THE AURAL: HEIDEGGER AND FUNDAMENTAL OTO-CHEIRO-LOGY II GEORGIOS TSAGDIS

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Hearing even constitutes the primary and
authentic openness of Da-sein for
its ownmost possibility of being¹

—Heidegger, *Being and Time*

The ear. Certainly, the hand and the ear. The distances and spaces, the fields they demarcate; this is the question at hand, at the heart of *mediality*. At the same time, the hand and the ear designate the figural limits of *epochality*, the emergence of time, no less than the time of emergence, all that is decisive in the *kairos* that sets into motion an era. And as perhaps we seem to be drifting away from the era of the writing hand, an era with only an ear for itself—or rather as this era seems to be drifting away from us—we, who ask on the meaning of this ‘we’, unavoidably also ask on the meaning of the ear. Self (*auto*) and ear (*oto*) are asked together.

THE SELF AND THE EAR

The question persists: Why *this* question? To muster the self and the ear in the intensity of this proximity, more than a claim to a distorted homophony and the augury of an epochal closure is needed. We begin to discover the necessity of this proximity in Heidegger’s epigraph. In order to open up and remain open in its ownmost possibility, the possibility of being that most properly belongs to *itself*, in order that is to *be*—the verb moving here beyond the copula—*itself* (*auto*), Da-sein must be able to hear; this untranslatable existence must develop an ear (*oto*) for hearing. For certainly, not every ear hears. We hear more closely, longer:

Hearing is constitutive for discourse. And just as linguistic utterance is based on discourse, acoustic perception is based on hearing. Listening to ... is the existential being-open of Da-sein as *being-with for the other*. Hearing even constitutes the primary and authentic openness of Da-sein for its ownmost possibility of being, as in hearing *the voice of the friend* whom every Da-sein carries with it. Da-sein hears because it understands.²

Discourse and the other, *for* if not *from* the other. Openness towards oneself as being-with. Hearing as understanding. The voice of the friend. The Heideggerian fragment mobilizes more than the whole apparatus of *Being and Time*, in what it calls to be understood. It proposes an intricate constellation of notions, which seem arranged along a hierarchy of orders of primordality, while folding at the same time this hierarchy upon itself.

1 Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (Albany: SUNY Press, 1996) § 34, 153.

2 Ibid., 153. My emphasis.

Heidegger writes: “The existential-ontological foundation of language is discourse [*Rede*].”³ And then: “Discourse is existentially equiprimordial with attunement and understanding.”⁴ The translation of *Rede* into discourse is sufficiently perplexing; those who hear the German, understand the word as conversation and speech in their pre-differentiated unity. Logos is here dialogue rather than dialectic; and it finds itself on par with understanding. Yet, Heidegger adds: “Hearing and keeping silent are possibilities belonging to discoursing speech [*redenden Sprechen*],”⁵ while as we already know: “Hearing is constitutive for discourse.”⁶ And then: “Discourse and hearing are grounded in understanding.”⁷ Collecting the utterances under a principle of transitivity, hearing appears as a constitutive possibility of *Rede*, which like the latter is grounded in, despite being equiprimordial with, understanding.

These tensions—constitution and possibility, ground and equality, the ontological before and after, no less than synchronicity—should not be understood as slips or contradictions, but undoubtedly through the logic of the supplement, in the opening between description and declaration. Hearing is grounded in understanding, which nonetheless it supplements—for without hearing there is no understanding. Indeed, hearing [*hören*] as the most generic term is refracted into hearkening [*hören*], that is, a hearing that understands,⁸ and listening [*zuhören*], which accompanies as a before and an after the intelligibility of articulated discourse.

The logic of the supplement is redoubled within *hearing*, for not only—thinking for a moment against Heidegger—is the genus of hearing ontologically supported by its most profound species—namely, hearkening—but in all this, *silence* with its various modulations, presents a specific complication at the heart of hearing and in turn of discourse and understanding altogether. Heidegger: “As a *mode of discourse*, reticence [*Verschwiegenheit*] articulates the intelligibility of *Da-sein* so primordially that it gives rise to a genuine potentiality for hearing and to a being-with-one-another that is transparent.”⁹ One mode of discourse offers the potentiality of another. Equality and synchronicity do not preclude conditioning. A certain modulation of the mode of hearing makes the latter, indeed its most profound mode, possible. Silence as reticence potentialities hearkening, that is, understanding in hearing: “in talking with one another the person who is silent can ‘let something be understood’.”¹⁰

3 Ibid., 150.

4 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 150.

5 Ibid., 151.

6 Ibid., 153.

7 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 154.

8 Ibid., 153.

9 Ibid., 154. My emphasis.

10 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 154.

Yet, at the same time, silence is conditioned upon *Rede* and understanding: “Authentic silence is possible only in genuine discourse.” And: “he who never says anything is also unable to keep silent at a given moment.”¹¹ Finally, although there is no understanding without hearing, and no proper hearing without silence, we also hear that “Da-sein hears *because* it understands.” In this cascade of supplements, the attuned ear and understanding converge.

Similarly, the hand converges with thought:

And only when man speaks, does he think—not the other way around, as metaphysics still believes. Every motion of the hand in every of its works carries itself through the element of thinking, every bearing of the hand bears itself in that element. All the work of the hand is rooted in thinking. Therefore, thinking itself is man’s simplest, and for that reason hardest, handiwork [*Handwerk*], if it would be accomplished at its proper time.¹²

One thinks because one speaks, one hears because one understands. These propositions, in the various possibilities of their mutual folds (one speaks because one understands, one thinks because one hears, and so on), demarcate a series of imperfectly aligned sequences, sequences which do not run parallel—a series of supplements and intersections. The hand appears in *What is Called Thinking?* as the figure that articulates speech *and* thought, while nothing seems to collect in *Being and Time* hearing *and* understanding. The present essay proposes the ear (Greek *ous*) as the figure of this collection—it might no less have been the mouth (Latin *os*), since ear and mouth are aligned on the side of ‘discoursing speech’,¹³ hand and eye on the side of writing, understood in a limited sense from within this polarity. If the hand in Heidegger, as in the passage above, appears to cut across this alignment, reaching out towards speech, it is because writing receives even here its significance from speech—language is primordially *Rede*—and yet *the hand thinks*, thought is the simplest and hardest, the most essential handiwork.

In sum, a strange ear. Just like the hand, it must be thought as severed, incorporeal and singular. Unlike the hand, however, it is unspoken, unarticulated, absent, since Heidegger nowhere thematizes the ear, preferring to speak instead of *hearing* (underwriting at the outset

¹¹ Ibid., 154.

¹² Martin Heidegger, *What is Called Thinking?*, trans. Fred D. Wieck and Glenn J. Gray (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), 16–17. The German in brackets is my inclusion.

¹³ The exposition of the inextricable alignment of orality and aurality, must necessarily remain incomplete without turning to *Being and Time*, § 29, where the *Stimmung* supplants the *Stimme* in conveying ‘Being in its *Da*’. Here, Agamben’s iteration of Novalis’s understanding of *Stimmung* as the ‘acoustics of the soul’, will have to serve as an indication in the place of such exposition. Giorgio Agamben, *Language and Death, The Place of Negativity*, trans. Karen E. Pinkus with Michael Hardt (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 55–56.

aural incorporeality). This ear we think with and against Heidegger, in order to think its folds, beyond the helix and the antihelix; what calls to be understood is the way in which the ear constitutes the supplement of understanding, upon which it is in turn constituted. Albeit far from conclusive, the analysis of this supplementation must now give way to an examination of the way in which the absent body of the ear allows for the constitution of the space of existence.

Heidegger opens the section on discourse and language by means of a fissure, or rather an opening up of Dasein, foregrounding the *being* of the *there* [Da]: “The fundamental existentials which constitute the being of the there [*das Sein des Da*], the disclosedness of being-in-the-world, are attunement and understanding.”¹⁴ The being of the there, which designates the being of the world as a being *in* the world, is constituted by what in turn the supplement of the ear constitutes. Although Dasein is not a subject, being barely a *self*, it is surely itself, fulfilling its ownmost possibility insofar as its being is an issue for itself, insofar as it hearkens. Accordingly, the there of being opens up the space of the self, by constituting the being of the there as a certain soundscape, a certain field of sonority. The ear supplements the self by delineating its horizon, that is, the field of *mediality*.

MEDIALITY AS PHILOTELEGRAMOPHONY

The field of mediality comprises the material and immaterial structures and dynamic processes that support all mediation. In being-with, the field of mediality constitutes the hyphen, the passage from Being to the with—already underway, always incomplete. The effort of this passage, its precarity and fragility we call communication. Communication determines the folds of the ear.

In this indeterminate determination, communication folds the ear upon itself as well as upon attunement and understanding. One comes here across the other. In discovering its ownmost possibility, Dasein discovers the other. Indeed, the text warrants, perhaps even necessitates, the inverse movement, which Heidegger would relinquish unto Levinas: Dasein arrives at itself only through hearing, which is always the hearing of the other, as other. Through the effort of communication Dasein discovers *itself as an other*.

No less is understanding at the outset an understanding-with: “*Mitda-sein* is essentially already manifest in attunement-with and understanding-with.”¹⁵ One understands either with *das Man*, the Heideggerian *hoi polloi*, thereby failing in truth to understand, or with the friend—Heidegger never says: the lover. It is in the distance of a

¹⁴ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, § 34, 150.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 152.

stellar friendship that the sharing of communication must be sought. A friendless *Da-sein*, if such an existence were possible, would be an existence unable to recover truth in communication.

In order to carry on, it is important to tarry here. *Da-sein* carries the voice of the friend. For Fynsk this carrying is constant and silent: “in its silence, the voice of the friend speaks to *Dasein* of its death.”¹⁶ Death is never far for Heidegger; it is undoubtedly at the heart of these reflections. But the identification of the voice of the friend with the voice of death merits a slower pace. Carrying here designates the *imperative* of the ‘with’. Insofar as being is being-with, one must carry the other. The words of Celan, which were to leave an indelible mark on late Derrida, resound here differently:

Die Welt ist fort, ich muss dich tragen.¹⁷

The death of the other, each time the unique end of the world; the end of the world, each time the death of the unique other. *Dasein* carries not only its own death but at the same time the death of the other; it carries the community of death. The voice of the friend speaks in silence when the friend is absent, temporarily, somehow always permanently. A familiar *phonē* arrives from an inscrutable distance. This spectral telephony is always *with* oneself—Heidegger writes here *bei sich*, rather than *mit*. We are reminded that *bei-sich-sein* designates in Hegel the absolute concept, the spirit “that has made its way to both inside and outside.”¹⁸ Although the Hegelian nexus exceeds the present horizon, the passage between interiority and exteriority is decisive.

The voice always bespeaks an interiority, even where interiority has lost all sense, as in the case of the voice of God. The voice is living spirit, life itself of the ghost in the machine. At the same time the voice is exteriorization, its reaches delimit the field of sonority and thereby the horizon of communication. The voice refracts the unity of spirit, marks the passage of an inside to an outside:

For before any appliance bearing the name ‘telephone’ in modern times, the telephonic *technē* is at work within the voice, multiplying the writing of voices without any instruments, as Mallarmé would say, a mental telephony, which, inscribing remoteness, distance, *différance*, and spacing [*espacement*] in the *phonē*, at the same time institutes, forbids, and interferes with the so-called monologue.¹⁹

16 Christopher Fynsk, *Heidegger: Thought and Historicity* (London: Cornell University Press, 1993), 43.

17 From the collection *Atemwende*. “The world is gone, I must carry you.” See Michael Hamburger, *Poems of Paul Celan* (New York: Persea Books, 1988), 267.

18 David Farrell Krell, *Phantoms of the Other, Four Generations of Derrida’s Geschlecht* (Albany: SUNY, 2015), 108.

19 Jacques Derrida, ‘Ulysses Gramophone, Hear Say Yes in Joy’, trans. Tina Kendall and Shari Benstock, in *Acts of Literature*, ed. Derek Attridge (London: Routledge, 1992), 271–272.

Voice, which is always the voice of the other, interrupts monologue. This interruption is the first death, as the voice loses the plenitude of life sustained within interiority, the absolute proximity of the voice. This necessary loss, recuperated through countless effects, proceeds upon a law of spacing that measures the distance from the point zero of interiority. The formula is here catalytic: "Existentially expressed, being-with-one-another has the character of *distantiality* [*Abständigkeit*]." ²⁰

On the one hand, in Heidegger's understanding, one distances oneself from the 'they' that distances itself in turn, setting into motion an incessant struggle of egotism, if not narcissism, against the mass imperative of the erasure of all distance. Dasein constantly reinstates its distance, sustained by the phobia of a relapse into the levelling of average uniformity. Being-with is here the impersonal abyss whence one constantly strives to escape. On the other hand, one always carries the voice of the friend as the distance within; a benevolent distance and an ideal proximity. Here, being-with discovers the harmony of *distantiality*, the law of spacing supporting the uniqueness of Dasein. Carrying the other, carrying the distance-within, Dasein discovers its ownmost possibility, it arrives, however fleetingly, at its absolute self-proximity. In a contrary motion, the Dasein attempts to produce a distance from the plural other (the 'they'), by hearkening to the distance-within, which the Dasein receives from the singular other (the friend). In this motion the Dasein escapes the vortex of absolute proximity of the other, to arrive at the absolute proximity of itself as an other.

The ear supplements, making good the foredoomed motion. The voice of the friend no less than the voice of Being is at once too far and too near. The ear folds this impossible distance upon itself in a communion of the far and the near:

Therefore, if 'Being is farther than all beings and is yet nearer to man than every being', if 'Being is the nearest', then one must be able to say that Being is what is near to man, and that man is what is near to Being. The near is the proper; the proper is the nearest (*prope*, *proprius*). *Man is the proper of what right near to him whispers in his ear*; Being is the proper of man, such is the truth that speaks, such is the proposition which gives the there of the truth of Being and the truth of man. ²¹

All the same, the proper of proximity reaches man as the remotest. Dasein is left with two possibilities: either to accept the necessary law of spacing at the heart of the voice, and thus allow the self-inscription of this telephony of friendship. Accordingly, by welcoming this *grammē* inside, to discover the exteriority of the interior, of the ownmost, to

²⁰ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, § 27, 118.

²¹ Jacques Derrida, 'The Ends of Man', in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1986), 133

witness itself as a record, perhaps even a trace of this philotelegramophony. Or, in order to resist this monstrosity of language, to strive to maintain the living voice, which speaks always of death, in the life of one's existence. In that sense, to carry the other amounts to an interdiction against recording his voice, against witnessing and bearing witness to it as a voice of distance, and by the same token, the voice of an other. To carry the voice of the other in absolute self-proximity, is thus to *incorporate* the other in the living presence of the self. The absent corporeality of the ear echoes in the labour of carrying the living body of the voice of the other, a sonic incorporation.

The latter response traverses the history of metaphysics, from Plato through Hegel to Heidegger and beyond. The earlier infects it from the beginning and outlines the limits of its closure—as such the limits of an epoch and the *kairos* of its abandonment. It outlines the operation of oto-cheiro-logy as auto-kairo-logy.

FINAL TRANSMISSION

We experience the becoming-manifest of the trace. As such we experience a profound tension. Levinas, who was among the first to sense this epochal tension and thus among the first to thematize the trace, understands it, at the outset, through the phenomenological logic of concealment: “the signifyingness of a trace consists in signifying without making appear,” its exceptionality consisting “in that it signifies outside of every intention of signalling.”²² A sign, which signifies without intention and without even appearing, the trace complicates and transforms the logic of concealment.

The epochal tension consists in forcing into appearance what has hitherto been the most recalcitrant and had in its elusiveness both supported and undermined a history of metaphysical figurations that comprise much more than the history of philosophy. Science and literature advance and bear testimony—retaining the traces—of the struggle towards the arrival at this epochal tension. Kittler marks Rilke's decisive contribution:

Rilke draws conclusions more radical than all scientific boldness. Before him, nobody had ever suggested to decode a trace that nobody had encoded and that encoded nothing. Ever since the invention of the phonograph, there has been writing without a subject. It is no longer necessary to assign an author to every trace, not even God.²³

22 Emmanuel Levinas, ‘The Trace of the Other’, trans. Alphonso Lingis, in *Deconstruction in Context, Literature and Philosophy*, ed. Mark C. Taylor (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1986), 356.

23 Friedrich A. Kittler, *Gramophone, Film Typewriter*, trans. Geoffrey Winthrop-Young and Michael Wutz (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 44.

Not only is the interiority of the author abolished, but the author is altogether elided. With the same stroke, or rather the same inscription, the trace reaches beyond signification. The trace becomes a sign which might or might not signify, establishing a non-exclusive relation between the two possibilities. The ear still hearkens the record of these traces, balancing over the abyss of the two possibilities.