers such as William Robert Grove and Hermann von Helmholtz had concluded that mechanics, heat, light, electricity, and magnetism were all convertible forms of a universal 'force'.[7] Organic memory seemed a logical extension of this persistence of force. As psychologists increasingly conceived mental states as material phenomena, they also imagined them converting into different forms, such as the germ plasm.[8] As Théodule-Armand Ribot wrote, 'heredity is but one form of that ultimate law which by physicists is called the conservation of energy.'[9] One of the first to make this argument was the German physiologist Ewald Hering in his 1870 lecture 'On Memory as a General Function of Organised Matter'. Each living body, he claimed, was a dense archive of its predecessors, storing their memories and repeating their actions.[10] In an English translation, which Butler reproduced in *Unconscious Memory* (1880), Hering stated that the imprint of an organism's habitual actions

[5] Peter J. Bowler, *Evolution: The History of an Idea*, 3rd edn (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), pp. 236–56.

[6] Samuel Butler, *Luck, or Cunning?* (London: Trübner, 1887).

[7] Crosbie Smith, *The Science of Energy: A Cultural History of Energy Physics in Victorian Britain* (London: Athlone Press, 1998), pp. 175–78.

[8] On the materialization of mind in psychology, see Rick Rylance, *Victorian Psychology and British Culture, 1850–1880* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 70–80. On the conservation of energy and hereditary memory, see Laura Otis, *Organic Memory: History and the Body in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1994), pp. 12–16.

[9] Théodule-Armand Ribot, *Heredity: A Psychological Study of its Phenomena, Laws, Causes, and Consequences* (London: King, 1875), p. 391, quoted in Otis, *Organic Memory*, p. 16.

[10] Ewald Hering, *Über das Gedächtnis als eine allgemeine Funktion der organisierten Materie* (Vienna: Akademische Verlagsgesellschaft, 1870).

upon 'the germ that lies within it [...] [which] develop[s] into a new creature [...] is as wonderful as when a grey-haired man remembers the events of his own childhood; but it is not more so'.[11] Children might be reimagined as passive containers of ancestral personalities, unconsciously mimicking their parents. Ribot wrote that 'heredity is that biological law by which all beings endowed with life tend to repeat themselves in their descendants: it is for the species what personal identity is for the individual' (p. 1). While the lives of individuals offered opportunities for new, character-forming experiences, these seemed dwarfed by the hereditary habits they were destined to echo.

Nineteenth-century discussions of the recording and reproduction of sound were also concerned with the persistence of past generations, specifically their voices. In 1837, the inventor Charles Babbage had argued that 'the pulsations of the air, once set in motion by the human voice, cease not to exist with the sounds to which they gave rise', but circulated through the molecules of the atmosphere without end. He claimed that, although beyond the range of human ears, 'the air itself is one vast library, on whose pages are for ever written all that man has ever said or woman whispered.'[12] Unlike disembodied writing, speech recording seemed to offer a corporeal link with one's ancestors. Technologies such as the kymograph and phonautograph captured the material phenomenon of speech, etching it as sound waves with a stylus. Such work prefigured Thomas Edison's phonograph, unveiled in 1877, which reproduced the sounds recorded, thus promising to immortalize the voice.[13] An enthusiastic editorial in *Scientific American* declared,

> whoever speaks into the mouthpiece of the phonograph [...] has the assurance that his speech may be reproduced audibly in his own tones long after he has turned to dust. [...] Our grandchildren or posterity centuries hence [will] hear us as plainly as if we were present.[14]

---

[11] Samuel Butler, *Unconscious Memory*, new edn (London: Fifield, 1910), p. 79.

[12] Charles Babbage, *The Ninth Bridgewater Treatise: A Fragment*, 2nd edn (London: Murray, 1838), pp. 108, 112.

[13] Jason David Hall, 'Materializing Meter: Physiology, Psychology, Prosody', *Victorian Poetry*, 49 (2011), 179–97; Lisa Gitelman, *Scripts, Grooves, and Writing Machines: Representing Technology in the Edison Era* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999).

[14] 'A Wonderful Invention', *Scientific American*, 37 (1877), p. 304.

Edison similarly saw his invention as a means for the dead to bequeath their wisdom to future generations. The following year he wrote: 'For the purpose of preserving the sayings, the voices, and *the last words* of the dying member of the family — as of great men — the phonograph will unquestionably outrank the photograph.'[15] The authority of the older generations over the younger is built into Edison's vision, since the transmission will be entirely one-way. The young must passively listen to and, by implication, obey the voices of their elders in perpetuity. Recorded speech seemed to give more power to such discourse than writing, mimicking the fleshy embodiment of the speaker's voice 'in his own tones'.

These developments in voice recording coincided with emergent views of heredity as a form of inscription. Germ cells, Darwin suggested, were vast archives of ancestral variation, which stored more information than could be observed from the traits of any individual. He compared latent hereditary traits to 'characters [...] written on paper with invisible ink', resurfacing in later generations.[16] Lamarckian descriptions of hereditary memory revolved around the popular assumption that mental states were reducible to material vibrations. Hering claimed that heredity recorded and transmitted ancestral experiences via these vibrations. To remember something, he wrote, was 'to reproduce whole series of vibrations' in the brain and nervous system, which resonated through 'the molecular disposition of the germ' of inheritance (Butler, *Unconscious Memory*, pp. 74, 78). The German biologist Ernst Haeckel similarly described heredity as a '*Wellenbewegung*' (wave motion) that rippled through generations.[17] Heredity seemed to record past vibrations as the phonograph did waves of vocal sound. Three decades later, after the commercial distribution of the phonograph and the gramophone, the writer Forbes

---

[15] Thomas A. Edison, 'The Phonograph and its Future', *North American Review*, May–June 1878, pp. 527–36 (pp. 533–34, emphasis in original). On the Victorian association of sound waves with ghosts, see Steven Connor, *Dumbstruck: A Cultural History of Ventriloquism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 362–93.

[16] Charles Darwin, *The Variation of Animals and Plants under Domestication*, 2 vols (London: Murray, 1868), II, 61; Otis, *Organic Memory*, p. 44.

[17] Ernst Haeckel, *Die Perigenesis der Plastidule oder die Wellenzeugung der Lebenstheilchen* [*The Perigenesis of Particulate Units or the Wave-Generation of Vital Particles*] (Berlin: Reimer, 1876), p. 61. Edwin Ray Lankester summarized Haeckel's argument for English readers in 'Perigenesis v. Pangenesis — Haeckel's New Theory of Heredity', *Nature*, 14 (1876), 235–38.

Phillips used these technologies as metaphors for inherited memory. Commenting on experiences of déjà vu, he wondered whether

> these flashes of reminiscence are the sudden awakening, the calling into action of something we have in our blood; the discs, the records of an ancestor's past life, which require but the essential adjustment and conditions to give up their secrets? [...] Whether we believe in apparitions or not, this world is a haunted one. Our thought-world is full of deep undertones that roll in upon us from the past. As we lay our ear to the din of the present, we find its accompaniment to be the immeasurable murmur of the ages, as the voice of many waters. The commonplace expressions, the ordinary words we use, are blocks of mind-stuff, wrought into their present state by the ponderous mace of time, and cast and recast in many brains [...]. Far-away generations of ancestors have cut deep the channels of our memories until what was once a volition is now an involuntary movement [...]. As I walk along a dark lonely road, my ears are on the alert, I glance to right and left, I look over my shoulder. Where did I learn this habit? May it not be the memory-disc giving off its record? My savage ancestor learned by long years of experience to be specially on his guard in a lonely place, and in the dark.[18]

Phillips's imagery presents the individual human as an organic gramophone, its many ancestral discs jolted into action by different stimuli. What seemed acts of personal volition might be merely the changing of ancestral records.

More generally, Lamarckian heredity shaped views of speech as a kind of biological inheritance. Lacking clear-cut divisions between nature and culture, some linguists viewed language as a form of racial memory. This idea reflected the nationalist origins of historical philology, which presented each language as the heritage of a mythical folk.[19] Languages could be imagined as interlocking with the mental and emotional tendencies of their ancestral creators. Hering commented:

> The most sublime ideas, though never so immortalised in speech or letters, are yet nothing for heads that are out of

[18] Forbes Phillips, 'Ancestral Memory: A Suggestion', *Nineteenth Century*, June 1906, pp. 977–83 (pp. 980–81); Otis, *Organic Memory*, p. 10.

[19] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, 2nd edn (London: Verso, 2006), pp. 67–86.

> harmony with them; they must be not only heard, but reproduced; and both speech and writing would be in vain were there not an inheritance of inward and outward brain development. (Butler, *Unconscious Memory*, pp. 85–86)

Yet languages could also conceal and forge ancestry, spreading across populations through war, trade, and migration. The historian Edward Freeman mourned the Norman infusion of Latinate vocabulary for alienating the English from their Anglo-Saxon ancestors.[20] Further, philologists found ancient words evolving radically different sounds and meanings over time through processes of 'growth' and 'decay' that occurred independently of speakers' intentions.[21] Speech might signal both union with one's ancestors and estrangement from them.

Samuel Butler was not only an observer of these intellectual currents but an active contributor to them, publishing four books on evolution, and publically feuding with Darwin. His belief that ancestral 'voices' persisted through heredity was inflected by his complex relations with his relatives, and his efforts to escape their influence. Butler's Lamarckian perspective on evolution caused him to imagine children inheriting the habitual thought and speech patterns of their parents. Nature and nurture seemed to conspire to render children as passive phonographs, echoing their elders. However, Butler seized upon three potential points of resistance. Firstly, the fresh experiences of each individual offered to shape new thought and discourse. Secondly, he conceived of inheritance not as a single, dictating voice but as a babble of ancestral tendencies all competing to be heard. The diversity of past 'voices' (inherited through both biology and society) offered sources of rebellion as well as conformity. Thirdly, Butler imagined writing as enabling greater divergence from past discourse than speech, which remained mixed up with the body and inherited impulses.

In some ways, Butler's life might be summarized as a series of rebellions. He was born into a middle-class Nottinghamshire family headed by the Reverend Thomas Butler, who, according to Samuel, regularly beat and bullied his children. The son recalled in later life,

---

[20] Edward A. Freeman, *The History of the Norman Conquest of England*, 6 vols (Oxford: Clarendon, 1867–79), v: *The Effects of the Norman Conquest* (1876), 563, 568.

[21] Geoffrey Sampson, *Schools of Linguistics* (Stanford: Stanford University Press), pp. 16–21.

> from my earliest recollections I can call to mind no time when I did not fear him and dislike him [...]. I have never passed a day without thinking of him many times over as the man who was sure to be against me.[22]

Thomas's alleged efforts to force his son to take holy orders replicated the actions of his own father, the bishop also named Samuel Butler. Samuel Butler junior diverged from the ancestral path, however, emigrating to New Zealand to work as a sheep farmer before pursuing a precarious writing career back in England. Butler also avoided the ancestral pattern of marriage and parenting, remaining a bachelor to his death. His rejection of his father's example coincided with him embracing biblical criticism and, later, theories of evolution. He subsequently opposed emerging orthodoxies of evolution, questioning the primacy of natural selection, and Darwin's contribution to the theory. Beginning with his book *Life and Habit* (1878), Butler propounded a Lamarckian view, involving the hereditary transmission of 'memory' and 'personality'.[23] He wrote that 'offspring should, as a general rule, resemble its own most immediate progenitors; that is to say, that it should remember best what it has been doing most recently'.[24] These ideas led him to accuse Darwin of neglecting to acknowledge his predecessors, and of failing to understand his own theory. David Amigoni argues that Butler's feud with Darwin demonstrates Butler's belief that evolution complicated authorial intention and intellectual property as much as it did the boundaries of species.[25] These ideas shape *The Way of All Flesh*, which follows several generations of the Pontifex family, ending with the black sheep and apostate Ernest. Much of the narrative concerns Ernest's efforts to escape his parents' influence, often

---

[22] *The Note-Books of Samuel Butler*, Volume 1, 1874–1883, ed. by Hans-Peter Breuer, (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1984), p. 231. For a critical view that questions some of Butler's claims about his father's cruelty, see R. S. Garnett's *Samuel Butler and his Family Relations* (London: Dent, 1926).

[23] Philip J. Pauly, 'Samuel Butler and his Darwinian Critics', *Victorian Studies*, 25 (1982), 161–80; and Hans-Peter Breuer, 'Samuel Butler's "The Book of the Machines" and the Argument from Design', *Modern Philology*, 72 (1975), 365–83.

[24] Samuel Butler, *Life and Habit* (London: Trübner, 1878), p. 168.

[25] David Amigoni, '"The written symbol extends infinitely": Samuel Butler and the Writing of Evolutionary Theory', in *Samuel Butler*, ed. by Paradis, pp. 91–112.

manifested in their voices or discourse.[26] Let us first consider, then, how Butler came to identify voice recording and reproduction with heredity.

It is curious to note that Butler's friend Henry Festing Jones was drawn to images of voice reproduction when publishing Butler's *Note-Books* in 1912. Jones wrote: 'Here will be found much of what he used to say as he talked [...] and I would it were possible to charge these pages with some echo of his voice and with some reflection of his manner.'[27] While Jones was unable to echo Butler's physical voice, he did echo a recurring image from his friend's discourse. In an 1889 essay on the ancient chapels of Oropa, Butler mused on the inaccessibility of the oral past. Considering the speech that might have filled the chapel, he wrote: 'Why, alas! was not Mr Edison alive when this chapel was made? We might then have had a daily phonographic recital of the conversation.'[28] He reached for the image of Edison's invention again in an 1895 lecture, exhorting his listeners to imagine a group of singers

> phonographed [...] so that their minutest shades of intonation are preserved, [...] and then let the scene be called suddenly into sight and sound, say a hundred years hence. Are those people dead or alive? Dead to themselves they are, but while they live so powerfully and so livingly in us, which is the greater paradox — to say that they are alive or that they are dead? [...] Granted that they do not present all the phenomena of life — who ever does so even when he is held to be alive? [...] Our living personality is, as the word implies, only our mask.[29]

Butler inverts popular views of the phonograph as an uncanny illusion: the deeper illusion is that of discrete individuals existing apart from the influence of others. The 'phenomena' of life — such as speech — exist not *in* individuals but *between* them. To transfer ideas from one mind to another is also to transfer personality. Butler conceives of thought and

[26] On the interactions between Butler's family history and the Pontifexes, see Max Saunders, *Self-Impression: Life-Writing, Autobiografiction, and the Forms of Modern Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 25–35.

[27] *The Note-Books of Samuel Butler*, ed. by Henry Festing Jones (New York: Dutton, 1917), p. xiii.

[28] Samuel Butler, 'A Medieval Girl School', *Universal Review*, December 1889, pp. 551–73 (p. 559).

[29] Samuel Butler, 'How to Make the Best of Life', in *Essays on Life, Art and Science*, ed. by R. A. Streatfeild (London: Fifield, 1908), pp. 69–86 (p. 73).

identity as not individual possessions but networks of exchange.[30] The phonograph might be said to parody the derivative, mimetic nature of human identity. To object that a machine does not think or speak for itself implies the naive assumption that humans do. Butler had earlier toyed with the idea that humans were merely the means for the evolution of machinery.[31] Actions which appeared to be driven by personal agency, might, on the macro scale, look as automatic as the cell division of an embryo. From this perspective, a phonographic record is, perhaps, no more mechanical or illusory than flesh-and-blood humans who constantly echo each other's words.

This view of humans as imitative machines was by no means far-fetched in the context of contemporary speculation by psychologists on the evolution of consciousness and social behaviour. Philosophers such as Herbert Spencer and G. H. Lewes, whom Butler read closely, had examined language and thought as communal practices of a 'social organism'. Lewes wrote: 'Our opinions are made up of shadowy associations, imperfect memories, echoes of other men's voices, mingling with the reactions of our own sensibility.'[32] James Sully, whom Butler cited in *Unconscious Memory*, noted that children developed speech and identity through 'the mimetic impulse', which continued to influence them more subtly in adulthood.[33] Such views of humanity as essentially imitative are discernible in Butler's literary criticism. In 1890, he wrote of Aeschylus:

---

[30] Laura Otis similarly argues, regarding telegraphy in the period, that 'electronic messages challenged the traditional notion of a bounded, delimited individual. As part of a network, one is defined through one's connections to others.' See Otis, *Networking: Communicating with Bodies and Machines in the Nineteenth Century* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001), p. 10.

[31] 'Darwin Among the Machines', in *Note-Books*, ed. by Jones, pp. 42–47.

[32] Herbert Spencer, 'The Social Organism', *Westminster Review*, January 1860, pp. 90–121; George Henry Lewes, *Problems of Life and Mind: Problem the First: The Study of Psychology*, 3rd series (London: Trübner, 1879), pp. 80, 167. Butler cites Lewes multiple times in *Evolution, Old and New* (London: Hardwicke and Bogue, 1879), pp. 25–26, 346, 350, 368.

[33] James Sully, *The Human Mind: A Text-Book of Psychology*, 2 vols (New York: Appleton, 1892), II, 220, quoted in Butler, *Unconscious Memory*, p. 87. On scientific investigations into mimicry in the period, see Tiffany Watt-Smith, 'The Sciences of Mind', in *Late Victorian into Modern, 1880–1920*, ed. by Laura Marcus, Michèle Mendelssohn, and Kirsten Shepherd-Barr (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming 2014).

> [His] voice is the echo of a drone, drone-begotten and drone-sustained [...]. Likely enough half the allusions and hard passages in Aeschylus of which we can make neither head nor tail are in reality only puffs of some of the literary leaders of his time.[34]

This is to be expected, Butler states, since 'there are true immortals, but they are few and far between; most classics are as great impostors dead as they were when living' (p. 518). Butler leant upon this idea of literary immortality (however rare) as a consolation for his lack of authorial success, imagining his writing reaching more receptive, future ears. Depicting public discourse as a deafening echo chamber, he wrote:

> I should not advise any one with ordinary independence of mind to attempt the public ear unless he is confident that he can out-lung and out-last his own generation [...]. True, he may die before he has out-screamed his opponents [...]. If his scream was well pitched it will sound clearer when he is dead [...]. The truest life is that which we live not in ourselves but vicariously in others. ('Ramblings', pp. 519–20)

Butler imagines thought as a form of vital energy, exchanged between people through conversion into language. The persistence of one's words on future lips equates to the persistence of one's mind beyond bodily death.

Butler's monistic view of mind and universe led him to blur the social inheritance of language with biology, presenting both as records of ancestral speech. In 1878, the year after Edison unveiled his invention, Butler's *Life and Habit* described hereditary memory in terms uncannily similar to the mechanisms of the phonograph. When 'we have hit upon some new idea' and vary our behaviour, he wrote, 'if we try to repeat it, we often find the residuum of our old memories pulling us so strongly into our old groove, that we have the greatest difficulty in repeating our performance in the new manner'. Butler notes the involuntary recall of old poems and songs to a man's lips, triggered by association, so that 'the ode seems more like something born with him' (*Life and Habit*, pp. 158–61). The body resembles a mass of phonographic coils, jolted into action by different triggers. The parallel with sound reproduction is even more striking in Butler's translation of Hering's arguments, which states that

[34] Samuel Butler, 'Ramblings in Cheapside', *Universal Review*, December 1890, pp. 513–23 (p. 520).

ideas buried in the body 'do not exist continuously as ideas; what is continuous is the special disposition of nerve substance in virtue of which this substance gives out to-day the same sound which it gave yesterday if it is rightly struck' (*Unconscious Memory*, p. 71). Indeed, Butler seems to have conceptualized heredity as the recording and reproduction of ancestral speech even earlier. Writing notes in 1874 for what would become *Life and Habit*, he commented:

> [The individual's] past selves are living in him at this moment with the accumulated life of centuries. 'Do this, this, this, which we too have done, and found our profit in it', cry the souls of his forefathers within him [...]. 'Withhold', cry some. 'Go on boldly', cry others. 'Me, me, me, revert hitherward, my descendant', shouts one as it were from some high vantage-ground over the heads of the clamorous multitude. 'Nay, but me, me, me', echoes another; and our former selves fight within us and wrangle for our possession.[35]

Butler was not only speaking metaphorically with this image, as he later confirmed when he described organic memory as 'periodical rhythms'. These molecular rhythms, he claimed, passed from parents to children and shaped 'the physical and psychical development of the individual in a course as nearly like that of the parents as changed surroundings will allow' (*Note-Books*, ed. by Jones, pp. 70–71). Ancestral speech persisted through both the social inheritance of language and the biological inheritance of urges and ideas, which words named. Butler argued that many words were understood instinctively rather than conventionally. 'We know too well what thought is', he stated,

> to be able to know that we know it, and I am persuaded there is no one in this room but understands what is meant by thought and thinking [...]. Whoever does not know this without words will not learn it for all the words and definitions that are laid before him.[36]

Our speech not only echoes the voices of our predecessors, but revives them, revealing the mental processes behind our words as their mental processes.

---

[35] *Unconscious Memory*, p. 18. The full passage is in *Life and Habit*, p. 52.

[36] 'Thought and Language', in *Essays on Life, Art and Science*, ed. by Streatfeild, pp. 176–233 (p. 179).

Butler worked on *The Way of All Flesh* between 1873 and 1884, but delayed publishing it until after his death due to its parallels with his family history. The novel enacts his theory through characters echoing and reproducing behaviour, both as individuals and hereditary chains. The tale's narrator Overton repeatedly describes people, including himself, as moving along predefined 'grooves', like a phonograph's stylus. Directed by acquired and hereditary habit, no one's words or actions in the novel seem ever wholly their own. After years of engagement, the young clergyman Theobald Pontifex 'had got into a groove, and the prospect of change [marriage] was disconcerting'. Similarly, after Theobald's son Ernest graduates, 'so deep was the groove' he has fallen into that 'he spent several hours a day in continuing his classical and mathematical studies as though he had not yet taken his degree'.[37] Simultaneously, Ernest retreads an ancestral groove, preparing to take holy orders like his father. These habitual grooves extend into characters' speech patterns. Theobald's repressed clerical existence turns him into a repository of clichés, which he repeats automatically. He determines to buy a watch 'answering every purpose', causing Overton to comment: 'Theobald spoke as if watches had half-a-dozen purposes besides time-keeping, but he could hardly open his mouth without using one or other of his tags, and "answering every purpose" was one of them' (p. 180). Similarly, after Ernest goes to Cambridge,

> Theobald said he was 'willing to hope' — this was one of his tags — that his son would turn over a new leaf now that he had left school, and for his own part he was 'only too ready' — this was another tag — to let bygones be bygones. (p. 199)

The strong hold of convention over his personality causes him to echo the majority. Overton states: 'The reader, if he has passed middle life and has a clerical connection, will probably remember scores and scores of rectors and rectors' wives who differed in no material respect from Theobald and Christina' (p. 73). Verbal conventions structure social norms, legitimizing brutal actions such as the beating of children for minor faux pas. Overton charts Theobald's thought process as a young father, which is shaped by the axioms of a 'long course of Puritanism': 'The first signs of self-will must be carefully looked for, and plucked up by the roots at once before they had time to grow' (p. 89). Theobald literally beats his son's speech

[37] Samuel Butler, *The Way of All Flesh*, 2nd edn (London: Fifield, 1908), pp. 56, 93, 207.

into the standardized shape, interpreting the infant's mispronunciation as stubborn self-will. 'Don't you think it would be very nice', he tells Ernest, 'if you were to say "come" like other people, instead of "tum"?' before hitting him when he continues to blur his phonemes (p. 96). Speech becomes a means for Theobald to replicate himself through his son, turning Ernest into a living phonograph.

The novel's long diachronic sweep enables it to depict this echoing of speech, gestures, and expressions through successive generations. In a postnuptial tiff with his wife, the smile of the young Theobald 'was succeeded by a scowl which that old Turk, his father, might have envied' (p. 58). He vents his frustration by stamping on the floor of their carriage; later in the narrative, his father angrily 'stamped as Theobald had done' (p. 75). This propensity of children to echo their parents inflects Ernest's struggle to escape Theobald's influence. As a child, Ernest often hides from his father's voice resounding from another room. Returning home after secretly helping the disgraced ex-servant Ellen, he sneaks inside to the sound of Theobald's 'angriest tones'. These make him feel like Jack 'when from the oven in which he was hidden he heard the ogre ask his wife what young children she had got for his supper'. Anxious that his actions will be discovered, Ernest 'next day and for many days afterwards [...] trembled each time he heard his father's voice calling for him' (p. 172). The image of the child-eating giant (often identified by psychoanalytic critics as an Oedipal projection) reflects the danger which Theobald's voice poses to Ernest's sense of self, threatening to consume and absorb him.[38] Biology seems to equate almost to destiny, with Overton commenting that Theobald and Christina would have to be born again 'of a different line of ancestry for many generations' to transcend their mental rigidity (p. 280). Similarly, written language, although detached from heredity, can seem equally phonographic as writers echo clichéd convention. Theobald's father George, the maverick who abandoned his rural origins and dialect to become an urban businessman, only does so to echo new, adopted predecessors. When Overton peruses his old diary of a European tour, it reads like an assortment of quotations from fashionable writers. Overton comments:

> I felt as I read it that the author before starting had made up his mind to admire only what he thought it would be credita-

[38] On Freudian readings of Jack and the Beanstalk, see Alan Dundes, 'Projection in Folklore: A Plea for Psychoanalytic Semiotics', *MLN*, 91 (1976), 1500–33 (pp. 1510–11).

> ble in him to admire, to look at nature and art only through the spectacles that had been handed down to him by generation after generation of prigs and impostors. (p. 14)

George's contrived effusions at Mont Blanc rely heavily on John Trumbull's 'The Prophecy of Balaam' (1773), as he recalls experiencing '"at distance dimly seen" [...] this sublime spectacle'.[39] The passage satirizes the pose of the Romantic poet, supposedly escaping social convention to experience a highly personal encounter with wild nature. Yet, like Oscar Wilde's stars in the sky, the landscape seems to serve only to 'illustrate quotations from the poets'.[40] Two generations later, convention stifles the verbal facility of Ernest's sister Charlotte. She absorbs the vocabulary of Christian respectability without interrogating its meanings. Overton notes that, like her father, 'she has fallen under the dominion of the words "hope," "think," "feel," "try," "bright," and "little," and can hardly write a page without introducing all these words and some of them more than once' (p. 415). Ernest is trained to behave the same so that, as a schoolboy, he, 'caught up, parrot-like, whatever jargon he heard from his elders, which he thought was the correct thing, and aired it in season and out of season, as though it were his own' (p. 150). How, then, might children escape the voices and discourse of their parents, both biological and intellectual?

A possible answer lay in the same technology that seemed to guarantee the persistence of ancestral speech. Replaying early phonograph recordings notoriously warped them out of shape, rendering speech unintelligible (Gitelman, p. 32). To reproduce speech was also to change it, the same as the sounds and meanings of words altered through generations of use. Butler imagined heredity operating similarly. Organic memory was imperfect, he claimed, because its waves were constantly 'interfered with' by other vibrations:

> On any repetition, [...] the circumstances, external or internal, or both, never are absolutely identical; there is some slight variation in each individual case, and some part of this variation is remembered [...]. The fact, therefore, that on each

---

[39] 'The Prophecy of Balaam', in *The Poetical Works of John Trumbull*, 2 vols (Hartford: Goodrich, 1820), II, 141–46.

[40] Oscar Wilde, 'The Decay of Lying: A Dialogue', *Nineteenth Century*, January 1889, pp. 35–56 (p. 56). On Victorian anxieties of influence, see Robert Douglas-Fairhurst, *Victorian Afterlives: The Shaping of Influence in Nineteenth-Century Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

> repetition of the action there is one memory more than on the last but one, and that this memory is slightly different from its predecessor, is seen to be an inherent and, *ex hypothesi*, necessarily disturbing factor in all habitual action [...]. The memory does not complete a true circle, but is, as it were, a spiral slightly divergent therefrom. (*Unconscious Memory*, p. 167)

Butler's vision, written after the unveiling of Edison's invention, evokes the spiral grooves of the phonograph as well as its distortive tendency. Distortions could be minor or radical depending on the environmental stimuli at work upon the individual. In *The Way of All Flesh*, Overton expresses the potential of experience to free individuals from hereditary grooves through the concept of 'crossing'. Explaining his avoidance of distressing people and situations, he states that 'whatever a man comes in contact with in any way forms a cross with him which will leave him better or worse, and the better things he is crossed with the more likely he is to live long and happily' (p. 101). Later, after a spell in prison has rendered the apostate Ernest physically and mentally ill, a doctor advises Overton to

> cross him [...]. Crossing is the great medical discovery of the age. Shake him out of himself by shaking something else into him [...]. Seeing is a mode of touching, touching is a mode of feeding, feeding is a mode of assimilation, assimilation is a mode of recreation and reproduction. (pp. 359–60)

New life might occur through not only procreation but also the experience of new sensations, suggestions, and environments that remake the individual. Eschewing his parents in adulthood, Ernest finds an adoptive father in the more sympathetic Overton. Conversely, Ernest pays a working-class family to adopt his children, so as to avoid bullying and tyrannizing over them as Theobald did him. In new environments and relationships, perhaps, we might become new people.

Nothing accelerated this process of organic rewriting, in Butler's view, more strongly than language. Each generation modified the words it inherited to describe its experiences, flushing them with new meanings. Lewes had written that each man 'appropriate[d]' the words of his predecessors, 'but he does not simply echo their words, he rethinks them [...]. He cannot think their thoughts so long as his experiences refuse to be condensed in their symbols' (Lewes, p. 160). Butler similarly lectured:

> The thought is not steadily and coherently governed by and moulded in words, nor does it steadily govern them. Words and thought interact upon and help one another, as any other mechanical appliances interact on and help the invention that first hit upon them. ('Thought and Language', pp. 225–26)

Written language, with its material permanence, highlighted the changeability of words' meanings, in contrast to the continuity of hereditary voice forms. In acrimonious letters to his father, Butler often echoed the latter's words, altering their meanings. After losing money through bad investments, he quoted his father: '"Pray let no false shame hinder you from making a clean breast of it". I have done nothing which I am ashamed of and have nothing to make a clean breast of.'[41] Butler also reworked his parents' words by placing them verbatim in the mouths of Ernest's parents. The wisdom which Butler's parents imagined themselves sharing is transformed into empty cliché, such as his father's phrase 'making a clean breast of it' (*Way of All Flesh*, p. 276). Butler's novel also appropriated a letter, which his pregnant mother had written to her children in case she died in labour. Christina's letter to the Pontifex children is almost identical (*Family Letters*, p. 29). Both assume that the meanings of their words will remain fixed through time, exhorting 'try to remember, and from time to time read over again the last words [of your mother]' (*Way of All Flesh*, p. 105). The message which Butler's mother imagined echoing the same truths down the ages becomes, in her son's hands, an indictment of pious delusion. Her belief that 'your father' will suffer immense 'sorrow' at her death is contradicted by Theobald's earlier hesitation about marrying her and his later 'want of emotion' when she dies (p. 394). According to Butler's friend Jones, Theobald's verbal tag repeated endlessly at Christina's deathbed ('I could not wish it prolonged') was taken from Butler's own father in the same situation.[42] The historical persistence of language produced an illusion of mental continuity. Although using the same words as their predecessors, moderns could charge them with radically new meanings, especially with the heightened consciousness of language enabled by writing.

This semantic plasticity of symbols aids Ernest's escape from his parents' influence. It is not by discarding his father's Bible that Ernest

---

[41] *The Family Letters of Samuel Butler: 1841–1886*, ed. by Arnold Silver (London: Cape, 1962), p. 146.

[42] Henry Festing Jones, *Samuel Butler, Author of Erewhon (1835–1902): A Memoir*, 2 vols (London: Macmillan, 1919), II, 4.

finally loses his faith but by rereading it and discovering its contradictions. 'He made the New Testament his chief study', states Overton, 'going through it [...] as one who wished neither to believe nor disbelieve, but cared only about finding out whether he ought to believe or no' (p. 284). Later, as a writer, Ernest argues 'that though it would be inconvenient to change the words of our prayer book and articles, it would not be inconvenient to change in a quiet way the meanings which we put upon those words' (p. 403). Words once interpreted as literal realities might instead be understood as metaphors for the limits of human knowledge. Evolutionary theory was effecting this change to the meanings of 'origin' and 'species', once imagined as definite and eternal.[43] The nexus of adaptation revealed no absolute genesis or categorical boundaries, turning these terms into hypothetical abstractions. Similarly, Ernest's reinterpretation of his father's biblical language shows that symbols can transcend the ideas they were forged to serve. Words, like Lamarck's organs, are modified by their use. Single generations can rewrite the meanings of words, as Overton remarks of the freethinking Ernest: 'His father and grandfather could probably no more understand his state of mind than they could understand Chinese' (p. 420). While empowering the present generation against their elders, though, Butler leaves the question of individual agency uncertain. As a writer challenging the institution of marriage, Ernest's voice seems all his own, declaring: 'There are a lot of things that want saying which no one dares to say [...]. It seems to me that I can say things which not another man in England except myself will venture to say.' He undermines his autonomy, however, with the further comment: 'I am bursting with these things, and it is my fate to say them' (pp. 396–97). Ernest's apparently independent discourse might form part of a larger development through previous generations.

Butler imagined heredity derailing parental instruction through its plurality. As his image of hundreds of shouting ancestors implied, heredity was not a single commanding voice but a cacophony of competing ones. Of inheritance, Darwin had written that 'each living creature must be looked at as a microcosm — a little universe, formed of a host of self-propagating organisms, inconceivably minute and as numerous as the stars in heaven' (*Variation of Animals and Plants*, II, 404). What seemed like a rebellion against heredity could be the return of a latent strain. When

[43] Gillian Beer, *Darwin's Plots: Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin, George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 3rd edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 49; Otis, *Organic Memory*, pp. 28–33.

Theobald forces his son into a church career, Ernest receives contrary orders from a hereditary 'voice', commanding:

> Obey me, your true self, and things will go tolerably well with you, but only listen to that outward and visible old husk of yours which is called your father, and I will rend you in pieces even unto the third and fourth generation as one who has hated God; for I, Ernest, am the God who made you. (pp. 132–33)

This voice causes Ernest to pursue his instinctive interests, such as music, diverting him from his education. As Overton remarks, while he struggled to remember the Classics, 'anyone played him a piece of music and told him where it came from, he never forgot that, though he made no effort to retain it' (p. 196). The instinctive signs of music derail his language education so that Theobald complains, 'why, when he was translating Livy the other day he slipped out Handel's name in mistake for Hannibal's' (p. 124). Butler suggests that Ernest's musical 'instinct' descends from his great-grandfather, who played the organ, and also emerges in his aunt Alethea. Upon discovering the fortune which Alethea has left to him, Ernest remarks: 'If I were rendering this moment in music [...] I should allow myself free use of the augmented sixth', before voicing 'a laugh that had something of a family likeness to his aunt's' (p. 373). Ernest's escape from the groove set by his father involves returning to an older hereditary one.

Butler further complicates parent–child rebellion by suggesting that the rebellious child reproduces impulses, now stifled, in the parent. Ernest's rebellion against Christianity repeats Theobald's failed attempts to escape a career in the church when he was young. In letters to George, Theobald requests not to be ordained, only for his father to coerce him with threats of cutting his allowance. Theobald's religious doubts are feebler than Ernest's partly because of the faith's stronger theoretical position in the early nineteenth century. Theobald writes to his father that, although 'I could subscribe cordially to every one of the thirty-nine articles' and William Paley's *Natural Theology* (1802) 'leaves no loop-hole for an opponent [...] I do not feel the inward call to be a minister of the gospel' (p. 33). As Overton recalls, in this time 'there was just a little scare about geology', but literal belief in the Genesis narrative remained strong (p. 52). Ernest's rebellion does not simply break with the language of his elders but revives a previously suppressed thread of it. His interpretation of scripture as metaphorical builds on earlier shifts in geology that un-

dermined biblical chronology. Individuals who seem like agents of change turn out to be units in larger, long-running processes. Ernest's experience germinates seeds of doubt already sown by conversations with a freethinking neighbour and reading the *Vestiges of Creation* (1844). This doubt is not simply a unitary, linear development, but one of many potentialities previously repressed. Overton comments how *Vestiges* had been 'forgotten before Ernest went up to Cambridge' (p. 208), yet its ideas would re-emerge, modified, in Darwin's work. Ernest's recovery of the book from the past counters the assumption of a Darwinian 'revolution' after 1859: ideas do not appear *ex nihilo* in a kind of pseudo-creation; all grow from previous forms. Similarly, Ernest's estrangement from his wife and writing of treatises against marriage echo Theobald's misgivings when he is pressured into marriage as a young man. He wishes desperately to annul the ceremony, but a 'voice' booms inside him, 'YOU CAN'T, CAN'T, CAN'T [...]. YOU ARE A MARRIED MAN'. Slumping back in his wedding carriage, Theobald 'for the first time felt how iniquitous were the marriage laws of England. But he would buy Milton's prose works and read his pamphlet on divorce' (p. 58). Theobald's reluctant submission to this voice of tradition prefigures his son's later rebellion against it. Not only nature and custom blur into each other in Butlerian evolution but also conformity and deviation.

Butler's sense that ancestral 'voices' haunted their descendants was countered by the notion that ancestral discourse could be appropriated and charged with new meanings. Equally, his belief that the dead lived on through their descendants existed in tension with his efforts to remake his ancestry in his own image. David Gillott has recently argued that Butler's compiling of his grandfather's *Life and Letters* served to lay the foundations of 'his own posthumous reputation'.[44] Butler literally rewrote some of his grandfather's papers, stating in his introduction, with a casualness that would horrify twenty-first-century archivists:

> Some of the drafts, again, I found so much cancelled and rewritten that I thought it better to copy the final state of the draft and destroy the original. I also destroyed, with the approval of the authorities of the British Museum [...] any letters the preservation of which might cause pain without

[44] David James Gillott, 'Authority, Authorship, and Lamarckian Self-Fashioning in the Works of Samuel Butler (1835–1902)' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of London, Birkbeck College, 2013), p. 174.

> serving any useful purpose, or again, which were deemed not worth the acceptance of the Museum.[45]

Butler would meticulously prepare his own notebooks and correspondence in the same way with indices and annotations to direct future biographers. Further, portraying his grandfather's biography as 'a prehistory' of his own, Butler foregrounded statements among the papers that seemed to neatly anticipate the grandson's philosophy (Gillott, p. 175). Butler senior's 'truest interests', his grandson insisted, lay 'in the avoidance of extreme opinions, however logical, and in greater adaptability to changing circumstances hereafterwords' (*Life and Letters*, II, 369). Thus Butler framed his grandfather as foreshadowing the grandson's Lamarckian view of evolution and preference for paradox over dogma. In this way, Butler presented his literary life as the expression of hereditary tendencies that a different environment had stifled in his grandfather. Butler claimed that his predecessor was forced into a 'scholastic' and 'clerical' career which 'shut the doors leading to many great fields of inquiry in his own face; and this done there must be little or no philosophy'. Ironically, Butler rounds off these claims in his conclusion with the hope that 'I should [not] father on Dr Butler opinions that were not his' (*Life and Letters*, II, 369–71). While the writings of the dead continued to influence their descendants, they could not control how their descendants edited and reinterpreted them.

Butler's reluctance to acknowledge this point is easy to understand, given his obsession with achieving posthumous immortality through his own writing. It would be demonstrated, though, by the reception of Butler's work after his death in 1902. While Edwardian radicals such as G. B. Shaw hailed the posthumously published *Way of All Flesh*, Butler's literary reputation rapidly declined after the First World War. Philip Cohen partly blames this decline on Jones's 1919 *Memoir* of Butler, which enabled reassessments of him as a cantankerous bigot.[46] Since the mid- to late twentieth century, the rise of concepts such as intertextuality and the 'Death of the Author' in literary criticism have sparked new interest in

[45] Samuel Butler, *The Life and Letters of Dr Samuel Butler,* 2 vols (London: Murray, 1896), I, p. vi.

[46] Philip Cohen, 'Stamped on his Works: The Decline of Samuel Butler's Literary Reputation', *Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association*, 18 (1985), 64–81.

Butler's work, which sometimes seems to prefigure these notions.[47] Yet Butler's faith in the endurance of an author's 'mind' through his or her work is fundamentally at odds with the contextuality of meaning that has underpinned the structuralist and post-structuralist turns. While he delighted in twisting the language of others into new meanings, Butler was reluctant to acknowledge the potential semantic instability of his own posthumous 'life' in print. Great authors, he maintained, lived on more fully in their works than they had done in their bodies. He wrote: 'We have them at their best. I cannot think that Shakespeare talked better than we hear him now in "Hamlet" or "Henry the Fourth"; like enough he would have been found a very disappointing person in a drawing-room' ('How to Make the Best of Life', p. 83). Butler's paradox might hint ironically at the mythic nature of literary immortality, which so often depends on lacking knowledge of the author behind the text. While the phonograph seemed to immortalize people by reproducing their voices, for Butler it also revealed their automatism, shaped by heredity and mental-linguistic convention. By abstracting discourse from its maker's body and immediate context, writing appeared to promise a measure of individuality, however imaginary.

[47] Ross Stewart, 'Samuel Butler: The First Post-Structuralist?', in *The British Critical Tradition: A Re-evaluation*, ed. by Gary Day (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993), pp. 38–48.