

Research Article

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The Poetics of Listening

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Abstract: Noting that one may hear without listening, the article probes the phenomenological and epistemic distinction between hearing and listening. To listen is to be attuned to voices muffled by silence or camouflaged by a defensive rhetoric resonant with a voice inflected by festering wounds, existential and political. In exploring how one is to listen to these voices of silence, I draw upon Martin Buber's concept of dialogical "inclusion" of others' stories, to listen without interpretation to allow the voice behind his – or her or their – story, be it merely etched viscerally in the language of silence, to dwell aside one's own story in a dialogue unencumbered by perceptions of the Other forged by cultural, social, political constructs, and perhaps most insidiously one's own defensive postures.

Keywords: *apodeixis*, *deixis*, dialogical listening and "inclusion," voices of silence, *wuwei* (Daoist concept of non-action), Isaac Babel, Roland Barthes, Martin Buber, John Cage, Stanley Cavell, Art Garfunkel, Alex Honneth, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

The Stranger at my fire side
 Cannot see what I see
 The forms I see, nor the sounds I hear
 "Haunted Houses." Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

The voices of silence are many, some melodic, others dissonant.¹ During my morning stroll through the streets of my Jerusalem neighborhood I pass dwellings one after the other that were formerly homes of Muslim and Christian Palestinians who in the wake of the intercommunal conflict that led to the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 fled, most often with the calculated "encouragement" of their Jewish neighbors. Their homes

¹ The title of this essay suggests that listening is a poetic act, what the celebrated Argentinian poet Jorge Luis Borges, recalling a *bon mot* of Ralph Waldo Emerson that "arguments convince nobody," Borges remarked that:

When something is merely said or – better still – hinted at, there is a kind of hospitality in our imagination. We are ready to accept it. I remember reading the works of Martin Buber – I thought of them as being wonderful poems. Then, when I went to Buenos Aires, I read a book by a friend of mine and found in its pages, much to my astonishment, that Martin Buber was a philosopher and that all his philosophy lay in the books I read as poetry. Perhaps I accepted these books because they came to me through poetry, through suggestion, through the music of poetry, and not as arguments. Luis Borges, *This Craft of Verse* (Harvard University Press, 2006), 31f. (Cf. Fischer-Barnicol, "...und ein Poet dazu").

And so I proceed in this essay, evoking varied images, as it were, of listening to silence – of recognizing and acknowledging the existential and ethical imperative to listen to the hidden and perforce veiled pain of the Other. I thus eschew the discursive method of philosophical discourse of *apodeixis*, or rational demonstration and argumentation. Rather I seek to employ the voice of *deixis*, pointing, which deems that cognition in the first instance is *recognition*. This is a method endorsed by the late American philosopher Stanley Cavell, who argued that though we do not, indeed, cannot have access and thus knowledge of another's pain we can "recognize" and "acknowledge" it. Making claims to be acknowledged by others, so Cavell, is fundamental to the ethical grammar of interpersonal life (Cavell, *Here and There*). Honneth advances a similar thesis in *Kampf um Anerkennung* (Berlin, 1992). Listening – not merely hearing nor seeking to interpret – the muffled, yet palpable silence of the other is an act of recognition and acknowledgment. Silence is, of course, palpable – audible – if one cares and knows how to listen.

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were subsequently pillaged and claimed by the infant State of Israel. The distinctive architectural oriental contours of these dwellings, now the homes of Jewish Israelis, mark them as haunted by the phantoms of their former forlorn residents. The abiding presence of these phantoms makes no sound but is nonetheless heard – if one chooses to listen to them. For Longfellow, the home in which he dwelt was haunted by the phantoms of the indigenous populations of America. One cannot stride through the byways of Berlin, Warsaw, and Odessa and not hear the voices of the silent phantoms that still haunt these cities of their once-thriving Jewish populations – that is, if one chooses to listen.

1 Listening to Silence

But how is one to listen to silence? Longfellow would suggest that one must consciously resist being a stranger to the past, oblivious of the scars and torments of the past inscribed in the silent crevices of the present. The focus of the following reflections is inspired by “The Sound of Silence,” a hymn of the counterculture movements in the late 1960s that had its initial gestation in the US, but quickly crossed the Atlantic to Western Europe. Composed by Paul Simon, the song was first sung in June 1966 at a live performance in Harlem, New York City’s largely Africa–American neighborhood. The lyrics are addressed, as it were, to a childhood friend:

The Sound of Silence

Hello darkness, my old friend
 I’ve come to talk with you again
 Because a vision softly creeping
 Left its seeds while I was sleeping [...]
 And touched the sound of silence
 And in the naked light I saw
 Ten thousand people, maybe more
People talking without speaking
People hearing without listening
People writing songs that voices never share
 No one dared
 Disturb the sound of silence
 “Fools” said I, “You do not know
 Silence like a cancer grows
 Hear my words that I might teach you
 Take my arms that I might reach you”
 But my words like silent raindrops fell
 And echoed in the wells of silence [...]
 In the words that it was forming
 And the sign said, “The words of the prophets
whispered in the sounds of silence.

The song bespeaks the cancerous growth of voices not heard, for they are muffled, as Simon’s boyhood friend Art Garfunkel noted, by “the inability of people to communicate with each other, not particularly intentionally but especially emotionally, so what you see around you are people unable to love each other.”² In this indictment of the estranged relations of the deracinated denizens of the modern social landscape who “talk without speaking,” and “hear without listening,” Simon beseeches us to listen to the words “whispered in the sounds of silence.”

The acclaimed Soviet-Russian writer Isaac Babel was arrested in 1939. His crime was his failure to conform to “socialist realism” decreed by Stalin to harness the intelligentsia to his vision for the Soviet Union and to suppress dissent. Babel chose to withdraw from public life, explaining his reticence at a congress of the Union

² Cited in Eliot, *Paul Simon*, 40.

of Soviet Writers that he had mastered “a new literary genre, the genre of silence.”³ In a fictional, duly ironic construction of Babel’s ruminations as he stood before a firing squad and execution, the novelist Nicole Krauss depicts the rush of his thoughts:

Only after they charged him with the crime of silence did Babel discover how many kinds of silence existed. When he heard music, he no longer listened to its notes, but the silences between them. When he read a book, he gave himself over entirely to commas and semi-colons, to the space after the period and the capital letter of the next sentence. He discovered the places in a room where the silences gathered: the folds of curtain drapes, the deep bowels of the family silver. When people spoke to him, he heard less and less what they were saying, and more and more what they were not. He learned to decipher the meaning of certain silences And no one could accuse him of not mastering his chosen métier. ... Imagine the burden of keeping silent when your child asks you whether God exists, or the woman you love asks you if you love her back. At first, Babel longed for two words: Yes or No. But he knew that to utter just a single word would be to destroy the delicate fluency of silence.⁴

To listen to silence, then, one would have to be silent, to silence one’s own inner voice resonant with one’s own story. Silent listening, as conceived by the French philosopher of semiotics Roland Barthes, is a hermeneutic act that takes place on three distinctive levels: alerting, deciphering, and understanding how the sound is produced and how it affects the listener.⁵ *Alerting*, the first level, involves the detection of environmental sound cues, such as the familiar footsteps of one’s partner or children, or the unfamiliar noise of an intruder or a ball or stone thrown through one’s window. *Deciphering*, the second level, involves detecting patterns when interpreting sounds, say of one’s house cat wailing with an urgent cry to be fed. The third level of listening, *understanding*, is attained by suspending one’s judgement, which for Barthes is typified by psychoanalysis, the study of the unconscious mind. To allow the patient’s unconscious to be heard, the psychoanalyst must suspend judgment while listening, as it were, to the voice beneath the patient’s spoken words. Each of these three levels of listening facilitates the semiotic mediation of meaning.

For Barthes, the third type of listening taps the depth of semiotic interpretation, which appertains not only to the hidden acoustics of psychoanalytic attunement, but, in fact, is “chiefly in the field of art,” particularly music.⁶ The full meaning of a musical composition, he contends, cannot be decoded by deciphering patterns of its soundscape. To exemplify his thesis, he referred to the American composer John Cage whose indeterminacy of musical composition and performance obliges one to listen to “each sound one after the next” rather than “its syntagmatic extension.”⁷ The sequential flow of each sound is punctuated by silence, which Cage illustrated by his composition “4’33,” which is performed in the absence of deliberate sound; musicians who present the work do nothing aside from being present for the duration specified by the title. The content of the composition is not “four minutes and 33 seconds of silence,” however. Rather, the intent is to highlight the inaudible cadences of musical composition, which Cage deems are just as important as the sounded notes themselves. Such an approach to listening promotes “not the advent of a signified, object of a recognition or of a deciphering, but the very dispersion, the shimmering of signifiers, ceaselessly restored to a listening which ceaselessly produces new ones from them without ever arresting their meaning,”⁸ for meaning is indeterminate and thus continuously re-experienced and understood. In sum, for Barthes “to listen is to adopt an attitude of decoding what is obscure, blurred or mute, in order to make available to consciousness the ‘underside’ of meaning (what is experienced, postulated as hidden).”⁹

This attitude of decoding has in more general terms been called *active listening*. An active listener is attuned to nonverbal messages from the speaker, intent to comprehend the full meaning of what is being said.¹⁰ It was a tragic encounter that brought the philosopher Martin Buber to appreciate the significance,

³ Krauss, *The History of Love*, 114f.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Barthes, *Forms of Responsibility*.

⁶ Ibid., 259.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid., 249.

¹⁰ Hoppe, *Active Listening*. Cf. Henny and Kristiansen, *Attending to Silence*; and Jaworski, *Silence*.

indeed, of the imperative of active listening. He reports that amid the First World War, sitting at his desk earlier in the morning he heard someone pounding on the door to his home in a bucolic village in Western Germany. Rushing to open the door, he was met by a bedraggled soldier who explained that he had marched from a distant battle for days on end to speak to him. Honoring the manifest urgency of the soldier's quest, Buber invited him in, but indicated that he had but a half-hour to devote to their conversation. The early morning guest posed questions, which Buber patiently addressed. The following day, he learned that the soldier had taken his life. It hit him like a flash of enlightenment – a sudden awakening, *satori* as a Zen Buddhist would put it. He was gripped by a realization that although he replied cordially to the soldier's questions, he failed to address those etched in the folds of his forehead, "to listen to the unspoken word."¹¹ This *satori* sowed the seeds of what Buber would develop with the publication in 1923 of *Ich und Du*, introducing his philosophy of dialogue.

2 Dialogical Listening

Dialogue is, indeed, ultimately beyond the spoken word. The soundless speech of dialogue is not akin to the "tender silence" of lovers, "resting in one another," sharing a gaze, "rich in inward relations." Nor is Buber "thinking of the mystical shared silence, such as reported of the Franciscan Aegidius and [King] Louis of France ... who, meeting once, did not utter a word, but 'taking their stand in the reflection of the Divine Face' experienced one another. For here too there is the expression of a gesture, of the physical attitude of the one to the other."¹² Mediated neither by words nor by gestures, dialogue is not an interpretative, cognitive act.¹³ Herein, dialogical listening differs from Barthes's notion of "understanding" as a distinctive cognitive procedure of yielding knowledge of the other by "decoding" the voice hidden and veiled in a silence "between the lines" of the sonic markers of speech. For Buber, listening to the Other, however, begets but the existential acknowledgement of the infinite, unknowable alterity of and thus the confirmation of the existential presence of one's partner in a dialogical encounter. Words and gestures are, in fact, to be transcended, for they carry a range of meanings that bear the stamp of cultural and personal inflections which are liable to hinder dialogue. "The relation to the [Thou] is unmediated. Nothing conceptual intervenes between I and [Thou], no prior knowledge and no imagination. ... Every means is an obstacle" to dialogue.¹⁴ "Only where all means have disintegrated encounters occur."¹⁵ In attending to the voice of the other, dialogical listening transcends its semiotic markers. One turns one's ear to the other with no intention other than to listen to the voice of other – to listen, and not merely hear the voice, even, indeed, especially when veiled in silence.

3 Non-Intentional Listening

Nor is dialogue a purposeful act. The Thou "encounters me by grace – it cannot be found by seeking"¹⁶ – hence, it is not akin to negotiations or prompted by a desire to engage in a conversation. The Thou encounters one, beckoning her to respond dialogically; she may choose – "decide" – or not choose to respond. The I–Thou relationship is thus one of "election and electing, passive and active at once." As an unmediated response to the existential presence of the Other, dialogue "approaches passivity," without "any sense of action."¹⁷

¹¹ Buber, *Encounter*, 47.

¹² *Ibid.*, 4.

¹³ See footnote 20.

¹⁴ Buber, *I and Thou*, 63.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 64.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 62.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* Michael Theunissen thus regards Buber's concept of dialogue as a "Gegenentwurf zur Transzendentalphilosophie." Theunissen, *Der Andere*, 231–77. Also cf. Welz, "Relational Ontology."

Buber's concept of passive action is informed by his understanding of the Daoist concept of *wúwéi* – non-action, a non-intentional, non-calculating, non-deliberative manner of being in the world. In adhering to the “path” (the *Dao*) of *wúwéi*, one is spontaneously and wholly open to the moment, to the here and now.¹⁸ In accord with the teachings of the Chinese Daoist sage Tschuang-Tse, Buber would distinguish the dialogical response to the Other, one's Thou, from an empathetic identification with the feelings and experience of others as analogous to what one has experienced or imagines as experiencing. Empathy by its very nature entails a projection of meaning that may not be consonant and consistent with the experience and feelings of others – and thus in effect denies the existential integrity of their experience and feelings.¹⁹ To circumvent this hermeneutic circle, Buber spoke of dialogical inclusion (*Umfassung*); to listen to the other's voice, muffled in silence or otherwise, without interpretation, and simply allow the voice of the Other to resonate, as it were, aside one's own “story,” one's own inner voice.²⁰ To listen to the voice of the other is to be attuned to a shared experience “from the other side”: One “actively participates” in the other's experience “without forfeiting anything of [one's own] felt reality ... and lives through a common event from the standpoint of the other.”²¹

4 Dialogical Listening as Self-Knowledge

Dialogical listening also serves to alert one to how one's own story and the attendant conduct of one's interpersonal relations – spoken or inaudible – might inflict emotional injury on others. Often but *in pianissimo*, our injurious relations with others were depicted by the nineteenth-century French novelist Jules Barbey d'Aurevilly as “civilized crimes” – interpersonal “crimes” that we commit “daily in secret and unpunished, with downright frequency and frivolity,” although they “appear to be negatable crimes for no blood is spilled and carnage takes place within the bounds of feeling.”²² Such crimes, to be sure, might be as hurtful as actions that society deems to be violations of civil and criminal law. On the public level, civilized or what may also be called liminal crimes can have a baleful effect on intercommunal relations, exacerbating misunderstanding and antagonism.

Dialogical listening requires that we open ourselves to the voice of the other and surrender the “armor” we as individuals and as communities have developed to secure our own story, and “to ward-off sings” addressed to us “without respite.” We need but open ourselves to perceive them. But it is a “risk” we tend to regard as “too dangerous.” For “the soundless thundering seems to threaten us with annihilation”; in response, we prefer to “perfect [our] defense mechanism.”²³ But once the risk is taken and the armor is put aside, one is to cease listening to oneself and attend to the voice of the other. Buber framed this ultimate *sine qua none* of the dialogical listening by relating a teaching of a Hasidic master. Rabbi Dov Ber, the Maggid of Mezerich once said to his disciples: “I shall teach you the best way to [hear] Torah,” the word of God. “You must cease to be aware of yourselves. You must be nothing but an ear which hears what the universe of the word is constantly saying within you. The moment you start hearing what you yourself are saying, you must stop.”²⁴

¹⁸ See Buber, “Die Lehre von Tao;” “The Teaching of the Dao,” in Buber, *Pointing the Way*, 31–6.

¹⁹ Buber, *Between Man and Man*, 114f. Though formulated in reflecting on the pedagogical ethos, the concept of “inclusion” has an overarching significance for the life of dialogue in all spheres of human encounter. Cf. Mendes-Flohr, “Sprachformen der Verständigung,” 83–91.

²⁰ Ibid. As a non-interpretative act of embracing the experience of another, Buber thus asks what, then, does one learn of the other when one relates to him or her in the sacred stance of an I–Thou relation? “Nothing at all.” (Buber, *I and Thou*, 61). It does, however, inform one's intersubjective and hence ethical sensibilities.

²¹ Ibid., 115.

²² Barbey d'Aurevilly, “La vengeance d'une femme,” 231.

²³ Buber, *Between Man and Man*, 11.

²⁴ Buber, *Die Erzählungen der Chassidim*, 205.

5 Listening in Dark Times

Dialogical listening demands an epistemological and existential leap beyond one's cherished conceptions of truth and self-preoccupations. Thus, Buber implores us: "You, imprisoned in the shells in which society, state, church, school, economy, public opinion, and your own pride have stuck you, ... break through your shells" and reach out to others. For, "each individual you meet needs help, each needs *your* help" – as ultimately you need theirs. For, "it is the nature of man to leave equally unnoticed [their own] innermost need. ... You shall awaken in the other the need of help, and in yourself the capacity to help. Even when you yourself are in need – and you are – you can help others and, in doing so, help yourself."²⁵ Alas, "the voices of the unknown, the familiar [are] silent." "What [then] are we to do?" Buber asks. In reply, one is to pose the question "What have I to do?" The answer is echoed in Saint Paul's imploration, "You shall not withhold yourself" (1 Corinthians 7:5).²⁶ "Silently the world awaits for the spirit,"²⁷ the spirit of attentive listening to the reticent voices of the other and *pari-passu* one's own need to be heard.

So conceived, dialogical listening is all-the-more urgent when humanity at large is in the grip of diabolic forces, facing self-destruction. We are thus beckoned to heed the cry which the German poet Berthold Brecht wrote in Denmark where he had fled from Hitler's henchmen:

Brecht, *Nachgeborenen* (1934-38)

Truly I live in dark times!
Frank speech is naïve. A smooth forehead
Suggests insensitivity. The man who laughs
Has simply not yet heard
The terrible news.

*What kind of times are these, when
To talk about trees is almost a crime
Because it implies silence about so many horrors?
When the man over there calmly crossing the street
Is already perhaps beyond the reach of his friends
Who are in need?
With forbearance.*

6 Listening to Silence is Bi-valent

One must in the first instance lift the veil of silence with which one has clothed oneself to muffle not only the plea of those in need but also to repress what Buber calls "existential guilt"²⁸: one's complicity by silence and thus implicit responsibility in producing the pain of others, or by allowing their pain to fester. Acknowledging one's responsibility for their pain conditions the ethical imperative to pierce the silence and to act to heal the indignities and injustice suffered by others. The voices of silence are many, inflected by wounds – social, political, and existential. They each bear muffled sonic appeals to be heard. Walking the hills not far from my home in Jerusalem, Jesus of Nazareth called on "anyone who has ears" to listen (Matthew 13:9).

²⁵ Buber, "What is to be Done?" in Buber, *Pointing the Way*, 110.

²⁶ Ibid., 109.

²⁷ Ibid., 111.

²⁸ Buber, *Pointing the Way*, 114–29.

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