theories and methodologies

Philosophical Aurality

FRANÇOIS NOUDELMANN

THE NOTION OF AURALITY, BY GOING BEYOND THE USUAL DISTINCTION BETWEEN WRITTEN AND ORAL LANGUAGE, RAISES QUESTIONS ABOUT the nature of listening while reading. The academic rehabilitation of orality in relation to writing has certainly made way for audible performing arts. It has also led to reassessments of cultures in all continents and archipelagoes that favor oral transmission. However, this attention to the auditory should not cause us to forget an orality inside writing, which comes not only from its inspiration but also from its very material. Let us therefore follow Friedrich Nietzsche's injunction to remove the plugs from our ears (332) and forget the legend of ideas being silent, abstracted from any sonic reality. Even if we do not use the expression "oral philosophy," we must remember that many discourses since antiquity, especially those of Socrates, have been oral performances. Our reading of ancient philosophy should therefore be sensitive to this acoustic dimension. But Western philosophy has constantly been suspicious of hearing, probably because the ear is always suspected of passivity, compared to an eye that objectifies reality. Since the ears have no lids to interrupt perception, they allow the sonic matter of the world to pass through without the subject's being able to control it. Consequently, the history of metaphysics presents a series of interdictions against sounds, and warnings about their enchanting power and their betrayal of the meaning they are supposed to carry. The desire to channel and domesticate the anarchy of sounds reflects a philosophical malentendu: sound is both misheard and misunderstood.

Investigating aurality might begin, then, with a simple question: What do we hear from a text in a so-called silent reading? The most obvious answer is a voice, or voices. Beyond Jacques Derrida's deconstruction of vococentrism, the dimension of sound cannot be erased, unless the hearing loss is deliberate. To listen, with new ears, to the voices contained in a text, one must get rid of a long philosophical tradition of commentary on inspiration. The voice was supposed to come from an intelligible place: the sense, the suprasensible, the divine. It

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was therefore evoked by metaphors, such as God's voice (which told Augustine, "Take up and read!" [206]), the heart's voice (which is the voice of nature, according to Jean-Jacques Rousseau), and the people's voice (the political vox populi). However, the voice remains, above all, a physical phenomenon, and, to be identified, it must be described precisely, in terms of emission, diffusion, and reception. The material voice is first of all a sound. Lucretius pointed out that "[v]oice and words are composed of corporeal particles," thereby dismissing metaphysical superstitions about the voice coming from an ineffable world (115). This affirmation of the voice as sound, though obvious, overturns the theoretical approach because it departs from humanistic discourses to join the side of acoustic physics.

What voice is heard in a text that is not supposed to physically produce acoustic phenomena? There is still no vocabulary to describe precisely the virtual sounds we hear in our inner self, more or less voluntarily, whether they are music, sounds, or words. If mental images are quasi visualization, an act of imagination, the sounds within consciousness are quasi hearing. When reading a speech silently to oneself, one hears the supposed voice of an enunciator. Some may object that we do not know the voices of authors who lived before the era of sound recording. However, a voice, if fictional, indeed accompanies the reading, unless we have resolutely chosen not to hear anything. Michel de Montaigne emphatically wanted to be heard in his writings. He valued the art of conversation and even stated that, if he had to choose, he would rather sacrifice sight than hearing. If it seems easy to repress philosophical voices in very abstract texts, like Immanuel Kant's *The Critique of Pure Reason*, it is impossible not to hear Montaigne's voice in his *Essays*, or René Descartes's in *The Discourse on the Method*. Affirming the presence of a voice, in a reading falsely described as silent, must, however, lead us to distinguish its multiple aspects and to be wary of metaphors once again—because authors have more than one voice and their texts resonate with many voices.

When we identify a voice, we often reduce it to a single aspect, its timbre. This makes it possible to singularize the voice and recognize particular voices. "It's her" or "It's him," we think, when we hear someone we know. Since style often substitutes for timbre in our aural imaginary, we recognize the voice of the author and react to the reading by saying, "It is indeed the voice of such a poet, such a novelist, or such a philosopher!" But, first, a voice consists of many aspects other than timbre: range, volume, tone, rhythm, accent, accident, breath. The style of a text gives voice to these aural aspects and signals that "the" voice of an author is a fiction: consciously or unconsciously, writing sounds out many vocal sources, which cannot be reduced to a single enunciator. This expression of the singular voice comes from a literary metaphor that confuses voice with style. However, an author can use several styles, and, above all, enunciators do not always master their vocal effects, some coming from expressive standards, others from unconscious phenomena. Even to recognize that style produces something like an aural effect for some readers, it is necessary to describe concretely what is sounding in a voice, and in writing.

The sound archives of seminars, interviews, conferences, and other events featuring philosophers or writers allow new analyses of their thinking. Theoretical studies, works of art, and theatrical performances have recently been devoted to the recorded voices of Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, Jacques Lacan, Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, and Roland Barthes, and other sound archives continue to attract attention today. These recordings give access to new meanings; they allow us to hear the physical investment of thought, to listen to the psychological tensions at work in the argumentation. Barthes's monotone in his public

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speeches indicates his resistance to masterful discourse and phallogocentrism. Lacan's changes in volume signal the imposition and suspension of meaning, indicating that his listeners' reactions are part of his thought process. Several voices, then, are woven into a single voice, and we must finally admit, as Marcel Proust claimed about writers, that theorists also have more than one "I" and several voices: "A book is the product of a different self from the self we manifest in our habits, in our social life, in our vices" (76). Sometimes it is a tiny sound accident that reveals layered and conflicting personalities. For example, tremors in the high-pitched voice of Édouard Glissant make audible the cultural tensions between Creole and French. A throat clearing, a stuttering, a hesitation, a silence, a sudden crescendo, an acceleration: all these phenomena testify to a vocal scene of thought involving many characters.

Even if writing does not transcribe voice traits as they sound, it is nevertheless connected to issues of voice. Aspects of speech as superficial as accent can play a role in the way authors establish a tone in writing. There are the voices that are fully expressed in a text, but there are also the accents that are repressed. The sociology of accents helps us notice how a manner of speaking can relegate individuals to a social group or isolate them if they do not change their voices. Writing can sometimes correct or even hide these social markers. In fact, writing is supposed to erase accents. However, there is sometimes an ambivalent desire to repress them, as observed in the cases of thinkers who have tried to hide their family origins by choosing an abstract, ostensibly neutral style. Derrida, who suffered because of his Algerian Jewish accent, thus explains that he trusted the erasing function of philosophical writing whose mission was to find a tone that makes the author's accent disappear. But despite that effort it did not disappear, because the symptoms of accent—some tones, pitches, volumes—invade his writing (78). We must therefore be attuned to the urge to fashion a new voice, without an accent or with a new accent, in certain texts. The use of several writing languages multiplies such an analysis, because writers and thinkers who write many languages do not just translate themselves, they invent new thinking personae. Julia Kristeva, in her commentary on polyglotism, shows the complex implications of many-voiced behavior, which implies psychological and phonic investments in writing, in relation to the original language (27). Hearing these polyphonies or cacophonies coming from different tongues in a text, owing to translation and aural malentendus, can thus help us access new meanings, beyond the intended and explicit meaning.

More broadly, aurality suggests that the ears should be open to all sound phenomena, whether they come from the voice or from other sources. The voice is equivocal, and it is never alone. It is grafted to the components of the sound environments in which it develops (see Howley in this cluster). As a breath, it produces cries and whispers in the writing itself, as we hear it. By means of this archaic listening, Antonin Artaud wanted to rediscover the materiality of the word that the articulated language had repressed. His new grammar "brings again into the light all the relations fixed and enclosed in the strata of the human syllable, which has killed them by confining them" (110). The predominance of verbal rationality has in fact tended to repel the somatic part of the word—that is, the voice. Deleuze states that he hears screams in Baruch Spinoza's philosophy, even in the texts that seem the most abstract, such as the *Ethics*. Attentive listening is therefore necessary to awaken this elementary utterance, also called vociferation, which is the basis of any language act. If the theatrical performance makes it possible to bring out the vocal breath that transforms speech into a bodily gesture, writing contains, in its own way, pneumatic material that an attentive ear

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can hear virtually. The cries of thought come from the investment of thinkers in fetish words, what Theodor Adorno called *Stichworte*, such as *authenticity*, for Martin Heidegger, or *the other*, for Emmanuel Levinas. They shout or they whisper these notions that circulate among their writings.

A history of sounds has yet to be written that listens to the auditory specificities of theoretical texts, whether they come from the singular breath of their authors or from the acoustic conditions of their time. One of the main contributions of sound studies is to show that technical modernity is not limited to practical innovations but corresponds to changes in mentality. This approach makes it possible to understand that writing depends as much as speaking does on the acoustic conditions in which it has been practiced. The influence of devices such as telephones, radios, and recorders on literature has been immense. Not only did they appear in stories as they became familiar objects and a part of daily life, they also disrupted the acoustic experience of writers and thinkers, modifying the very shape of their writing: the way they describe sounds, how they address the reader, how they change the voice settings. Telephone communication, for instance, transformed the way Proust heard voices. The narrator of *In Search of Lost Time* analyzes the radically new listening that his grandmother's voice produced once it was detached from her facial expressions. The phone led him to hear that voice as if for the first time, as if the machine were changing the intimate and musical scores of her speech, suddenly associating her voice with entirely new affects. It has become an "acousmatic" voice (whose source is unseen, like the off-screen one in movies), with an unprecedented autonomy and singularity that Proust sought to make heard.

The democratization of recording, through the spread of recorders, has also brought about important changes in auditory perception and in the way that people listen to and transcribe even their own voices. In the 1950s, many poets, playwrights, and filmmakers used recording devices for their preliminary work. The recorder sometimes takes the place of the actor as well as the author, creating a double voicing that passes through the microphone and is printed again on magnetic tapes. Perhaps the most spectacular example of this process is Samuel Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tape*, in which the eponymous protagonist listens to his archived voice and compulsively records new comments, until the voice acquires an autonomy, sounding beyond any subjective intention for transmission and archiving. More generally, the work of authors such as Sartre, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Barthes cannot be analyzed accurately if we do not take into account the experiences they had with microphones, radios, and recorders and the way those experiences modified their style, thinking, and writing. These three thinkers reflected on the effects of listening to one's own voice. The ambiguous recognition and strangeness of this objectified voice led them to hear, speak, and write differently. In *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty compares hearing his voice when speaking to hearing it from an external source. He then reflects at length on the fundamentally sonic dimension of human beings (134). We must therefore listen to the effect that this debt to acoustic instruments has on writing and reading, because these instruments have shifted the way writers emit sounds and broadcast them in texts.

Thought can thus be understood as a mixing board that arranges soundtracks (Noudelmann 147). The thinkers for whom hearing is the condition for thinking know how to choose their acoustic environment as a recording studio. Sonic memories always exist before the development of ideas and argumentation because one never thinks from silence but from a hubbub of voices. Soundtracks may

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already be present, like prerecorded voices or layers of sounds. These sounds are edited in the process of a philosophical discourse's elaboration. The so-called silence of thought is actually populated by ghostly voices that rustle in the memory of language. The challenge of an original philosophy is to become attuned to one's voices among this whispering of ghostly voices. They suggest intonations, volumes, and rhythms, and one must reckon with these voices that whisper to the subject thinking preformed sound compounds.

Thinkers always work from such a sound-mixing board that they arrange and transform. As modern as this portrait of philosophical activity may seem, it defines practices as old as Plato's. Plato collected vocal sources from Socrates and other speakers, to highlight the source that makes the voice of truth heard amid the cacophony of opinions. In direct dialogue with an opponent, or intertwined with the speeches of several disciples, Socrates's voice imposes itself according to the sound that Plato has mixed: it triumphs in glory at the end of a text or remains like a soft basso continuo as the other voices in the text gradually fade away.

It is thus beneficial to observe the acoustic environments in which a thought experiment develops. These places and moments are closely linked to sound environments, such as a convent or a monastic cell for solitary thinkers. They appear as stages where a vocation is accepted, whether it be a call to transcendence or a noise that enters a room. The moment of an intellectual revelation implies, for many philosophers, a particular acoustics. The young Descartes traces the source of his philosophy to three dreams that were provoked by the crackling of a fire. Rousseau explicitly associates his thoughts, in *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*, with the sounds of nature, and especially with the gurgling of a brook. He looks for "a silence which is unbroken but for the cry of eagles, the occasional song of birds and the roar of streams cascading down from the mountains" (157). Arthur Schopenhauer argues that the quality of minds can be measured by the noises they withstand and select. Some sounds, such as barking, whipping, or door slamming, are bearable by imbeciles but impede the act of thinking and destroy healthy spirits:

> This sudden, sharp, brain-numbing crack, which cuts to pieces all contemplation and murders every thought, has to be painfully felt by everyone who bears anything resembling a thought in his head; therefore each of those cracks must disturb hundreds in their mental activity, however inferior it may be in quality, but they chop through a thinker's meditations as painfully and disastrously as the executioner's blade severs the head from the body. (576)

Although entirely circumstantial, the acoustic environment of the reader also matters. On the one hand, the soundtracks contained in a text are objectifiable, and one needs to recognize them in order to fully access the meaning of a text. On the other hand, those that come from the reader's environment may seem entirely contingent and therefore not worth considering. However, they also participate in the sound environment that develops in the unfolding of words. The soundtracks may be voluntary, as when, for example, readers choose to accompany their reading with particular music. In other cases, they are random and perceptible to varying degrees. In *The Brown Book*, Ludwig Wittgenstein observes that we sometimes become aware of a noise accompanying our reading, coming from our environment and possibly influencing our understanding:

> I am in the situation of a man who is working in his room, reading, writing, speaking, etc., and who suddenly concentrates his attention on some soft uniform noise, such as one can almost always hear, particularly in a town (the dim noise resulting from all the various

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> noises of the street, the sounds of wind, rain, workshops, etc.). We could imagine that this man might think that a particular noise was a common element of all the experiences he had in this room. (208)

We may say that these kinds of sounds play a secondary role, but Wittgenstein insists on describing *composed* experience whose cohesion is variable: one noise, such as a musical note in a chord, may play a decisive role, guiding, diverting, or supporting language activity. It has accompanied the reading, like a hummed song, without the reading subject's being able to name it, but it also exerts a determinate influence.

When we recognize the variety of internal and external soundtracks of our reading, we can also recognize that sound is fundamentally relational. Even if we can isolate a sound, in fact, it is never alone. Not only does sound comprise sonic ensembles, like clusters, it also, more broadly, is grafted to images, affects, sensations, meanings. The emphasis on sound has sometimes led to a certain fetishism of sound objects that has made us forget this associative nature of sounds. Texts offer an excellent experience of an environment composed of multiple elements whose reading triggers the connection. Literature, probably more than theoretical writings, possesses composite and associable sound environments, which R. Murray Schafer calls soundscapes (7). Despite its questionable naturalistic aesthetics—the assumption that there are natural-sound beauties—this notion leads us to think of a sound ecology of texts that lends full meaning to aurality: it recognizes the habitat of sounds at the heart of writing and calls for a politics of attention to sound, to its differential and relational qualities.

Reading therefore not only involves an act of understanding, it also implies a particular disposition to listen. Being disposed to listen to what we read therefore also requires that we suspend meaning, without forgetting it, that we let it float, so as not to dismiss the other layers of meanings accessible by attention to sound. This type of listening is practiced by psychoanalysts who were asked by Sigmund Freud to suspend attention. Theodor Reik suggests that analysts hear what is said pianissimo and resonates in their unconscious. Instead of seeking to understand and interpret a patient's words, such analysis aims to suspend knowledge, so that the psychoanalyst, by transforming the speaking unconscious into sound waves, becomes like a telephone. Freud made a similar recommendation to physicians:

> He (the doctor) must adjust himself to the patient as a telephone receiver is adjusted to the transmitting microphone. Just as the receiver converts back into sound waves the electric oscillations in the telephone line which were set up by sound waves, so the doctor's unconscious is able, from the derivatives of the unconscious which are communicated to him, to reconstruct that unconscious, which has determined the patient's free associations. (116)

Such analysis can be applied to the reading of texts. Even if the suspension of meaning seems contrary to an intelligent reading of any text, it is a condition for access to meanings that are sometimes contradictory to the explicit purpose. This attitude certainly goes against our reading habits, which favor the will of understanding an argument and rejecting the anguish of not immediately grasping it. Using our third ear implies the suspension of the explicit meaning of texts but also the suspension of our need for control.

But how do we read philosophy with a third ear? There is no need to presuppose an "unconscious of the text" and to pledge to decipher its logic, which risks reducing sound once again to a simple expressive function. Listening to texts is, rather, to track multidimensional psychic movements that proceed from grafts of words and sounds and that diffuse contradictory forces in the uttering

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and writing of a powerful concept. Indeed, concepts produce striking effects. They mark the sentences with their sound imprints, and the way they are rung says a lot about the thoughts of their authors. Listening to philosophical texts with the third ear makes it possible to hear the dramaturgy of ideas and demonstrations: some concepts rise with fanfare, others mezza voce; some shout, others whisper.

Listening to a text is thus not just perceiving sounds, even if this attention is a minimum requirement, intended to counter the voluntary deafness of the users of abstract language. Listening, as we have suggested, implies expanding the capacity of our ears, those that perceive, those that distract the will to understand, those that catch unexpected senses. It involves auditory memories—that is, ways of hearing, paying attention to one noise rather than another, and locating oneself in common sound milieus. Above all, this essentially relational listening implies that sounds are never alone but are connected to many other phenomena, like imagination, sensation, and signification. It is therefore a spectrum of infinite richness that attention to aurality can display, even—and particularly—in abstract texts that can be heard roaring and resounding louder than we thought possible.

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