theories and methodologies

Cicero the Barbarian

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LATE INTO THE NIGHT, I SIT ALONE IN MY STUDY, LISTENING. IN THIS, I AM NOT UNLIKE THE TITLE CHARACTER OF ITALO CALVINO'S "A KING Listens," one of three stories that make up his *Under a Jaguar Sun*, first published as a collection in 1986. The aim of Calvino's king is the acoustic surveillance of his realm, every corner of which is connected to the throne room by a twisting network of resonant tubes. Day in, day out, he listens, learning much, but feeling very little.

This royal listener would later capture the imagination of the philosopher Adriana Cavarero, who opens her book *For More than One Voice* with a close reading of the story. For Cavarero, Calvino's king is very much like philosophy in its traditional Western form, listening for bodiless, universal *logos*, the Greek word for "word" that ancient philosophy uses to designate the rational order of the cosmos. In the story, the king is brought to his knees, suddenly and unexpectedly, by the sound of a woman singing. For Cavarero, this single, singular voice embodies the particularity that philosophy traditionally excludes in the name of the universal.

I, however, am neither a king nor a philosopher. I am simply a reader. So too is my listening done in what, to the outside observer at least, must sound like silence, directed as it is at pages that do not speak, at words that I seldom pronounce. I suppose that someone might lend my seemingly solitary reading the venerable name of philology, the love (*philia*) not of wisdom (*sophia*) or of a unifying *logos* but of a messy plurality of utterances (*logoi*). But one might as well call me instead a prisoner of the Internet, source by now of the majority (though not the totality) of the things I read. Like so many others, I am besieged by data. Indeed, the words that come at me from all directions overthrew me long ago. I have never really commanded them. I am more like their slave.

And yet, every now and then—but in a way that makes me wonder whether it is happening all the time, even when I do not notice—the signal seems to change. Take, for example, a letter of Cicero's written late in 46 BCE to his best friend, Atticus.[1] Current events regularly

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provided subject matter for Cicero's correspondence, and that year, which had seen Julius Caesar consolidate his control of Rome with the title of dictator, gave the silenced senator no shortage of things to write about. Nevertheless, apart from an update on Cicero's own whereabouts and future movements, this particular letter brings no news, in part because the two friends were scheduled to see each other soon.

"Cum complicarem hanc epistulam" ("Just as I was folding this letter"; 12.1.2), Cicero explains, a new letter arrived from Atticus, so he resumed writing and added, among other things, his best wishes for Attica, his friend's daughter, reported to have a fever. This is followed by a cryptic sentence responding to something else in the letter he has just received. But apart from pleasantries and commonplaces, the only other work the letter seems to do is to convey Cicero's desire to hear what Attica and his own daughter, Tullia, apparently staying with Atticus and his wife, Pilia, are up to:

> Atque utinam continuo ad complexum meae Tulliae, ad osculum Atticae possem currere! quod quidem ipsum scribe, quaeso, ad me ut, dum consisto in Tusculano, sciam quid garriat, sin rusticatur, quid scribat ad te; eique interea aut scribes salutem aut nuntiabis itemque Piliae. (12.1.1)
>
> How I wish I could speed my way into Tullia's hugs and Attica's kisses! Please write to me on this subject, so that while I'm staying in the house at Tusculum, I know what she is chattering [*quid garriat*]—or if she's in the country, what she herself writes to you. Likewise, write back to her, or take her (and Pilia) my hello in person.

Cicero's wording is ambiguous, but it seems clear that the reported "chattering" is Attica's, not Tullia's, since Attica was five and Tullia was then in her midthirties and is never represented elsewhere by Cicero as prone to chatter.

The Latin verb *garrire* ("to chatter") derives relatively unchanged from the reconstructed Indo-European root **gar*-, meaning "to call, cry."[2] The patently imitative nature of the root reminds us of the Greek word *barbaros*, which rudely suggested that "barbarian" speech sounded like this: *bar bar bar*. (The joke was on the Greeks, since they evidently did not invent the word but inherited it from an oriental language.) *Gar gar gar*, however, was more promiscuous, crossing not just boundaries of tribe and tongue but those of species. Frogs and nightingales, for example, sometimes *garriunt* in Latin. And while newer dictionaries take this as a kind of personification, older ones are not so sure and suggest instead that the metaphor flows in the other direction—namely, that human beings, when they chatter, begin to sound more and more like other animals.[3]

Nor is this chicken-and-egg question helped much by other words seemingly derived from the same root, such as the Old Irish *gairm*, which names crying and crowing sounds that likewise cross freely between human and nonhuman realms. The same is true of the Ancient Greek verb *gēruo* or *garuo* (the spelling varies by dialect), which could describe not only the sounds of owls and nightingales but also the singing of Orpheus—whose song, in turn, enchanted birds and beasts. The related noun, *gērus* or *garus*, could mean "voice," which was something that even logocentric Greek philosophy tended to regard as a common possession of human beings and air-breathing nonhuman beings alike. In fact, most Greek words for "voice" (like *phōnē*) can also be used to mean "speech," a fact that theoretically colonizes all animate vocality for human language but just as surely surrenders the latter to a whole wild world of human and nonhuman sounds. Do birds chatter like Attica? Or does Attica chirp like a bird? And for Cicero, whose very name was already a synonym for eloquence, what would have been the difference?

If I seem to be hearing things that are not there, then at least I am not the first. The

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ear of a far more sensitive reader, Paulus Manutius, son of the great Renaissance printer Aldus and still regarded as one of the greatest editors of Cicero's letters, also caught on *garriat*, leading him to offer this comment: "Apte, garriat, de puella: nam infantes, cum loquuntur, hilaritate quadam et sono vocis aviculas videntur imitari. Itaque, quod avium proprium verbum est, eleganter ad puellam transtulit" ("'Chatter': well said, about a girl, since small children, when they speak, seem by their laughter and the sound of their voices to imitate little birds. Therefore, he artfully applied to the girl a word proper to birds"; 397). Well might we pause to complain about these three men—Cicero, Atticus, and, sixteen centuries later, Manutius—and their traffic in the infantile, dehumanized sounds of a female body. (I doubtless should add myself to the list, rounding out this barbershop quartet.) Attica was still learning to speak, but the truth is that she would never really be allowed to speak for herself, then or thereafter.

Nevertheless, the presence of Tullia in this story is a reminder that things could be somewhat more complicated than we might at first suppose. Cicero loved his daughter dearly, educating her well beyond what was normal for a Roman girl and counting her among his closest confidants. At the moment this letter was written, her unhappy marriage had just ended in divorce, which presumably is why she was staying with family friends. Pregnant with her ex-husband's child, she would give birth early in the new year. The birth was not an easy one, and a few weeks later Tullia was dead. Her father's grief was so unruly that eventually even his closest friends, including Atticus, began to reproach him. After all, Tullia had been a mere woman, and he was a son of Rome.

To his credit, Cicero mostly ignored them. For months he tried to buy land in Rome to erect a shrine to her memory, but endless complications finally led him to abandon the plan, albeit reluctantly. Meanwhile, he composed his *Consolatio*, a now-lost work in which he sought to assuage his grief or "care"—to use, with a mostly obsolete meaning, an English word that comes to us, by way of German, from **gar-*. Across cultures, as our own word reminds us, pain is such a persistent part of the human condition that it may provoke inarticulate vocalizations even by an adult, even by a father, even, indeed, by a man hailed as a *pater patriae*, a "father of the fatherland." To be sure, it is hardly the case that ancient theory and practice did not distinguish a mourner's cry from a philosopher's treatise. (Among other differences, mourning was often seen as women's work, while the voice of philosophy was paradigmatically male, though there were exceptions to both genderings.) Nevertheless, the ancient languages themselves were forever reviving the possibility of a vocal continuum, stretching across all human utterance and beyond. For his part, at least as orator and statesman, Cicero tended to lament only one kind of vocal act: silence. And so, in sum, when he asks about the chatter of his best friend's little girl, there is every reason to suppose that his affection and interest are sincere.

But all these many thoughts—philological, etymological, historical, biographical—came later. Why instead, already on my first reading, did Cicero's request stop me in my tracks, quicken my pulse, fill me, instantly, with an ineffable feeling somewhere between desire and dread, as if the dead had suddenly spoken with a living voice? If I was anticipating what my recourse to dictionaries would uncover, then I was doing so only dimly. Perhaps the initial shock came merely from the fact that here was Cicero, antiquity's most famous orator, straining to hear the babble of a child. Perhaps too it was the uncanny doubling that had me listening to Cicero, himself listening. Perhaps, indeed, it was the extraordinary number of mediations through which this sound sought to travel. Attica chatters with her father, or perhaps writes

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to him from the countryside (by herself, or by dictation, the latter of which would introduce another layer of mediation); he listens or reads; Cicero asks him to transcribe what he hears into a letter. The request, though not the answer, then makes its way to us through centuries of ancient and medieval copying in which the text for a long period went entirely missing, only to be rediscovered by Petrarch and edited and emended by scholars like Manutius. Even more mesmerizing is the way in which language itself simultaneously captures and muffles this child's voice. *Garrire* turns extralinguistic vocalizing into a verb that designates the kind of speech that says . . . nothing really.

What exactly was Attica chattering about? Properly speaking, we do not really know whether the feverish girl was chattering at all. Assuming, however, that there really was something to hear, what exactly would we gain by having any transcript her father later forwarded to Cicero? Linguists, to be sure, might delight in the chance to listen in on a small child speaking Latin. Or was it Greek? Since she grew up in both Italy and Greece, it is hard to be sure in what language Attica—whose very name, like her father's, is really just a nickname meaning "Athenian"—would have chattered. But in whichever language, she scarcely can have said anything that was of any great consequence to the adults who surrounded her, or to those who listened in from afar. In any case, a transcription of her voice would have lost anything that was irreducible to the Greek or Latin alphabet, including not only the laughter imagined by Manutius but also all the other qualities that Cavarero supposes lend a voice its singularity and that thus brought Calvino's king to a halt. In the absence of a transcription that already would have been inadequate, what could possibly be left to command our attention?

And yet I, too, halted. Though my reason told me I could not be hearing anything more than the murmuring of mediation itself, some other part of me was saying that something had just happened. To placate imperious logic, I began a thought experiment. What exactly could be said to impede my acoustic connection to chattering Attica? That she is not my own child is no more a barrier than was the fact that she was not Cicero's. Her distance in space and time makes it impossible for either of us to enjoy the kisses that Cicero longed for, but physical contact is not a requirement for hearing, even when sound is generated viva voce. To suppose that the problem is that I cannot see her chattering is likewise to confuse one sense with another—and to forget that for some, starting at least with Pythagoras, to hear without seeing is the best way to learn to listen. To fixate on the loss of her words is, as I have already intimated, to elevate what can have been barely more than nonsense to the status of transcendent meaningfulness.

What then of her other vocal qualities, the ones that made her voice different from her father's or her mother's, from Cicero's or Tullia's? Surely these are lost. Nevertheless, what made her voice distinctly charming was not so much the fact that it was her own as that hers was the voice of a child—that is, it was not so much a singular voice as a particular kind of voice. Furthermore, anyone who has listened to children of that age knows that their voices—in the full sense of the term, embracing not just words and phrases but intonation, cadence, etc.—are filled with echoes of the adults who surround them. Perhaps we can say that a child gives us what the baritone Charles Panzéra gave Roland Barthes—namely, "the grain of the voice," in the sense in which Barthes really meant the phrase, which is to say a voice that does not simply deliver musical or linguistic values but, rather, stages the very emergence of significance. But this means that what Attica expressed was nothing less than the *gar gar gar* that, as the etymologists have shown us, has echoed across millennia to signify the

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very stuff out of which our words are made. Where, let us ask, do we not hear that refrain? Far from being absent, Attica is everywhere. And the fact that the literal meaning of Attica (which is also the proper name of the region around Athens) makes the sentence "Attica is everywhere" also mean "everywhere contains Athens" proves how ready nonsense is to overwhelm us at every turn. When you really listen, who doesn't sound like a barbarian?

Even Cicero babbles. Turn back through the *Letters to Atticus* to the ones he wrote as he fled into temporary exile, and the matter becomes painfully clear. "Inimici mei mea mihi, non me ipsum ademerunt" ("My enemies have taken from me my possessions, but not my very self"; 3.5), he scrawls to his friend. This sounds quite noble in translation. But the Latin, with its repeated *m*'s and *n*'s, rings more like a tongue twister or a nursery rhyme. Cicero here is doing little more than crying *mamma*, I tell my students, only half jokingly. But something similar is true even when his style is at its finest. Petrarch writes that, when he was himself a mere child, he was thrilled by the "dulcedo . . . et sonoritas" ("sweet sonority") of Cicero's prose—long before he was able to understand its meaning (*Res seniles* 16.1.1).[4] But don't take my word for it, or even Petrarch's. Take Cicero's, in the very letter that asks about Attica. Concluding the addendum that was prompted by the receipt of the fresh letter from Atticus, he writes, "Hoc igitur habebis, novi nihil" ("This is what I've got for you: nothing new"; *Letters to Atticus* 12.1.2). He then poses himself a question, as if Atticus himself had asked it: "Quid ergo opus erat epistula?" ("So what was the point of sending a letter at all?"). He answers by suggesting that the same question could be asked of their face-to-face conversations: "Quid cum coram sumus et garrimus quicquid in buccam?" ("What is the point when we are together and chatter away with whatever pops into our heads?"). Boom! There it is: *cum garrimus*, "when we chatter." Cicero and Atticus, *gar gar gar*. Like children, like frogs, like birds.

One sentence remains, summing up what Cicero has just been saying and bringing the letter to a close: "Est profecto quiddam λέσχη, quae habet, etiam si nihil subest, collocutione ipsa suavitatem" ("There is a certain quality to chitchat, which derives its pleasantness [*suavitas*] from the mere fact of conversation [*collocutio*], even when this is completely superficial"). For "chitchat" Cicero uses a Greek word, *leschē*, which literally means "couch" but came to refer to the kind of idle or gossipy conversation one might have while lounging. In haste we might assume that the pleasure of chitchat is simply that of being in one another's company. But how then to account for the fact that Cicero clearly means that he finds the same *suavitas* in the epistolary exchanges he has long enjoyed with his faraway friend? To suppose that such exchanges merely recall pleasures only truly enjoyed face-to-face is to leave us at a loss to explain the seemingly similar pleasure Petrarch took in Cicero's written company fourteen centuries after his death. So little did this distance matter to him that, after rediscovering Cicero's letters in Verona, he wrote two letters to Cicero in reply, the first of which opens by describing the reading he has just completed: "Audivi multa te dicentem" ("I have heard you saying many things"; *Res familiares* 24.3.1).[5]

Surely Atticus, too, heard Cicero in this and all the other letters. But how did this first addressee know whom he was hearing? There was, to begin with, the letter's seal and salutation. Contentwise, there were things that maybe only his friend would know or ask. In this regard, even the use of a Greek word is a kind of wink, not just at Atticus's life overseas but also at the bilingual education they had enjoyed together in Rome as boys, where they had first met. Above all, there was the *sphragis* or "signature" of Cicero's style, the elements of which would take a long time to catalog, even for such a short and

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"superficial" letter. For all that, to believe that mediated contact is real contact requires what might seem like a leap of faith. But is such a leap any less necessary when we are sitting on a couch, chatting about the weather—or even pouring out our souls to one another? Sophisticated twentieth-century thought, in fact, was adamant in this regard: to speak at all is to announce difference and absence, not presence. But forget about us. What about the couch? What about the resonant air, and when we are far apart, what about the wax of an ancient writing tablet, or the papyrus of a book roll, the parchment of a codex, the paper of a printed book, or the screens across which we now run our fingers? If it's really contact that counts, then our media, both natural and artificial, give us no shortage of that. Even the most fleeting of touches can be enough to make us feel that someone is there. If instead we are wrong about those who are distant, and wrong too about the dead, then we are just as wrong about those right beside us. What a dreary world that would be! We should pity those who have been made to think they live in it.

"Homo sum; humani nil a me alienum puto" ("I'm a human being: I view nothing that is human as beyond my concern"). These slightly singsongy words are those of the Roman playwright Terence in *The Self-Tormentor* (line 77). Cicero quotes them near the beginning of his final treatise, *On Duties*, written a year or so before his murder and sent to his son, its dedicatee, who was then studying abroad in Greece. In order to perform our obligations to others, Cicero explains, we must overcome the appearance that our concerns and theirs are separated by a "longum intervallum" ("significant gap"; 1.30). But it was the chatter of a child that suddenly leapt that gap, rising lightly from the pages of a letter to a friend to fill my study with care.

Notes

1. Cicero, *Letters to Atticus* 12.1. The Latin text of the full letter, with facing English translation, can conveniently be found in the Loeb edition of D. R. Shackleton Bailey (3: 274–77). All translations from this and other Latin texts in this article, however, are my own.

2. Here and below I follow Watkins 26. Vaan more elaborately reconstructs the root as **ǵ(e)h₂r-* but adds that "we may well be dealing with independent onomatopoeic formations . . . of individual languages" (255).

3. For an example of the older sequence, in which the primary meaning regards nonhuman animals and human sounds belong instead to the word's extended, metaphoric meaning, see Forcellini 367. Later editors of Forcellini's authoritative lexicon, however, reversed the sequence.

4. For more on Petrarch's reading of Ciceronian sound, see Butler 161–95.

5. I cite the Latin text of Petrarch's *Res familiares* from the edition of Vittorio Rossi, which appears in the list of works cited as *Le familiari*.

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