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The Vocal Body

Extract from A Philosophical Encyclopedia of the Body

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Translated by Matt Langione

The following essay previously appeared in French as an entry in a *Dictionnaire du corps* published by PUF in 2007. The translation below is from the original, unpublished Italian manuscript.

Voice is so inherent to the human body that the body can be considered *its* instrument. The lungs, trachea, larynx, mouth and other organs of respiration and alimentation transform into organs of phonation (Tomatis 1991). The first cry of the newborn is voice and breath: a sonorous, vital announcement of a singular bodily existence. As each body is always unique, so each voice differs from all the others. And as is typical of a living being, each voice develops along a temporal arc of existence and marks the physiological points on this trajectory. From infancy to maturity to old age, the voice remains unique but changes as the body changes, most conspicuously in the case of male puberty. The development of the body, especially that of the gendered body, manifests itself vocally. Though predisposed to the perception of sound in general, the human ear is, above all, tuned to this vocal emission that reveals singular bodies to one another. In contrast to speech, the voice puts hearing in play even before listening.

Speaking Voice

Auditory perception is so strongly privileged that, in modern as in ancient languages, the terms corresponding to the English *voice* (Latin: *vox*, Greek: *phōnē*) tend to denote a large spectrum of sound phenomena with either animate or inanimate sources. This means that voice is not primarily human and that the “voice of the wind” is not necessarily a metaphor. Most modern dictionaries, however, define “voice” first as human voice, the ensemble of sounds emitted from the larynx and the system of phonation organs. They then specify in greater detail that such sounds are produced by the vocal chords entering into vibration under the effect of a rhythmic nerve excitation (Rey 1996); or that the breathing apparatus together with the nasal cavity and the mouth contribute to the emission of sound (Devoto and Oli 1990); or even that this type of definition applies equally to human and to animal phonation organs (*Oxford English Dictionary*). The inclusion of the animal is worth noting not only because the connection of the voice to the body ends up underscoring the physiological affinity between man and animal—at least, any animal equipped with a vocal apparatus—but above all, because the entrance of the animal into the primary and principal definition of voice functions as a sign, if not as a symptom, of the problematic and hardly self-evident decision to take voice to mean human voice in the first place.

More than simply anthropocentric, this choice can be defined as logocentric. It goes back to the complex point at which Greek philosophy is seen to privilege the connection between voice and speech, thus imprisoning voice in the realm of *logos* and in the cluster of questions that characterize the development of the philosophical tradition as a continuous reflection on language (Heidegger 1959). Given that the term *logos* can mean not only “speech” and “language” but also “discourse,” “number,” and, above all, “reason” and “thought,” in this context voice is consigned to play a role that generates a series of paradoxes. Consider the famous metaphor of the “voice of reason,” a conceptual analogue for the “voice of the soul,” which can be traced as far back as Plato (*Sophist* 263e), not to mention to the more modern “voice

of the conscience” (Desideri 1998). The metaphor illustrates the paradox for which, in the context of a *logos* taken tendentially as reason, voice is not only deprived of its sonorous physicality but, in its incorporeal form, becomes human voice par excellence inasmuch as the human is likewise defined as a rational animal. The usage dictionaries that make reference to the act of speaking in the primary definition of voice (Grimm 1941; Rey 1993; de Mauro 2000) have their roots in a conceptual history of the voice based on a philosophical stance that holds speaking to be dependent on thinking (Onians 1988). The conviction, typical of metaphysics, that to speak is to vocalize mental meanings, which are given the status of universality, exerts a determining influence on the problem of the nexus between voice and speech.

In ancient Greek the term *phōnē* denotes, in the first place, sound in general, which is to say the sonorous vibrations perceived by the ear, irrespective of the physical source emitting them. As is still the case in modern languages, more emphasis is put on the auditory impression than on its production: the sonorous order outweighs the vocal. This emphasis on acoustic perception succeeds even in signaling a difference between, on the one hand, inanimate things, things lacking the perceptive organs, and, on the other hand, those animal species equipped with them. Irrespective of his capacity for speech, man is in a position to carve out for himself an essential role both as the source of sonorous emission and, perhaps even above all, as the receiving ear. The exquisitely physical nature of the relation between voice and ear does not go unobserved by those philosophers who privilege the immateriality of thought. Parmenides mentions the echoing ear in his list of sensory faculties that prevent men from seizing upon the truth (*On Nature* B7), while, according to Plato, the ear is a funnel of flesh through which the physicality of the *phōnē* travels directly into the soul, compromising rational harmony (*Republic* 411a). Less obsessed with the danger of acoustic pleasures, Aristotle discourses on *phōnē* in a famous passage in the *Poetics* (1456b 20–57 a 30), where he regards sound (*phōnē*) as indivisible in each of its discrete elements—that is, the letters—by which the human voice (*phōnē*) is articulated, specifying that the indivisible sound units differ, among other things, “according to the

shape of the mouth” (1456b 31). Aside from the explicit reference to the body, here the structural bivalence of the term is emphasized once more, as *phōnē* can equally mean the emitted sound, specifically in its discrete articulations (the letters), and the total phenomenon of the sound’s emission and production. This also pertains, in the Greek language, to the case of musical instruments, in which *phōnē* means as much the type of sound (the voice of the flute) as the notes produced. The generalizing role of the ear becomes crucial.

In the *Poetics*, Aristotle specifically takes up the human capacity for phonation in relation to speech, in the context of an inquiry aiming to separate and classify the components of *logos*. Here defined as “signifying voice” (*phōnē semantikè*), *logos* is essentially regarded as language, that is, as a system, as a complex structure of signification. Posing as the precursor of the modern linguist, the philosopher begins by separating out the indivisible sounds emitted “by the mouth,” the letters whose union results in the syllables, which in turn assemble to form the nouns, the verbs, and, finally, the sentences, culminating ultimately in the *logos* of such a total system of signification, that is, in *logos* as nothing more or less than language: *phōnē semantikè* par excellence. In this system, as Aristotle affirms elsewhere, the *phōnē* coincides substantially with the ensemble of acoustic signs called upon to express mental realities or entities of thought (*On Interpretation* 1). Reduced to a dependence on the function of vocalizing mental significations, the *phōnē* thus earns by antonomasia “human voice” as its acceptance, insofar as the sounds emitted from man are put in the service of the entities of reason. The rational animal does not merely have a voice; it has a voice that is itself human, a voice that is, by its very nature as “human,” an instrument of thought.

As we know, the definition of man as a rational animal, however famous, is not a precise translation. Aristotle says in *Politics* (1253a10) that man is a *zoon logon echon*: a living being in possession of *logos*. This imprecision is, however, only superficial. Although *logos* is a “signifying voice,” what counts here is, above all, the domain of meaning, that is, the sphere of mental entities that can be classified in a system encapsulated very well by the term “reason.” The hierarchical opposition between mind and body is

obviously decisive here (Cavarero 1995). In this binary, one typical of logocentrism, the corporeality of the voice has a depreciating effect, rendering it a secondary and merely instrumental component of language when compared to language's semantic-rational component. In fact, if it is detached from this instrumental role, the *phōnē* loses its human specificity and, as Aristotle explains in the *Politics*, becomes merely a generic capacity, shared by men and animals, to emit sounds that express bodily and emotional states: grief, pleasure, and so forth (1253a10–12). What distinguishes man from animal is neither the voice nor the organ of phonation, but the signifying voice, that is, man's capacity to translate mental events into acoustic sounds that, when they concern the just, the useful and the harmful, identify him as a *zoon politikon*: a political animal (1253a3).

Beyond its importance for the history of political philosophy, this line of argument is crucial for those considering the patriarchal and sexist character of logocentrism. Other than distinguishing man from the animals, the “signifying voice” is in fact positioned to trace a distinction, entirely within the human species, between men and women. Only the former, according to Aristotle, possess *logos* in the full sense, while the latter are restricted to vocalizing meanings whose rational order they are scarcely able to master (1260a14). The term “man”—in ancient Greek as well as in modern languages—assumes the male as the universal paradigm of the human species (Irigaray 1977). Since man is defined as *zoon logon echon*, the position of woman within the human species is endowed with a connection to a *phōnē semantikē* emphasizing the vocal over and against the semantic component. The binary economy that opposes the mind to the body also opposes man to woman and, in one comprehensive logical move, the rationality of the semantic to the corporeality of the vocal. In the history of the Western imaginary, it is not rare to run into an extreme gap dividing the two components of *logos*, represented, on one side, by feminine figures embodying the pure voice (the Sirens, the nymph Echo, the divas), and, on the other, by the figure of the solitary thinker silently contemplating his Ideals, such as Plato's philosopher (*Republic* 516a–c).

Voice and Sexual Difference

Sexual difference might provide the necessary means to retrace a history of the voice that, in contrast to that given by logocentrism, would value its roots in the body (Cavarero 2003). This is not to disregard the human faculty of speech, but, as Zumthor suggests, to develop “a science of the voice” that would ultimately investigate “the ensemble of activities and values that are properties of vocality, independent of language” (Zumthor 2000). The Sirens are, in this regard, emblematic. In *The Odyssey* (12.181–200) their voice, though a fatally powerful sonorous emission, is connected to speech: the Homeric Sirens sing a narrative and are, indeed, even “omniscient” narrators. In the development of the Western imaginary, however, they tend to lose their capacity of speech, as their voice devolves into inarticulacy, a moan, a cry: vocal expressions of a profound corporeality, at once seductive and dangerous, inextricably linked to the animality inscribed even in their hybrid appearance (Mancini 2005). The voice of the Sirens is a non-semantic voice, the dangerous, fascinating effect of which gestures to a corporeality not yet—or no longer—dominated by reason and, therefore, to the realm of sexual impulses and of enjoyment in general. Creatures of the water who are themselves able to generate a maternal, amniotic fluid, the Sirens represent the nexus between the pleasure principle and the death drive. Like the nymph Echo in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* (3.339–510), who reverberates sounds, repeats, stutters, they call out to infantile regression, that is, to a state in which the voice as sonorous emission is not yet connected to the word and is unhinged from the system of signification. We are dealing, according to Horkheimer and Adorno, with a voice of bodily enjoyment that opposes the self’s rationality by inducing it to melt back into the bliss of its prehistory (Horkheimer and Adorno 1969).

This analysis applies all the more readily to song, in which musicality—insofar as it constitutes a particular and exclusive expression of the limits of sound—has the merit of alluding to the internal rhythms of the body, like the heartbeat, or the cadences of breathing. Well known is the theory, after all, that places acoustic-

vocal phenomena in the brain's right hemisphere, the seat of the emotions, in contrast to the left hemisphere, the seat of logical and rational thought (Jaynes 1977). The voice in general, and the voice of the song in particular, arouses the emotional sphere at the expense of the logical sphere. This explains why divas and other lyric singers are unmistakably linked to Sirens. In the soprano, and in operatic song in general, the voice not only reaches the heights of its expressive power but dominates the word, rendering the word secondary even as it transmits it. The Queen of the Night's second-act aria in Mozart's *The Magic Flute* exemplifies what we so often encounter in opera: a voice that, chasing after the expressive heights of its pure, sonorous material, expands to the point of dissolving the significance of the words. In this sense, opera has been interpreted as a theater on which, despite the inevitable misogyny of the libretto, the feminine principle of vocality prevails, every once in a while, over the masculine principle of rationality (Clément 1979; Koestenbaum 1993). Obviously, this thesis gains more and more strength the more the two components of *logos* are bifurcated into, on the one hand, the pole of pure voice, traditionally ascribed to the binomial woman-body, and on the other, the pole of pure thought ascribed to the binomial man-reason. Taken to a radical extreme, the tension within the Aristotelian *phōnē semantikhè* leads to a scenario in which voice assumes an antagonistic role with respect to semantics.

Voice and Writing

That voice is in a position to assume an antagonistic role with respect to the system of languages is a thesis shared, in various ways and according to various disciplinary approaches, by some of the most innovative theoretical perspectives of the late twentieth century. What unites them is not, however, a specific interest in the question of sexual difference, but instead a variously articulated but shared reflection on the theme of writing. Twentieth-century interest in writing is a notoriously well documented and complex phenomenon. To simplify, one might separate these reflections into two major groups: first, the wide range of studies on orality or,

more generally, on communication (Lord 1960; Havelock 1963; McLuhan 1967; Ong 1982; Zumthor 1983); and second, those studies that, alongside Derrida (*Voice and Phenomenon*), pursue a certain strand of French thought born of poststructuralism. It is, however, symptomatic that the studies on orality are rooted in an interest in the Homeric epic, which they analyze according to its dimension of vocal performance. The fundamental thesis here is that there is an essential difference, one ascribable to a specific historical transition, between oral culture and textual civilization, in which the first centers around the voice and the second around the eye (Havelock 1963). The society without writing—well exemplified by the figure of Homer—is characterized by a type of knowledge and communication in which the voice not only plays an essential role but influences the very structure of the word itself and, therefore, of language, which now bends to the rhythmic and sonorous demands of vocality.

The textual civilization—exemplified by Plato, and more generally by the birth of philosophy—depends instead on the centrality of the eye and on a detached relationship with a language that, because it must be put into visually enduring signs, over time condenses into an objective and permanent form, favoring analytical thought and the possibility of attributing a mental reality to speech. Oral cultures rely on the flow of sound, fleeting and temporally irreversible, in an acoustic-vocal sphere that puts bodies in communication and brings them together physically. Writing is, by contrast, a solitary activity. In terms of etymology, it is emphasized that the epic refers to an “epos,” the Indo-European root of which, *wekw-*, is the same as the Latin *vox*, French *voix*, Italian *voce*, English *voice*, and so on (Ong 1982). An equally interesting etymology can be traced from the Latin term for mouth—*os*, *oris*—meaning both orifice and origin, suggesting that the voice lives in those vital regions where food enters and respiration traverses the body (Zumthor 1983). This crucial issue surfaces regularly in contemporary and interdisciplinary studies on voice, especially those conducted from an anthropological point of view (Bologna 2000). Following the Judaic turn toward the spiritual, this originary sonority is connected to the creative power of the divine breath (*rouah*)—

which will be replaced in the Christian tradition with a God that creates instead through the Word, the *Verbum*—and, more generally, to vocal practices such as Gregorian chant or meditation on the vibration of the syllable *om*.

A lesser interest in anthropological and religious aspects of the vocal emission instead characterizes the aforementioned strand of contemporary French thought that, while in a different way than the studies on orality, also reflects upon the interweaving of voice and text. Kristeva maintains that the vocal sphere (which she calls “semiotic chora”), where rhythmic and unconscious impulses rule, precedes and exceeds the symbolic system of language, manifesting itself especially in the poetic text (Kristeva 1974). Insisting on a pleasure of the text that is detached from the urgency of signification, Barthes proposes writing aloud, a practice that could render sensible the very grain of the throat, the voluptuousness of the vocals, and all the fleshy stereophonics of a language covered with skin (Barthes 1973). Hélène Cixous speaks of an *écriture féminine* linked explicitly to the maternal figure, wherein a voice sings that is breath and nourishment, an infinite enjoyment, a bodily music that breaks out of the phallogocentric prison of syntax (Cixous 1986). These perspectives, all variously influenced by psychoanalysis, thus emphasize sonorous materiality and the corporeality of a voice that becomes antagonistic to, or at least disruptive of, the rational system of signification. Their insistence on text and writing, however, leads to the problem of an acoustic sphere that risks remaining trapped in the visual. In reference to phenomenology’s acceptance of the voice (Ihde 1976), this problem is confirmed by the complicated position of Derrida, who, from the standpoint of a writing he strove to understand as *différance*—the realm of deferral and of the infinite proliferation of signs—paradoxically criticizes metaphysical logocentrism as phonocentric (*Voice and Phenomenon; Of Grammatology*). Although Nancy would revoke this thesis (Nancy 2002), albeit with Derridean arguments and in the name of sound rather than voice, Derrida’s contention directly opposes the more widely held idea that metaphysics is based on the centrality of seeing, to the detriment of hearing (Jonas 2001). More interesting for a recovery of vocal corporeality in language

are contemporary experiments on voice that valorize the theatrical (Bene 2003) or poetic (Brathwaite 1984) performance. Against the codes of logocentrism, they maintain that, even before representing the corporeality of speaking (Barthes and Havas 1976), the voice is sound, vibrations of a fleshly throat that, bubbling out of the depths of the body, expands in the air and penetrates the ear.

The Singularity of Voices

In the story “A King Listens,” Italo Calvino writes that the “voice comes certainly from a person, unique, inimitable, like every person . . . a living person, throat, chest, feelings, who sends into the air this voice, different from all other voices” (Calvino 1988, 53–54). Routinely ignored by philosophy, with some rare exceptions (Nancy 1982), the phenomenon of the singularity of the voice does not escape the scrutiny of Calvino’s narrator. To recognize someone by the sound of voice his or her is an everyday experience for all of us: electronic vocal analysis, made famous by its use in police investigations, is premised on this elementary fact. The infant recognizes the mother’s voice in its very first weeks of life. This recognition, which is, after all, mutual, also represents the communication of a corporeality that, because it is unique and irreplaceable, is expressed vocally. Even before communicating something through the word—whether a mental meaning or an emotive state—human beings communicate with their voices.

This is not to deny Aristotle’s claim that human particularity inheres in words, but rather to challenge the reduction of voice to an instrument of speech. Communicating corporeal singularity, the voice precedes, renders possible, and exceeds any linguistic form of communication. The musicality of the song, in this sense, is no more than a natural extension of the musicality of any given language, insofar as any language already carries in itself the rhythmic resonance of voices that, as in the vocal exchanges between mother and infant, between variation and repetition, call to one another. The first music is Echo: an echo, however, where the ricochet of the voice comes from individual bodies that, as Calvino already mentioned, transmit “the pleasure of giving a personal form to

sound waves” (Calvino 1988, 54). Such a pleasure, ultimately tied to sound emission and not only to auditory reception—to the personal voice and not only to the other’s ear, as the fable of the Sirens would have it—far from eliciting a death drive, demonstrates the vitality of an individual body. In the emission of sound that comes from the depths of the body and escapes to the outside in order to penetrate the ear of another, thus evoking another voice in response, the reciprocity of communicating is a revelation, a relation, and an (inter)dependence. Tone and emotional expressivity, as well as musicality and even speech, are always contained in this primary relationality of the human voice. No coincidence, then, that the voice is thought of as traditionally feminine; the voice alludes to a body, singular but not sealed off in its individual self-sufficiency, which opens and welcomes another, tuning the body’s music to the rhythms of life.

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