

Commentary

Silences and Solitudes, Between the Human and the Divine

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Abstract

The attempts at dialogue, in the 1950s and 1960s, between the journalist Sergio Zavoli and the cloistered nun Maria Teresa offer us the opportunity to dwell on the connections between experiences such as solitude, dialogue, silence, listening. Phenomena on which philosophers such as Aristotle and Hume shed light. In Hume, the Aristotelian *philía*, based on utility and/or pleasure and/or virtue, is accompanied and almost replaced by that linked to joy and the need to share. And involuntary solitude becomes a painful condition and a torment of the body and soul, a real misfortune. What happens, however, when solitude is voluntary, for example aimed at listening to God? In reality, as the life of Sister Maria Teresa shows, there can be an intimate and fruitful tension between silent conversation with God and interhuman dialogue. She seeks and loves men in God for a long time, then slowly learns to seek and love God in men. Here, among other things, André Neher's intuition is confirmed, according to which dialogue is nourished by both silences and words, sometimes accompanied by a meta-silence dimension, which transcends both. At a certain point, Sister Maria Teresa feels a sort of vertigo: the silence of the cloister is too silent, that isolation risks translating into arid solitude, that silence, more silent than any noise and any silence, becomes an

Keywords

Solitude, Silence, Words, Dialogue

1. Introduction

My contribution intends to study from a philosophical point of view the dialogue, of a journalistic nature, between Sister Maria Teresa of Jesus and Sergio Zavoli [1], throughout the 1950s and 1960s. Furthermore, I aim to combine the theme of solitude – and isolation – to that of silence, of silences, primarily human.

1 S. Zavoli, *Socialista di Dio*, Arnoldo Mondadori Editore, Milano 1981, pp. 270-283.

2. Friendship and Solitude, Between Aristotle and Hume

Aristotle, particularly in *Politics*, proposes between the lines an articulated relationship between “the Greek”, living in the polis, and “the barbarian”, for example “the Persian”. Both are social animals, or sociable animals, but with the polis, represented by a community of “friends” united mainly by “usefulness” and in lesser numbers by “virtue”, as we read in the *Nicomachean Ethics* («for you cannot make a city with ten men, and with a hundred thousand it is no longer a city: but certainly their quantity is not given by a single determined number, but by any number within certain limits» [2]), popu-

2 Aristotele, *Etica Nicomachea*, C. Mazzarelli (a cura di), Bompiani, Firen-

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lated by the "political animals" properly speaking. Not only that: the political nature of humans is intimately linked to the gift of speech. Let us listen:

«From this, then, it is evident that the City is part of the things that exist by nature, that man is by nature a political animal and that he who has no City, by nature and not by chance, is either a man of little worth or is more than a man, and even by Homer is said, with contempt: 'without relations, without law, without hearth'. Indeed, such a man by nature is, at the same time, also eager for conflict, precisely as if he were an isolated pawn on the chessboard. That man is more of a political animal than any bee or flock animal is clear. For nature, as we say, does nothing without reason and man is the only one among animals who possesses speech. If the voice signals pain and pleasure, and is therefore also the prerogative of other animals (so far, in fact, comes their nature: to feel pain and pleasure and signal them to each other), the word, on the other hand, serves to show the useful and the harmful and, consequently, the just and the unjust: it is in fact proper of man, compared to the other animals, to be the only one to have perception of good and evil, of just and unjust and so on»^[3].

Hence the juxtaposition of solitude and silence is easily deduced. Not only that: the moral nature of human beings, combined with the gift of speech, is emphasised. The Stagirite thus posits a very close link between articulate language, politics, morality, as if it were an indissoluble triad.

Ultimately, he closely juxtaposes sociability, political life, and culture. In a profoundly dissimilar context, however, David Hume emphasises the connection between sympathy, friendship, and sociability, as opposed to solitude. Sympathy, in a meaning very close to the word empathy, allows us to participate in the feelings of others: «In short, there is nothing left that can make us feel esteem for power and wealth, and contempt for squalor and poverty, except the principle of sympathy, by which we enter into the feelings of the rich and the poor, and participate in their pleasure and their pain»^[4]. One page later and we find the celebrated considerations on loneliness:

«Total solitude is perhaps the worst punishment one can inflict upon oneself. Any pleasure languishes if it is not enjoyed in company, and any pain becomes more cruel and intolerable. Whatever the passion that moves us, pride, ambition, avarice, lust for knowledge, desire for revenge, or concupiscence, of all sympathy is the soul or animating principle; and it would have no force if we made complete abstraction from the thoughts and feelings of others. If even all the forces and elements of nature agreed to serve one man and obey him; if even the sun rose and set at his command; if even the sea and the rivers flowed at his pleasure, and the earth spontaneously produced all that was useful or pleasing to him, he would still be unhappy until he was given at least one other person with

whom he could share his happiness and whose esteem and friendship he could enjoy»^[5].

The Humean perspective is evidently more "sentimental" than the Aristotelian one; it is more based on emotional and affective, private and intimate aspects. The phil á based on usefulness and/or pleasure and/or virtue is here flanked and almost replaced by that linked to joy and the need to share. And involuntary loneliness becomes a painful condition and a torment of the body and soul, a real misfortune (Hume, in fact, somewhat relativises the distinction between the "voluntary" or "involuntary" character of "aptitudes" or "virtues" and, more generally, of the human condition and the situation of individuals, although he does not reject it^[6]).

Beware, however: the discourse is more multifaceted and complex than it would seem. One can "share" even at a distance. Spatial and temporal distances do not necessarily erase passions and interhuman bonds (Aristotle, on the other hand, noted that «if absence lasts over time, it admittedly makes one forget friendship as well. Hence the saying: 'Many friendships, therefore, made the impossibility of speaking to one another'»^[7]). In the quotation, he even exhumes a very rare word such as *aprosogoria*). Hume writes:

«While despair and a sense of security, however contrary they may be, produce the same effects, we can see that distance has contrary effects and in different circumstances either increases or diminishes our affections. The Duke de la Rochefoucauld has very rightly observed that distance destroys weak passions, while it increases strong ones; in the same way as a gust of wind puts out a candle, but revives a fire. Prolonged distance naturally weakens our idea and diminishes the passion: but when the idea is so strong and lively that it sustains itself, then the pain that comes from distance revives the passion and gives it new strength and violence»^[8].

Words and Silences in a Perspective of Faith: André Neher's Lesson

For the believer and, more generally, from a faith perspective, the interhuman dimension, which we call "horizontal" for convenience, is flanked by the "vertical" one: the words and silences that can bind us to (or bring us into conflict with) God. Human words and silences, then, and divine ones. And here lies the discourse, among others, of André Neher: between the word and the silence, he teaches, «there is a third dimension, that of dialogue», «of the face to face», physical or metaphorical, which «are neither word nor silence even though they are one and the other together»^[9]. So much so that, pushing the discourse to its extreme consequences, one can go so far as to affirm that the only (or the highest) form of prayer may be silence. Not only that: almost at the beginning

5 Ivi, p. 380.

6 See, in particular, *ivi*, p. 643.

7 Aristotele, *Etica Nicomachea*, cited work., p. 309.

8 D. Hume, *Opere filosofiche*, volume primo. Trattato sulla natura umana, cited work, p. 443.

9 A. Neher, *L'exil de la parole. Du silence biblique au silence d'Auschwitz*, Éditions du Seuil, Paris 1970; trad. it. di G. Cestari, *L'esilio della parola. Dal silenzio biblico al silenzio di Auschwitz*, Marietti, Casale Monferrato 1983, p. 217.

ze-Milano 2017, p. 365.

3Aristotele, *Politica*, F. Ferri (a cura di), Bompiani, Firenze-Milano 2020, p. 77.

4 D. Hume, *Opere filosofiche*, volume primo. Trattato sulla natura umana, E. Lecaldano (a cura di), Editori Laterza, Bari 2010, p. 379.

of his masterpiece, the thinker and theologian Neher reminds us that the name God has in the Hebrew Kabbalah is No-End and that «it is the intimate identification of this name with the hidden and silent God of the Bible» that «allowed one of the 13th century Jewish Kabbalists, Eleazar Rokeah of Worms, to affirm, once and for all, so that we would no longer have any doubts and so that the pride of our human word would not rise up against this simple and eloquent truth, that God is Silence» [10]. As if to say: the Infinite corresponds to Silence, arrives at it. A powerful echo, by the way, of so-called “negative theology”. Many times we humans are disturbed by divine silence, but God’s silence is a silence that respects our freedom. God is also present with silence. Our silences, on the other hand, often arise from fear and a desire to escape.

Here, the central affirmation of Sister Maria Teresa of the Eucharist, in her dialogue with Sergio Zavoli, divided and, at the same time, united by the lattice of the cloister, is that one can love God in men, or one can love men in God. Perhaps it is in the happy combination of the two aspects, however, that the person of faith fully expresses himself in his relationship with the Father, through Jesus (for Christians). It is the tension between love of neighbour and love of God that really makes the meaning of faith and devotion in its most authentic sense. Not only that: it is the attempts to encounter them and Him that characterise the life of the Christian. Attempts that often fail, or are mortified and stifled, like congestive and wailing; attempts that are mostly unfulfilled and incomplete, populated with words and silences. As admirably shown, among others, by Neher himself, it is the Lord Himself who not infrequently expresses Himself with silence, with a failed response, with a denied response, with absence (at least apparent). Here, too, lies, perhaps, the healthy contention, and the loving relationship, between us and Him. Even more often, then, the voice of the Eternal One is like a rustling, as if He were whispering, rather than articulating full words and sentences. As the biblical First Book of Kings recounts, He is not in the hurricane on Mount Horeb, nor in the earthquake, nor even in the fire, but rather, depending on the version, in “a soft and subdued sound” or in “a subtle murmur of silence” or, again, in a “voice of subtle silence” and there He meets Elijah. And the “voice of the subtle silence”, Neher argues, is a silence that transcends itself, a metasential silence, that transcends words and silence, a «voice more subdued than silence», a sign «of Life, of Presence, of the Word» [11], of fullness. And he makes a paradoxical connection with the Non-Silence of Psalm 22, when not even the night, with its “silent noise”, gives the psalmist peace. It is «a silence more silent than silence, it is the fall of silence into a deeper layer of nothingness, it is a tunnel dug directly into silence and leading to its most vertiginous abysses». Not only: it may «be a language that no word and no silence have ever been able to express», «the zero dimension of silence where, in the general confusion of all existents, word and silence are lost together in nothingness»

[12]. A metasential silence here too, under the banner, however, of emptiness, not fullness.

3. Listening to the Divine and Dialogue with Humans: Results and Conclusions

Here, all this can help to understand the experiences, even dissonant ones, of Sister Maria Teresa.

Zavoli writes: «I did not know her face, and yet we had been talking for several days. I would ‘see’ her in the morning, around seven o’clock, and we would stay together for a couple of hours; then, in the afternoon, as many. I would ask her various things, still preliminary: her age, where she was from, when she became a nun, how long it had been since she had seen her father and mother...» [13]. And again: «Every morning she would announce herself like this: ‘Sister Maria Teresa of the Eucharist, and may Jesus Christ be praised for this too’. I knew it would be correct, and humble, to answer her ‘always be praised’, but I was never able to do it. So secular, but also so awkward, I felt completely on the other side of the fence. ‘Your presence here could be a sign from the Lord’, she once told me, ‘and we did not ask for it’. The dialogue had begun» [14].

The solitude and silence of the hermitage thus represent a phase of preparation for dialogue, a true gestation of dialogue. Yes, the dialogue. The Carmelite nun – the same Mount Carmel dear to Elijah – who lives in a strict cloistered life even in the pre-conciliar times feels she must dialogue with that man who comes from far away. She seeks men in God, in His silence, respectful of those who, instead, seek God in men. Yet it is precisely that cloistered isolation and silence that enable her to dialogue. As Neher points out, there can be no dialogue without listening and, therefore, without silence.

Let us listen to a few passages. Sister Maria Teresa, for example, says: «If there is anything I regret, it is not so much what I have left behind, as what I wish I had left behind. I wish I had possessed the whole world to offer it to the Lord» [15]. The “vertical” dimension prevails by far over the horizontal one, which is almost sacrificed. And even before that: «You see, after so many years of monastic life our spirit is greatly simplified, and then we have a way of conceiving things that is so different from yours...» [16]. But it is precisely the difference that makes the dialogue so interesting and fruitful. And the “horizontal” dialogical aspect perhaps insinuates something new and unexpected into the existences of the two interlocutors. So much so that after not a few years the nun left the cloister and moved to the hermitage of Spello, on Mount Subasio. From there, on 18 September 1969, she wrote a long letter to the journalist. Let us try to capture some of its moments:

12 Ivi, p. 80.

13 S. Zavoli, *Socialista di Dio*, cited work, p. 270.

14 Ivi, pp. 271-272.

15 Ivi, p. 273.

16 Ibidem.

10 Ivi, pp. 24-25.

11 Ivi, p. 97.

«I began to have similar thoughts, and to mature the convictions I have today, starting from that November of 1957, when you came to ‘provoke’ me beyond the grille. From those dialogues, at first so laboured, then increasingly open, Clausera was born. The echo of your documentary gave rise to a very lively exchange of letters with people of all ages and from all walks of life. From miners from Australia and Belgium to journalists, from lifers to Freemasonry leaders, from humble creatures to cultured people, from the very young to the elderly who had become disillusioned but were searching for truth, with all of them I established a dialogue»^[17].

As if to say: dialogue calls dialogue, difference calls difference. We are a conversation, as Hölderlin poetised: inner conversations and conversations with the other, individually declined. Of these we are an expression. Just like Sister Maria Teresa, who feeds so voraciously on "vertical" and "horizontal" colloquies and soliloquies, inspired and supported also by the Second Vatican Council.

«Twelve years ago I told you that I had chosen to love men in God, not God in men. But then I realised that Christ incarnate cannot bear a choice that divides him into himself. So I wanted to love the whole Christ, ‘God made man’; I wanted to take up, on the trail of a Church that was being renewed by returning to its origins, the now forgotten but authentic monastic vocation of ‘ora et labora’»^[18].

For long years she had been silently and solitarily listening to that divine “rustle”, to that “voice of subtle silence”. Then, however, she felt a sort of vertigo: that silence was too quiet, that isolation risked turning into arid loneliness, that silence quieter than all noise and all silence became an abyss, a chasm, a limit. And here she feels to recover the “horizontal” dialogical dimension, to be harmonised with the soliloquy and the “vertical” relationship. The tension between the "vertical" conversation with God, nourished by silence, and the dialogue with humans, populated by silences and words, remains, but, in the end, Sister Maria Teresa discovers that she wants to love God in men. She feels ready, now, precisely because she has long loved men in God.

Author Contributions

Danilo Di Matteo is the sole author. The author read and approved the final manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

References

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- [5] Sergio ZAVOLI, *Socialista di Dio*, Arnoldo Mondadori Editore, Milano 1981.

17 Ivi, p. 280.

18 Ivi, p. 281.