

## FROM THE EDITORS

### LISTENING CAREFULLY

Perhaps the title of the present editorial article should be placed in inverted commas: not because the author is distancing herself from her chosen heading, but because it may be regarded as a quotation. The reason is that the words in question may be found in the introductory line of an article<sup>1</sup> addressing issues that lay outside the scope of (at least professional) interests of the authors of texts usually published in *Ethos*. The paper referred to presents an analysis of the specific harmonic tremor recorded at Lascar volcano in Chile. This specialist study in volcanology was accidentally rendered by an Internet search engine in response to a query regarding the theme of the present volume. The search engine listed the title of the paper among those of articles from the domains of the humanities and social sciences addressing mainly various aspects of human communication. In this context, the subject matter of the study, as well as its, as it were, general significance, appeared particularly salient. Regardless of the motives that inspired Margaret Hellweg to give such a ‘humanist’ title to her text, the image of listening to the murmurs of a volcano throws the attentive listening into sharp relief. In this case, listening is not related to interpersonal communication, but plays an even more fundamental role by protecting human beings from direct physical danger. The word ‘listening’ used in the title of the paper on volcanology is, to some extent, also a metaphor: the frequency of a volcanic tremor does not fall into the range detectable by the human ear, and to ‘hear’ the vibrations, it is necessary to enhance the sense of hearing with technical devices and to learn to analyze and interpret the measurements they render. Such ‘listening’ requires a sustained and organized effort. It seems that the history of human civilization and culture may be, in fact, told as a history of such a concerted effort to listen.

However, working on the present volume, I was accompanied by a different image, or a number of images-memories emotionally distant from the vision of an awakening volcano: instead of being colored with fear, they evoked the

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<sup>1</sup> See Margaret Hellweg, “Listening Carefully: Unique Observations of Harmonic Tremor at Lascar Volcano, Chile,” *Annali di Geofisica* 42, no. 3 (1999): 451–64.

sense of safety. All those memories concern my listening, in childhood, to books read aloud by the grown-up family members. I should have said ‘our’ listening, because also my brother participated in those reading sessions. We listened to a lot of books; they were read to us not only at bedtime, but at other times of the day as well, also long after we had learned to read on our own. I remember many of them quite well, to some I returned years later, curious whether my ‘grown-up’ impressions would be similar to those formed when I had been a child.

The circumstances of listening to individual books have almost all faded from my memory; there are, however, exceptions and I can recall some of the situations in detail. One of them must have occurred rather long ago, as I remember us children sitting in our little wooden armchairs that would not have accommodated an adolescent or an adult. We were at our grandmother’s house, seated around the old tile stove, the little iron hearth door open (we thus pretended to have gathered around a campfire), and father was reading aloud from an old, battered book. By the way, the novel (somewhat didactic) we were read told the adventures of the first Pole among the North American natives.<sup>2</sup>

We also listened to our father reading *The Odyssey*. As I was recently perusing the Polish translation we had heard at the time (by Stanisław Mleczko<sup>3</sup>, in the Polish hexameter), the idea of reading a Homeric poem to children seemed to me somewhat risky—even had we been older at the time and capable of sitting in full-size ‘adult’ armchairs. Yet father proved successful in his endeavor, as he had combined the ritual of reading and listening with watching a television series based on the Homer’s work. After each episode, father read to us the text aloud, sometimes finding in it suitable words to make us obediently go to bed, following the example of the characters in the story: “...they shared the dinner equally, and all had plenty, then they took the gift of sleep.”<sup>4</sup>

The gift of sleep after such an evening session was indeed a very good gift: I cannot recall difficulties in falling asleep or bad dreams featuring Odysseus or his companions. Perhaps I was protected by the ‘unusual’ language of the translation and by the rhythm of the verse. Many of the stories told by Homer have not, in fact, stirred my imagination or stayed in my memory. Yet I remember that I preferred not to ponder about the Cyclops, the way he had been blinded, or the sharp-wittedness shown by Odysseus in his effective ploy. In fact, I am unable today to tell what I remembered from those reading sessions and what influence they exerted on me. I know, however, that the story of Odysseus’s

<sup>2</sup> See Bolesław Zieliński, *Orli Szpon* (Lwów: Wydawnictwo M. Kowalski, 1944).

<sup>3</sup> See Homer, *Odysseja*, translated by Stanisław Mleczko (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Ultima Thule, 1934).

<sup>4</sup> Homer, *The Odyssey*, Book 16, translated by Emily Wilson (W.W. Norton & Company, Inc.: New York–London, 2018), 385.

prolonged homecoming stayed with me and it occasionally recurs, evoked by other stories, by events and ideas I encounter. I also find pleasure in the thought that owing to our sessions of reading and listening we reproduced the activities that are fundamental to culture: not only to the European culture, but, perhaps, to culture as such. The reading of Homer's epic, we, listeners were given something important and valuable: a kind of treasure. We can use it to our intellectual and moral benefit, but we are also expected to pass on the story.

The image of children listening to their father reading a book or telling a story is an attractive one, it breathes serenity, innocence, and 'good faith.' It is the image of passing on the good, and a relationship between the reader and the listener, is not the relationship of power. According to the logic inherent in this image, the speaker (or reader) had to be the listener first. There is a balance between reading and listening, or perhaps the image indicates a certain predominance of listening as it presupposes the commitment of both the reader and the listener to the good.

The image, however, may be interpreted in a different way: one may focus on the position of the reader (speaker) that seems to give him or her control over the listener, as well as on the connection between listening and obedience. The reader may be considered as active, and thus 'forming' the listener, and the latter as passive, as one who is 'being formed.' If we disregard the assumption concerning the commitment to the good, the resulting image resembles that of the relationship between master and slave, i.e. a structure that makes it possible for the speaker to attain his or her goals using the listeners.

According to Gemma Corradi Fiumara, the Western culture presupposes a predominance of speaking over listening, which has led to the present crisis in thinking: "...in the vast array of possible social interactions the stress inevitably falls on the irreplaceable value of the expressive capacity rather than on a propensity to listen. The 'attentive willingness' to listen is even perceived as an eminently 'futile' stance that need not even surface in our culture, in spite of the fact that it represents a vital and essential requisite for thought."<sup>5</sup> The diagnosis the author gives is not based merely on her observation of social practices. She believes the absence of the question of listening as a philosophical problem from the history of Western thought to be an even more important argument in favor of her claim: "'God grant the philosopher' insight into what lies in front of everyone's eyes" is one of Wittgenstein's remarks. Perhaps the problem of listening is also in front of our eyes and we simply fail to see it."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Gemma Corradi Fiumara, *The Other Side of Language: A Philosophy of Listening*, translated by Charles Lambert (New York: Routledge, 1990), 31.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem*, 31.

Interestingly, it is not critical listening that the Italian philosopher deems fundamental. In her view, the universal “logico-dialectic furor that drives us to come up with ever more critical questions while tacitly opposing proper hearing”<sup>7</sup> favors, in fact, hasty and superficial judgements and results in rejecting ideas without really understanding them. On the other hand, Corradi Fiumara observes that in the culture so focused on speaking, non-listening becomes a defense strategy<sup>8</sup> adopted to protect one both from an excess of messages and from certain ways of their ‘transmission’ (when they resemble “forced feeding, hypnotic induction or epistemic violence”<sup>9</sup>).

Listening is indispensable, but it is also dangerous. Having cited *The Odyssey*, it would be impossible not to be reminded of the Sirens whose song Odysseus wanted to hear—but not to follow. ‘Siren song’ has become a synonym of temptation and the story of how the king of Ithaca managed both to listen to their wonderful singing and save himself and his companions belongs among the most frequently interpreted episodes of the poem, continuing to inspire other works of art (not only literary ones). Retold again and again, through centuries, the story undergoes modification: the changes concern both the way it is understood (in some Christian interpretations, for instance, wax in the ears does not protect from temptation but prevents from hearing the voice of Christ<sup>10</sup>) and some ‘facts’ (there are also versions where Odysseus decided to stop with wax also his own ears, and not only those of his companions<sup>11</sup>).

In the short story “The Silence of the Sirens” by Franz Kafka (which proposes a puzzling ‘variation’ on the initial narrative), Odysseus chose to act in precisely this way as he wholeheartedly did not want to hear the voice of the marvelous creatures. And he did not hear it, but the reason was not the wax in his ears (as neither wax nor chaining to the mast would, according to Kafka, resist the power of the sirens’ song), but that the sirens remained silent. Probably (yet the writer did not decide this question, as “even the goddess of fate could not see into his [Odysseus’s] heart”<sup>12</sup>), the king of Ithaca did not even realize it. In fact, he defeated the sirens with his pride: “Against the feeling of having overcome them by one’s own strength, and against the resultant arrogance that sweeps everything with it, no earthly resistance is possible. ...

<sup>7</sup> Ibidem, 29.

<sup>8</sup> See ibidem, 82.

<sup>9</sup> Ibidem, 93.

<sup>10</sup> See Henryk Pietras, “Chrześcijańskie interpretacje *Odysei*,” *Przegląd Powszechny* 114, no. 12 (1997): 267-77.

<sup>11</sup> See Piotr Urbaniśki, “Dlaczego Odys zatkał sobie uszy woskiem? Komentarz do *Dafnidy* Samuela Twardowskiego,” in: *Mit Odysa w Gdańsku. Antykizacja w sztuce polskiej*, edited by Teresa Grzybkowska (Gdańsk, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Gdańskiego, 2000), 170–81.

<sup>12</sup> Franz Kafka, *The Silence of the Sirens*, translated by Malcolm Pasley, in: Franz Kafka, *The Great Wall of China and Other Short Works* (London: Penguin Books, 1991), 102.

The Sirens positively vanished from his awareness, and at the very moment when he was nearest to them he knew them no longer.”<sup>13</sup>

Regardless of the interpretation, the adventure of Odysseus points to a constitutive mark of the sense of hearing: it is impossible to “switch it off.” As Jakub Momro writes in his paper “Fenomenologia ucha” [“Phenomenology of the Ear”]: “Sounds seep through ceaselessly, they come from all the directions and continually permeate our bodies. At the same time, sounds open our perception to new possibilities and make the final and simple selection of the material impossible. We cannot ‘close’ our ears and stop listening.”<sup>14</sup> The author speaks about hearing the sound as such, and not about listening to meaningful words, but his observations seem to refer also to the latter. *Nota bene*, the sirens seduced sailors not only with the beauty of their singing, but also with the allure of stories they told in the songs (“...we know everything the Greeks and Trojans suffered in Troy, by gods’ will; and we know whatever happens anywhere on earth”<sup>15</sup>).

Presumably, we would sometimes prefer not to hear certain sounds that fill the soundscape in which we live (or to choose some of them to remain around us, while removing others), including some of the words that circulate in it—or, at least, we would like to be able not to listen to them. In the increasing noise of sounds and meanings it is also more than ever difficult to receive individual messages: some of them may prove as important as the harmonic tremor of a volcano.

Although the experience of the difficulty just described is generally shared, Corradi Fiumara’s view that the Western culture privileges speaking and expression rather than listening and reception may appear exaggerated. The question of listening seems appreciated and discussed by scholars representing different fields, including philosophy (which is confirmed, for example, by the present issue of *Ethos*), as well as by those who express it in their interesting social and artistic initiatives.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, it would be impossible to judge whether research and activities related to the problem of hearing and listening (or to the numerous problems related to hearing and listening, some of which have been signaled above) are sufficient. In the image, or memory, of listening

<sup>13</sup> Ibidem, 101f.

<sup>14</sup> Jakub Momro, “Fenomenologia ucha,” *Teksty Drugie*, no. 5 (2015): 11f. ([http://rcin.org.pl/Content/64977/WA248\\_81029\\_P-I-2524\\_momro-fenomeno\\_o.pdf](http://rcin.org.pl/Content/64977/WA248_81029_P-I-2524_momro-fenomeno_o.pdf)).

<sup>15</sup> Homer, *The Odyssey*, Book 12, 307.

<sup>16</sup> Let us mention, for example the program “Cała Polska czyta dzieciom” [“All of Poland Reads to Kids”] (<http://www.calapolskaczytadzieciom.pl>) and its international extension: “All of Europe Reads to Kids” (<http://www.allofpolandreadstokids.org/all-of-europe-reads-to-kids#>), or the Polish initiatives related to storytelling as an art form undertaken by Grupa Studnia O (<http://studnia.org/>) or Ośrodek „Brama Grodzka – Teatr NN” (<https://teatrnn.pl/opowiadacze/sztuka-opowiadania/>).

I have described, the most important is the balance between speaking and listening considered as a structure, or as a whole, and the subordination of that whole to the good. The Italian author, calling for the philosophical reflection on hearing and listening, appeals, in fact, for finding the balance: without it we are incapable of speaking. “The illusion that we can speak to others without being able to listen is, perhaps, one that we all share”<sup>17</sup>—writes Corradi Fiumara. She also seems to be looking for the nature of the good on which the balance in question rests. Thus her claim seems worth accepting, especially that, together with Franz Kafka, she makes the reader reflect on pride, which—like the pride of the king of Ithaca—deprives others of their voice.

*P. M.*

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<sup>17</sup> Corradi Fiumara, op. cit., 29.