

1. THE HERMENEUTIC CONVERSATION AND THE PIERCING DIALECTICS RESOUNDING IN LISTENING (OVERTURE FIGURES: HANS-GEORG GADAMER AND JEAN-LUC NANCY)

1.1. Conversations and things

This chapter aims to create a space for sharing some thoughts concerning the issue of listening and the dialectics contained in it, by taking the risk of inviting the reader to participate in a kind of dialogue with the two key thinkers: Gadamer and Nancy. Moreover, the idea of juxtaposing some of their thoughts is explored not because they are the same, but instead because they have something in common and can be treated to some extent as endeavors complementary to each other. What appears to be vital in their thinking on listening, lies somewhere “in” and “in-between” Gadamer’s notion of conversation and Nancy’s description of the experience of listening. The latter can be easily found in his essay entitled *Listening*, the former – in the legacy of Gadamer’s works devoted to philosophical hermeneutics itself, because the notion and experience of conversation is probably the most important “paradigm” of his original idea of hermeneutics.

In Gadamer’s *Truth and Method*, there is an expression “hermeneutical conversation.” It concerns the issue of the understanding of a text.¹ The understanding, which for Gadamer is identical with interpretation and application,² is very reminiscent of a live conversation which takes place between real persons.³ The text is a particular “other.” The text is

¹ H.-G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. 389.

² See *ibid.*, for instance: pp. 307, 308, 313, 324, or 385.

³ In order to show different and nuanced aspects of conversation and dialogue in Gadamerian hermeneutics, it is impossible not to mention an exceptional joint publication edited by Andrzej Wierciński: *Gadamer’s Hermeneutics and the Art of Conversation*, International Studies in Hermeneutics and Phenomenology, vol. 2, LIT Verlag, Berlin 2011.

the other that has its own voice indeed, however without the possibility to react to an interpretation *in statu nascendi* of this voice: a reader can understand the voice of the text (its content, if you like), but the text is not able to respond to the interpretation, like an interlocutor does in a real-life conversation. In this sense, this other (the text) is, on the one hand, quietened down, and on the other hand, it can be heard in the reader's act of reading it. Thus, one can say that the text as the readable other is *audible*. So, in turn, the task of hermeneutics and that of a hermeneutist who *understands* the text is to *bring* the voice of the other *to life*, to *re-vive* the other in the event of understanding, which, as an event, unfolds differently each time, if it happens at all. In order to enliven the text, the hermeneutist should strengthen the voice of the other, namely the text's voice, and build it up.⁴ James Risser's interpretation of the Gadamerian philosophical hermeneutics emphasizes the very spirit of it.

Nonetheless, one can ask: what does it mean to strengthen the voice of the other? If something needs to be strengthened, it means that it is too weak (by itself or due to some drowning out factors or circumstances) to be heard and, by consequence, understood. If somebody strengthens the voice of the text, it means first of all that they listen to what the other (the text, in this case) is actually saying, and they are able to voice it, to *co-utter* the text. In this attentive, respectful and committed *co-utterance*, the text (the other) is presented in its entire being, and its content is being brought back to life. As Gadamer emphasizes: without performance, there is no work of art, there is no text as well.⁵

Equally, Gadamer asserts that not everything is a *text*. There is a kind of speaking in which the situation and its context of a conversation dominate in the process of achieving an agreement. This form of speaking

⁴ H.-G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. 360 (dialectics as the art of the strengthening of the voice of the other).

⁵ See Chapter 1.B: "Transformation into structure and total mediation," in H.-G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, pp. 110–119, esp. p. 110. Polish translation of *transformation into structure* is "przemiana w wytwór", i.e. *transformation into work* (in a literal translation "wytwór" is English "product", but the sens of the word "wytwór" is "work" as in "work of art"). The word "structure" in Polish has a connotation of "construction." Cf. "As such, the play – even the unforeseen elements of improvisation – is in principle repeatable and hence permanent. It has the character of a work, of an *ergon* and not only of *energeia*. In this sense I call it a structure (*Gebilde*)," H.-G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. 110; and in the Polish edition: "Jako taka, gra – nawet nieprzewidziany wynik improwizacji – jest z zasady powtarzalna i w tym sensie utrwalona. Ma charakter dzieła, *ergon*, a nie tylko *energeia*. W tym sensie nazywam ją wytworem," H.-G. Gadamer, *Prawda i metoda. Zarys hermeneutyki filozoficznej* [Truth and method: The outline of the philosophical hermeneutics], transl. B. Baran, Inter Esse, Kraków 1993, p. 129.

Gadamer calls *anti-texts*.⁶ Two instances of these anti-texts are a joke (lack of seriousness and strong connection between what is uttered and the situation in which the joke is appropriate) and irony (here there is a sort of a phoniness, but at the same time it is connected with an expectation or at least hope that someone will grasp the relevance of the thing, despite the reverse way of communicating something; it demands a preliminary condition of an understanding). There are *pseudo-texts* (rhetoric with its ritual-functional role)⁷ and *pre-texts* (ideological texts that spread or propagate hidden interests, businesses – any criticism of them requires disclosure of this semblance). What characterizes all of them (anti-, pseudo- and pre-texts) is that they do not speak from themselves, but they are instead forms of informational messages in which the content's inner dynamic is a peripheral, if it is any at all, matter.

On the contrary, the texts of literature (especially the classic ones), called by Gadamer *eminent texts*, speak. It means to Gadamer that they should be listened to just like the voice of any living person. However, eminent texts induce a peculiar co-utterance of them. This co-utterance, i.e., uttering texts *sotto voce*, brings something that is dead back to life. In eminent texts language itself appears in an uncanny, peculiar and important way. So, the eminent text requires not only to be communicated (in reading) but to be read out and to be heard by an *inner ear*, so that the contained word and speaking could be presented. Every performance, in turn, assumes the previous listening to the thing, i.e., listening to what is to be understood. Of course, the question of time has to be taken into account in this case.⁸ After all, when I am listening, I am participating in something because listening is an experience of a delicate dialectics of the other and me, the dialectics of “the other” I am listening to, and the “I” who is listening to the other. So, it is a challenging thing to point to a precise moment in which something begins or ends. It is certain that listening does happen, takes its time and it is not possible to listen to and omit time, the listener is in a way a temporality of listening, and that is why they are what they are. The listener is an embodied, and thus spaced temporality of listening.

⁶ H.-G. Gadamer, “Text and Interpretation,” [in:] *Dialogue and Deconstruction: The Gadamer-Derrida Encounter*, eds. D. P. Michelfelder, R. E. Palmer, State University of New York Press, New York 1989, p. 37.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 37–39.

⁸ D. Vallega-Neu, “Disseminating Time: Durations, Configurations, and Chance,” *Research in Phenomenology* 47, no. 1, 2017, pp. 1–18. See also the recently published A. Wierciński, “The Hermeneutics of Lived Time: Education as the Way of Being,” [in:] *Relational Hermeneutics: Essays in Comparative Philosophy*, ed. P. Fairfield, S. Geniusas, Bloomsbury Academic, London 2018, pp. 52–62.

It is worth bringing back Gadamer's thoughts on language and things. His deliberation of the issue of the unity of words and things seems less enigmatic if we remember about his original concept of the speculativity of language. The concept does not mean that language is an intelligible abstraction of its own being, but – generally speaking – that there is unity (not identity, but rather an *eidocity*⁹) between language, thinking and the thing “expressed” in it.¹⁰ In his *dialogical and dialectical* hermeneutics,¹¹ Gadamer articulates an aspect, or rather an essence of the speculativity of language in the metaphor of blended horizons in understanding. Yet, assuming the speculativity of language¹² (i.e., the ontological dimension of the philosophical hermeneutics that enables speaking of the blending of horizons¹³), and at the same time assuming the dialectics (and a logic) of question and answer, one comes to the conclusion that *the audibility of things* ought to be considered here as well.

In the light of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's statement that everything is a symbol, Gadamer claims everything is in relation, “everything points to another thing. This ‘everything’ is not an assertion about each being, indicating what it is, but an assertion as to how it encounters man's understanding. [...] For only because the universal relatedness of being is concealed from human eyes does it need to be discovered.”¹⁴ However, does being in relation not mean to be audible? If so, in a sense everything speaks to us, and is audible even if the “thing” is a painting, a sight, a picture or something to be touched and felt

⁹ This neologism is inspired by a description of the Greek concept of *eidōs* discussed by Grondin, see J. Grondin, *Introduction à la métaphysique*, Press de l'Université de Montréal, Montréal 2004, pp. 58–61.

¹⁰ Cf. M. Przanowska, “*Verbum interius* jako fundujące doświadczenie hermeneutyki filozoficznej. Zarys dyskusji” [*Verbum interius* as the essential experience of philosophical hermeneutics. An outline of the discussion], *Archiwum Historii Filozofii i Myśli Społecznej* 61, 2016, pp. 223–248.

¹¹ See e.g. H.-G. Gadamer, “Hermeneutics and Logocentrism”, [in:] *Dialogue and Deconstruction: The Gadamer-Derrida Encounter*, eds. D. P. Michelfelder, R. E. Palmer, State University of New York Press, New York 1989, p. 121.

¹² For Andrzej Przyłębski it is debatable whether it is legitimate to give priority to the speculativity of language over an instrumental concept of it, criticized by Gadamer, see A. Przyłębski, “Gadamer's Critique of the Instrumental Philosophy of Language,” [in:] *Gadamer's Hermeneutics and the Art of Conversation*, ed. A. Wierciński, pp. 231–242.

¹³ One can find an elaboration of the subject in: J. Grondin, “La fusion des horizons. La version gadamérienne de l'adaequatio rei et intellectus?” *Archives de philosophie* 68, 2005, pp. 401–418.

¹⁴ H.-G. Gadamer, “Aesthetics and Hermeneutics (1964),” [in:] H.-G. Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, transl. and ed. D. E. Linge, University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles and London 2004, p. 103.

(see colloquial¹⁵: “to have a feel(ing) for” in the sense of understanding, belief or familiarity). Even if one would say that not everything – even a language – has sound properties or features, qualities perceived by everybody, it does not change our understanding of the phenomenon of the reality of listening: everything speaks, and the language of things can be experienced differently. Is it not a matter of our own attitude toward reality that can silence it, not allowing us to be opened up to the audibility of things? In the context which is opened (and somehow outlined) in this question, we must discover what a listening phenomenon, experience, and acoumenon mean. That is why Chapter 3 is dedicated to a phenomenology of listening, or rather to the phenomenological hermeneutics of it. For now, let us adhere to the Gadamerian concept of the abovementioned unity.

Another question is, however, whether there is a technique that could force things to speak to us? Just as Gadamer states, “the false paths of human self-understanding only reach their true through divine grace” (and that is why the real concept of self-understanding is to be conceived in terms of religious experience¹⁶), one can risk making a claim that it is a “divine grace” to see or to feel “voices” of things. In this sense, one can consider an artist or a thinker as the divine “chosen one.” Nonetheless, being an artist means perhaps, even more, being a dialectician who listens for the *logos* of reality – in the sense outlined below: *mousikē-logos*. It is an interesting point that, according to Danuta Szlagowska, sophists were those who considered music a pleasant combination of sounds and rhythms, and could not assign to music any psychological power of catharsis and healing (as Aristotle continued to believe). However, despite disputes about the psychological and ethical values of music, the theories of ethos and catharsis were revived at the close of antiquity.¹⁷

It seems that the difference between sophists and dialecticians in general is of great importance in Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics. Yet, it appears as well, that a vision of the difference is based on a more fundamental “attitude” toward reality. The “attitude” is rather a being-in-the-world, and it is echoed in the way of life and in the way of seeing (or better: seeing, feeling *in* listening to) things, generally speaking,

¹⁵ *Ad marginem*, according to Gadamer, a humanist, as well as a hermeneutist can learn something even from a complete amateur, H.-G. Gadamer, “Cóż to jest prawda?” [What is the truth?] [in:] H.-G. Gadamer, *Rozum, słowo, dzieje. Szkice wybrane*, transl. M. Łukasiewicz, K. Michalski, PIW, Warszawa 2000, p. 43.

¹⁶ H.-G. Gadamer, “The Nature of Things,” p. 80.

¹⁷ Cf. D. Szlagowska, *Kultura muzyczna antyku* [The music culture of antiquity], Wydawnictwo Akademii Muzycznej im. Stanisława Moniuszki, Gdańsk 1996, p. 73.

the attitude to the world in which we live. In the text “The Nature of Things and the Language of Things” Gadamer considers the relation between words, things, and soul in the following way:

What seemed the same [i.e. “the nature of things” and “the language of things” – M. P.] is not the same. It makes a difference whether a limit is experienced from out of the subjectivity of the fact of meaning and the domineering character of the will or whether it is conceived in terms of the all-embracing harmony of beings within the word disclosed by language. Our finite experience of the correspondence between words and things thus indicates something like what metaphysics once taught as the original harmony of all things created, especially as the commensurateness of the created soul to created things. This fact seems to me to be guaranteed not in “the nature of things,” which confronts other opinions and demands attention, but rather in “the language of things,” which wants to be heard in the way in which things bring themselves to expression in language.¹⁸

1.2. Audibility of things and voice-*mousikē*

The ancient theory of music and harmony of spheres is founded on a conviction that there is a mathematical base of music, i.e., one can find mathematical properties in different sounds and intervals between them. Motion, however, is considered as the reason for sound. Moreover, if we cannot hear the harmony or “the music of spheres,” it is because music works continuously and evenly.¹⁹ If it is so, it is *a difference* that enables us to hear something. In conclusion, it is necessary to say that our ability to hear or our incapacity to receive sounds cannot invalidate a conviction, or rather an intuition, of the *audibility* of the *thing*. Perhaps we ought to understand the Gadamerian attention to agreement in the light of harmony or being in harmony with the world and the other(s). The speculative unity or harmony does not, however, destroy or blunt the difference itself, but paradoxically, enables it or is constantly building it up. Each text – as the realm of the unity (due to its *dia*-logical structure of thinking) – has its own rhythm, its own music, because it is like poetry or, in general, any art over which the Muses presided, i.e., *μουσική* (*mousikē*).

James Risser refers to Plato’s *Phaedo*, in which Socrates says that “he was told in a dream to make music (*μουσικῆν*)” (Plato, *Phaedo* 60e).²⁰

¹⁸ H.-G. Gadamer, “The Nature of Things,” p. 81.

¹⁹ See D. Szlagowska, *Kultura muzyczna antyku*, p. 71.

²⁰ English quotations of Plato after Risser: J. Risser, *Hermeneutics and the Voice of the Other: Re-reading Gadamer’s Philosophical Hermeneutics*, State University of New York