

On the Fundamental Experience of Voice in Language with some Notes on Heidegger



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I have taken up the experience of voice in this paper, and have attempted to examine the experience itself in its relation to language, using music as a paradigmatic example of the experience of voice. I have made some distinctions between listening and hearing, and have studied etymologically the original sense of these words with a view toward suggesting some possible correlations between music and language in a discussion of the phenomenology of voice.

I

It is a generally accepted linguistic distinction in English that allows us to speak of listening *adversus* hearing. Yet hearing, I believe, is a more intense experience than listening, contrary to the usual attributions recognized in the usage of the words 'hear' and 'listen'. In ordinary usage we would claim quite the opposite: that one may easily "just hear" articulate sounds, but that a greater effort is required to listen to speech or music.

The auditory sense is the first higher sense modality to develop in the or-

ganism. It is as primordial as the tactile and kinaesthetic modalities. It is also the case that one cannot as easily shut out sound as one may, for example, close his eyes to prevent access of fresh visual images or keep one's mouth closed and immobile to refuse access to the materials of gustatory sensation. We may admit that only the olfactory sense organs are as readily susceptible to impressions as the auditory sensory modality is, since the periodic inhalations and exhalations of normal breathing involuntarily bring new materials for this sensory modality to introduce into experience. Even when fully conscious, one may relax oneself to the extent that the integument and its tactile sensory modality become impervious to their own functions, given, of course, contrived and artificial conditions of a seriously restrained immediate physical environment.

The point here, however, is not to determine which of the senses (if any) is least easily cut off from the immediate physical world, but only to suggest the great vulnerability of the auditory

sphere and the implications of this fact for a phenomenology of voice. We may thus readily agree that the auditory sphere is most susceptible to stimulation. Foetal research adds the finding that the auditory sphere is the earliest to develop, along with the kinaesthetic sense of being moved. Moreover, it is seemingly the last to refuse its form of awareness to experience. The very ill and those who were anaesthetized report having heard the voices of people in their presence while they were otherwise unable to sense the environment. The sense of hearing seems to have primacy among the sensory modalities, comparable only to the sense of touch and being touched, and of being moved.

Though everyday usage suggests that to listen calls for hearing with greater effort, and dictionaries record that to listen means to make a conscious effort to hear, or to attend to closely, so as to better hear, and while we ordinarily understand the verb 'to hear' as denoting the simpler act of becoming aware of sounds to which we then may not necessarily attend very closely, it is interesting to note that the Indo-European root of 'hear' is *qeu-* (to pay attention to, watch, or observe), but the Indo-European root for 'listen' is *kleu-* (to hear). This is an important historical note, since it demonstrates an opposition to the evidence of everyday usage, and because it is the greater effort of hearing, in its original sense of *qeu-*, that will concern us here. It is the vulnerability of hearkening (also from *qeu-*) that I would suggest is the primordial "sense" of the world that we have, as we have seen that it is also the first in order of the body's senses to develop. It is hearkening, as the basic sense of receptivity in the world, that I will explore in what follows.

Clearly, I do not wish to propose a sixth sense, nor do I intend to study

the physiology of hearing. I do suggest, however, that our receptivity to voice grounds the experience of hearkening, listening, and hearing, and that this receptivity is philosophically important for a phenomenology of voice.

II

To say that one is always hearkening to what surrounds one is to suggest, for one thing, that one is fundamentally sensitive and attuned to the world as a world which is, in a primary way, heard. Only next in the order of experience as we reflect on it from this perspective may we distinguish listening: actively discriminating kinds of sounds according to the patterns of one's experience in general, which seem to be organized primarily from the perspective of the visual modality. At this stage, one may, for example, listen for signs of one's location, accomplished in co-operation with the visual interpretation of the world afforded by the visual sense. Finally, at a further stage, we may say that in an effort to become no longer explicitly aware of the world as a world that is heard, one may simply hear the sounds of whatever happens to be going on, and with effort ignore the dissonance and hear nothing distinctly. It is in this sense that I will use the word 'hear' in this paper.

I am interested, then, in the primacy of hearkening, the initial receptivity to the acoustic world, before the other senses intervene and cause one to listen for something, or later perhaps cause one to ignore what could be easily discriminated or discriminated only with difficulty, as in the example given above, when one might abandon the stage of 'mere hearing' and return to listening to what one has previously ignored.

To summarize the distinctions just made, I would say that we can detect

three moments of auditory experience: hearkening, listening, and hearing. (a) Hearkening is primordial, antedating visual and other sensory experience. It remains operative throughout all later transformations of auditory experience of the world as an acoustic world. (b) Listening, next, is the function of auditory experience which supports language. It is always also preoccupied with the world as a visual world. (c) Finally, one may merely hear, by ignoring what one has been listening to, and in that state of effortful non-listening, recede past and behind listening to a flattened awareness of the acoustic world. This state in no way resembles that disposition I have called hearkening, and it is also difficult to accomplish.

III

I believe that hearkening, as described above, is what Heidegger points to in his play on the words *hören* and *gehören*, where to hear the poetic word is to belong to the world in a fundamental and unique way, in an experience of language which reveals its thinking and poetizing compass.

It would seem that our metaphors for life are often acoustic, and embedded as they are in language, the unique province of *homo audiens*.

The Greek *akouazoumai*, to hearken to, also means to be called to. *Akouein* is 'to hear'. These verbs are formed from the 'a'-privative (a-) and the even more fundamental Indo-European root (s)keu- (= (s)geu), which means to cover or hide. A-(s)-keu-yo (= *akouein*) means to hear or hearken to, sc. to *that which is uncovered or unhidden*. From this Greek verb comes the English word 'acoustic'.

The relationship to what Heidegger's meditations on *alētheia* reveal is striking. What is unforgotten and un-

concealed in *alētheia* may have a deeper sense of being uncovered or unhidden in the hearkening of *akouēia*. Especially given Heidegger's suggestive references to *hören* and *gehören*, once again, such an acoustic sense of unhiddenness, and its necessary by-play with silence (comparable to the concealing moment of *alētheia*), when we extend our grasp of the matter to the word and language, may emerge as even more primordial than the presence-by-absence or 'pres-ab-sence' (Sheehan) of *alētheia*. Consider also (1) the acoustic sense of attunement (*Stimmung*) in Heidegger's thinking, (2) the *call* of Being, and even (3) the eminently silent ambience of *Gelassenheit*, as further instances in Heidegger's lexicon of an acoustic meaning of unconcealment, and as a possible further determination of the range of fundamental unhiddenness 'as *akouēia*, hearkening, which remains unspoken in his thinking.

Some further comments about the relationship between *alētheia* and *akouēia* seem in order before going on with a discussion of voice. It is in the nature of *alētheia* to unconceal one perspective by hiding itself as a whole and, hence, concealing other perspectives which have been or could be revealed. Similarly, what is unhidden by being brought to language (what is listened to) is possible only because the fundamental hearkening of *akouēia* is not heard, except in its continuing presence in language as the interrupted silence by means of which language occurs.

We may say that, in listening, the hearkening of *akouēia* is "overheard," superseded by speech and the effort required to listen to the word or its equivalents in the signs of written language.

Karl-Otto Apel reminds us that phenomenologies of the word — the word as listened to, the spoken word, and the written word — are quite dif-

ferent. I would add that there is also a phenomenology of the word as it is present in the dream, which would, it seems to me, provide some powerful clues for a phenomenology of the word as it occurs silently, as in deliberation or contemplation. Perhaps prayer could be included in this category. Here I am thinking of the language of subvocal speech, the spoken word recalled from dreams, the imaginatively reconstituted word, all of which are listened to. The consequence of this consideration for us is that phenomenologies of language must begin with an account of voice, as begun here, which serves as the basis for any listening.

From a Heideggerian perspective, that the ontological dimension of Dasein is finally grounded in Dasein's ontic givenness may suggest that the grounding of *alētheia* is to be found in *akouēia*, and that the hearkening discussed here is Dasein's access to the ontological difference, as the *preparatory* moment which has such unspoken prominence in *Being and Time*. *

IV

I have suggested in the title of this paper that the experience of voice is fundamental to a close examination

of language. I will now turn again to the unique sense of hearkening and the experience of voice. One may listen to the sentences of his interlocutor or follow the melodic lines of a musical composition, but while listening one may further experience voice in hearkening. The experience of such hearkening seems best exemplified by the performer's experience of music. The performer reads the score and in his interpretation of the composition heeds the tones he is producing in the way one heeds one's own voice.

The speaking voice of an interlocutor is listened to. (But it is in a very different sense of the word that I use the term 'voice' when discussing what one hearkens to.) Harkening to one's voice while speaking is quite different from listening to one's voice, say, as it is played through a recording medium. Yet hearkening to one's own voice is of the order of experience that I have been pointing to in what I have said about hearkening. The complications, perhaps even the impossibility, of hearkening to one's voice while speaking is to be found in the necessity of at the same time listening to it. I return, then, to the experience of music as the more available event.

* *Though I am not concerned with an interpretation of Heidegger at this time, I would offer the suggestion that hearkening, akouēia, is a dimension of Sorge, which I translate as heeding. By way of an aside, I propose that an interpretation of Heidegger must begin with a radical hermeneutic study of Being and Time and its especially problematic vocabulary (to say nothing of the issues with which Heidegger is concerned in that work). Such an enterprise would call for a much needed retranslation of the basic language of the text. It would have to justify rereadings of that work's fundamental terms, including the following: Sorge as heeding, Befindlichkeit as conditionality, Geworfenheit as abandonedness. These terms present fewer difficulties than do adequate renderings or Zeitlichkeit, Verfallenheit, Jemeinigkeit, etc. Finally, I would only add my belief that even before working at such translations, a true Heideggerian project would begin by first undertaking a close study of the English language of metaphysics.*

It is the performer's receptivity to the music which prepares him to also "listen in" on his own musical production. But this receptivity is also the necessary precondition for an auditor's listening and, as in the special case to be described shortly, to hearken to voice in music. It is on the attestation of this experience that the ideas developed in this paper depend. It is also true, of course, that in conversation one may be said to hearken to the voice of one's interlocutor as preparatory for a listening to what he says in his utterance. That is to say, one hearkens to the interlocutor's tone, his manner of speaking, the choice of language he has made (German, French, English, etc.), his accent or dialect, before one listens to the sentences he has uttered. In ordinary experience, it is difficult to separate these moments, and to discriminate the contributions of non-linguistic signs which such matters as tone, pace, and manner of speech provide for one's interpretation of what one has listened to. The initial hearkening, though, is a separate matter. It is like the experience one has as a performer of music in the act of making music, and like the special case of an auditor of this music (mentioned above) which will now be described.

What happens in this hearkening to voice? One lets himself become receptive to voice. The psychopathology of agnosis makes clear to us that this is not possible for some people, and thus serves as a negative characterization of what I will positively describe as hearkening. It may be added that the agnostic never reaches the point of listening to what we say to him, so it is not really a matter of his not listening to us; rather, he does not hearken to us at all, even though otological examination reveals that his ears are perfectly healthy.

Now it is certainly important who

our interlocutor is, in the case of hearkening to speech. But the importance of these intersubjective dimensions of the communication process belongs to our interpretation of the interlocutor's utterance (the dimension of listening and hermeneutics of the word), rather than to the initial hearkening to voice which allows us to listen to him. It is to avoid these problematic areas for the time being that I have chosen to concentrate on the same experience which occurs at special times when we listen to music. It is evident that I am referring to a special case when I describe the occurrence of hearkening while listening to music. That such an experience of hearkening has occurred in the moment preparatory to listening to music is, of course, also true, and it is exactly like the hearkening to voice which is preparatory to our listening to someone who speaks to us. The hearkening to voice while listening to music seems to this observer to be the most accessible and striking instance of the phenomenon, and has consequently been taken as the theme of my description.

V

We are overtaken by voice. It passes through us, just as the music performed passes through the performer in his execution of the score while sounding his instrument, and before his music may have been hearkened to and listened to by an auditor. Voice grasps one before one grasps what is performed or said.

What do we hearken to? In the case of music, Nietzsche has already identified it as "the spirit of music." For Heidegger, it was *the* voice of Being in the word of the poet, especially Hölderlin. I believe he might have characterized voice *per se* as *akouoia*, had he followed a path such as the one laid down earlier in this discussion of the

unconcealing or unhiding of *akoueia*. For Heidegger, there was no reply to that voice.

The preparatory moment of hearkening is active and receptive. Its activity then engages us to listen. How long the listening continues depends on other matters. *

It is important to stress that such hearkening is not a passivity to whatever might come one's way in the acoustic world, though it would follow from what was said in the first section of this paper that one must apparently learn how to listen. It is that moment of engagement that perseveres, but which in order to be captured for reflection requires certain music, certain words, when one no longer listens and for a time hearkens to voice, as that which supports music or discourse. It is that moment of engagement revisited which one recognizes as having been preparatory for any activity in a world thus revealed in *akoueia*, a world of discourse, praxis, and reflection.

'Voice', the word, derives from the Indo-European root *ueksu-*, to speak, and in its suffixed form, *uek-os-*, is the source of the Greek word 'epos'. Here Nietzsche's critical elucidation of the *epos* in Greek tragedy, in *The Birth of Tragedy* (e.g., sections 12, 24), is of special interest, since he suggests that with the introduction of spoken words into Greek artistic performance (interpolated into choric song), the voice or spirit (*Geist*) of music becomes already somewhat hidden. This seems to be, in Nietzsche, a not yet explicit understanding of *akoueia* as a relation to what is hidden and revealed, in this case, in art.

Such primary attunement to voice seems to draw us back to the spoken word. But the *vocalise* of the singer and the tones of homophonic melody seem to be even more closely related to the experience of hearkening we are examining. Yet neither can be said to take preference over the other when we consider the spoken word and musical tone side by side in this way.

* Interestingly, to one of Heidegger's students, Walter Strolz, one of his teacher's most outstanding personal characteristics (which he recalled to me in an interview in Freiburg, in 1976) was that Heidegger "listened [hearkened] with great intensity," in a way unforgettable because of the energy Heidegger seemed to have invested in the activity. Heidegger's dialogue with the Greeks would seem to be paradigmatic for an understanding of how hearkening underlies and continually accompanies a profound listening to what has been said by a thinker or poet. The meeting of ancient Greek and German in Heidegger's thinking was the condition for the possibility of the significant philosophische Denken which occurred through him. It follows that a genuine philosophical encounter between Heidegger and an English-speaking thinker would begin in and be sustained throughout by a similar confrontation between the two languages, and would entail an exhaustive philological search for those English words which contain the greatest interrogative problematics and power, those words which are most questionable philosophically (and, therefore, as Heidegger would say, most thought-provoking) and rich in association with other words (English and German), words whose etymologies reveal deep connections that are significant for the issues of Heidegger's thinking.

In either case, we are arrested by voice. It surprises us and we are brought to a momentary stop, drawn back by it as though we were being pulled back by something that resonates in our own individual 'voices'. Musicians have traditionally (since medieval times) referred to the multiple lines of melody in a composition as voices or voice-parts. In the singular, *vox* (*voce*, *voix* in its cognates) is described in medieval treatises on music (Aurelianus Reomensis, c. 810; Adhemar de Chavanne, c. 1034) as a designation for the broader sense of voice in music as 'sound' or tone color (*Klangfarbe*).

Voice overtakes us, and the response is often a curious mixture of seriousness and composure (*Gelassenheit*) about what more there is to know about it, regardless of whether the ensuing emotional reaction is on the order of cheerfulness and buoyancy, or sadness and melancholy. The initial moment of engagement (or disengagement, during the course of listening to music) initiates the listening experience. Also, we feel that what we hear (hearken to) is entirely new, "unheard of" before.

The Greek sense of voice, a voice of any kind, is expressed in the verb *aeidein*, from the Indo-European root *wed-*, to speak, from which root come the Greek words which translate into English as tragedy, melody, and ode, among others. This root (*wed-*) is further derived from the stem *au-*, an intensifier which suggests (1) distancing (hence, proclamations from afar; cf. 'ukase'), or (2) an increase or growth, often as into the future (e.g., in proph-

ecy, as found in the derivative word 'augur'), or (3) senses which combine both connotations. This extremely rich and overdetermined source for the already primordial sense of hearing voice (*wed-*) is again quite suggestive of the sense of *akouein* outlined earlier in this paper. *

VI

The grasp of hearkening is full-bodied. There is the impulse to "have it" again, and to search retrospectively for the point of contact with hearkening in what has been listened to. But it is not a repeatable contact, on call in the sense that, say, sexual excitement and consummation can be sought out again with the same partner to repeat the experience. Rather, the grasp of hearkening in its uniqueness is most decidedly surprising and arresting when it occurs.

The externality of voice is yet another of its characteristics as we experience it. Hegel's explicitation of the concept of "*Das Verhältniss der Kraft und ihrer Ausserung*" and the immediately related concept of the "*Verhältniss des Aussen und Innern*" (*Wissenschaft der Logik*, II, ii, 3 B/C) intimates a kinship between the concept of giving voice to something and its essential exteriority. If we may legitimately play on the terms of Hegel's discussion of these categories (as he often does in the *Logik*), it is possible to propose that what is given expression or voice is utterly other than what we understand well and share familiarity with. (This, of course, is not what Hegel says.) We are then led to the further suggestion

* *Highly sophisticated and exhaustive philological attestations would flesh out the outline presented here and are certainly in order, but I am not capable of providing these. Much of what has been presented draws heavily from Julius Pokorny's two-volume Indogermanisches Etymologisches Wörterbuch, Bern, 1959.*

that such voicing is uncanny, utterly *sui generis* at the very least, and perhaps the advent of something entirely new. (A transition to the later Heidegger on this point would be quite interesting.)

At certain moments in the experience of music (our "special case"), we are "taken up" by the sound as, in a quite different way, we might be taken up by a matter for thought or discussion.*

When a word was spoken for the first time in a language, we might conjecture, such an experience of hearkening occurred for both the speaker and his audience. It came to the speaker just as unexpectedly and without warning or precedent as it comes to the audience (the speaker's auditors or readers), as something new, provocative, and evocative. For a writer, the dimensions of speaker and auditor coincide, and so the writer provides an exceptional example of the experience of voice, when it occurs for him and he reflects on it. The appearance of the Latin root *vocare* in terms used to describe the effect of such words on an auditor (evocative, provocative) is notable.

The poet experiences something similar when he uses a word in an entirely new way, in an unexpected context, or with a deliberate intention to create something new for expression (as when he compounds words or constructs neologisms). Where do such words come from, particularly those words which are *new* in the context provided? They are new words for the language, even though they may have in standard-

ized forms been uttered countless times. The most familiar word, used poetically, is understandably, then, the most powerful word, transformed by the context provided by the poet, he knows not how.

The poet cannot tell us about the source of his utterance in this case (if at all, when he is asked to provide commentary for his poems). He cannot explain away his choice of *that* word at the time it occurred to him. Consequently, he has nothing to say about the meaning of his choice. He was committed to saying it, and that is all he has to say about it. There may be ways to decipher his choice; for example, in terms of his unconscious memories, or of his preconscious readiness to speak in certain ways. But his prosaic description in making associations to the word will not produce another new use of the word "on call," as it were. It will certainly not produce another poem.

VII

I have spoken here about the receptivity of hearkening, of a "first hearing" of voice, and about the necessity of this disposition in anyone who is not agnostic, and who thus has access to voice. What one hearkens to is not something inaudible to everyone else. It is not mystical experience. Nor is it voice for which one needs a "third ear" (Reik). It is not the voice of God (Deuteronomy 4:12). It may be that to recognize such hearkening requires practice. Or it may be, as suggested earlier, that hearkening is preparation. Perhaps Freud alluded to this difficulty of access to voice in everyday life (as compared to the experience of musicians,

* *This, for me, is the preparatory phase of which there is a decided sense throughout Heidegger's works. Heidegger prepares for the matter of thinking by availing himself of the grasp of thinking. I would propose that it is the experience of voice in akouēia which engages us in thinking, providing that we avail ourselves of its grasp.*

those who reflect about language, or poets) when he said that the voice of reason (the intellect) is a small one, not easily discerned. Metaphorically speaking, we may sometimes listen for a long while to what someone has said before we "hear" its message. But this is yet a different, though perhaps related, mode of listening.

Again, Heidegger's play on *hören* and *gehören* seems most instructive. That one must belong to what one hearkens to suggests the intimacy

which underlies the sense of "first hearing" (hearkening) presented here. I believe we may entertain once again the idea that the experience of hearkening which occurs sometimes while listening to music is exemplary of what always occurs to us as the precondition for listening to speech and, thus, for having language and participating in it. Hearkening in music is illustrative of that occasion of the belonging together of "first hearing" and voice which engages us to listen and to speak.

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