

Contact: [Les Back](#), Department of Sociology, Goldsmiths, University of London

An Ordinary Virtue

Faussone, the hero of Primo Levi's novel *The Wrench*, is a difficult man. An itinerant rigger he spent his life travelling the world operating high-rise cranes. Despite the dramatic nature of his adventures Faussone is not a natural storyteller. The novel's narrator comments on how tempting it is to interrupt him put words in his mouth and spoil his stories before they have even been told. He comes to realise: "just as there is an art of storytelling, strictly codified through a thousand trails and errors, so there is also an art of listening, equally ancient and noble, but as far as I know, it has never been given any norm."¹ The quiet patience required to invite the story's telling makes an important contribution to its content. For as Levi writes "a distracted or hostile audience can unnerve any teacher or lecturer; a friendly public sustains."² The listener's art for Primo Levi is practiced through abstaining from speech and allowing the speaker to be heard. Listening is active, a form of attention to be trained rather than presumed.

My contention is that in our time this shared quality has been diminished because we live in a culture that speaks more than it listens. Walter Benjamin lamented in his famous essay on the storyteller the loss of attention to stories and tales which could be 'woven into the fabric of real life' as wisdom.³ The profusion of talk and information inhibit the social transactions of understanding. Producing a situation in which our ears become sound proofed, as if

¹ Primo Levi *The Wrench* (London: Abacus, 1986) p. 35

² Ibid.

³ Walter Benjamin *Illuminations* (London: Fontana, 1992) p. 83

covered by panes of glass like the double glazed homes we live in that keep out the noise of the city.

I want to focus on Primo Levi's craft of listening by way of developing an argument about how to hold to the world and pay attention to it. Arguably the most astute witness to the Nazi holocaust, Levi's commitment to listening resonates with his experience of being a witness and survivor, but it is also an essential part of his skill as a writer. Robert Gordon in his brilliant study of the moral dimensions of Primo Levi's work⁴ suggests that the primal scene of his ethics of listening is the chapter in *If This is a Man* called the Canto of Ulysses. This book is a chronicle of the year he spent as a prisoner in Auschwitz where his trade as chemist was pressed into the service of the regime in the Chemical Kommando. The chapter recounts a moment of reprieve inside the fierce rhythm of the camp.

Jean, the Pikolo of the barrack charged with implementing and coordinating its routines, suggests Primo be his assistant in carrying the daily rations to the barracks. The sunshine and fresh air fills the men with memories a life before their internment. The walk was just a half a mile but on their return they had to carry a huge pot of soup supported by two poles weighing over a hundred pounds. During the hour journey the two men spoke of their homes in Strasbourg and Turin, the books they read and their families. Dante's Divine Comedy comes to Levis' mind and he starts to recount the lines from the Canto of Ulysses. The task of transporting Dante's words into the camp takes on a frantic sense of urgency:

⁴ Robert Gordon *Primo Levi's Ordinary Virtues: From Testimony to Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

Here, Pikolo, open your ears and your mind, you have to understand, for my sake:

‘Think of your breed; for brutish ignorance
You mettle was not made; you were made men,
To follow after knowledge and excellence.’

As if I also was hearing it for the first time: like a blast of a trumpet, like the voice of God. For a moment I forgot who I am and where I am.⁵

The lines are not only a reminder of the life he had before but also that human communication could be concerned with such things as books, thinking and a search for beauty and knowledge. It is a reminder that he and Pikolo are not mere Häftlings defined only by the number inscribed on their skins and that there is a universe and a time before and beyond the barbed wire. He continues:

Pikolo begs me to repeat it. How good Pikolo is, he is aware that it is doing me good. Or perhaps something more: perhaps, despite the wan translation and the pedestrian, rushed commentary, he has received my message, he has felt that it has to do with him, that it has to do with all men who toil, and with us in particular; and that it has to do with us two, who dare to reason of these things with the poles for soup on our shoulders.⁶

It is not just that Primo Levi needs to speak of these things, neither is it that matter that Pikolo yearns to grasp Dante’s meaning. The two men in that moment furnish their world anew if only for the hour it takes to deliver the soup. The process summoning the lines from Primo’s memory involves both men. Their shared labour enacts a line of

⁵ Primo Levi *If This is A Man/ The Truce* (London: Abacus, 1987) p. 119

⁶ *Ibid*: 119-120

communication and communion in midst of the barbarism and inhumanity of the camp. Speaking and listening here is collective, social and ethical. Studied hearing is a humane disposition practiced by Levi inside the camps as a survival strategy but also as a means to remain connected to the past and indeed to the future.

“‘You do not interest me’ No man can say these words to another without committing a cruelty and offending against justice” writes philosopher Simone Weil.⁷ This is like Coleridge’s *Ancient Mariner* whose story is cursed because no one will listen to it. Indeed Primo Levi was preoccupied with this fable because of his fear that on returning from Auschwitz people like him would be either ignored or simply disbelieved. I think such a view is resonant today in the context of Israel and Palestine. The debate about the proposed boycott of Israeli academics and institutions by British Universities is one such case. Personally, I have changed my mind many times over the boycott. I want to reflect here on the importance of listening and the damage done by turning a deaf ear. Howard Jacobson commented in his column in *The Independent* newspaper that “a university that will not listen does far more intellectual damage to itself than to the university it has stopped listening to.”⁸ Glazing the ear, however noble the motivation is something that I cannot subscribe to ethically or politically. For I believe our task has to be to develop a radical attentiveness not only to our friends but also our enemies.

⁷ Simone Weil ‘Human Personality’, in *The Simone Weil Reader* ed. George A. Panichas (New York, David McKay Company, 1997).

⁸ Howard Jacobson ‘Those who boycott Israeli universities are doing intellectual violence to themselves,’ *The Independent* 14th July, 2007.

Part of the reason for this move is I think our political debates do not suffer from doubt but from certainty. The task of thinking is to live with doubt in the service of understanding, rather than living with certainty in the preservation of ignorance. Name-calling is not thinking. The temptation to dismiss the view of one's opponents as 'drivel' or 'rubbish' is strong but misguided for two reasons. Dismissing racist views as drivel does nothing to evaluate and understand their resonance or reach. It is for this reason that I no longer subscribe to the 'no platform' argument with regard to racists. We need to know what a racist argument sounds-like. This is not the same as suggesting that organisations like the British National Party should be given an automatic seat at the political table. Rather, it means paying close attention to what they say and subjecting these sentiments to critical judgment. For reducing opposing views to rubbish produces encamped positions that actually stop listening. It forecloses criticism – they simply need no further attention other than being consigned to the category of waste to be disposed.

In his book *Hold Everything Dear* John Berger recounts a conversation with a Palestinian mother in the midst of a conflict at a checkpoint. “For us the silence of the West is worse’ – she nods toward the [IDF] armoured car – ‘than their bullets.’”⁹ Edward Said wrote and spoke at length that the American Left “cannot bring themselves to focus on” what is going on in the West Bank and Gaza.¹⁰ The danger is that caricature, misinformation and scaremongering inhibit serious attention and sensitive thought. Certainty here, or what might be called the toxic atmosphere of sureness, is blinding and deafening to the other view. It is

⁹ John Berger *Hold Everything Dear* (London: Verso, 2007) p. 8

¹⁰ Edward Said *Power, Politics and Culture: Interviews with Edward Said* (London: Bloomsbury, 2004) p. 326.

not only a matter of paying attention to the damage that antisemitism does to the critical imagination but also a cosmopolitan loyalty to justice with regard to the plight of the Palestinians. I am thinking here about the lengths that Palestinian students have to go to secure a university education and the scrutiny that they are subjected and the how difficult it is for many of them just to get to class.

A recent example from Israeli academic life is a case in point. Nizar Hassan, an Arab film studies lecturer from Sapir College in the Negev, has been investigated because he criticised a Jewish student for attending class wearing a military uniform and carrying a gun. Senior figures in the Israeli military have insisted that Hassan should apologise or be sacked. In the letter written to him by the college's president it stipulated that Hassan's apology: "must refer to your obligation to be respectful to the IDF uniform and the full right of every student to enter your classroom in uniform."¹¹ Hassan, a popular teacher with strong support from his students, explained his opposition to the wearing of uniforms in class in general ethical terms. One of the Arab students in his class who witnesses the incident explained to a journalist that when Hassan noticed the student wearing a uniform: "he explained that all military uniforms – of the Israeli army, of Fatah or of Hamas – are symbols of violence and that he does not allow them into his classroom [...] Some people at the college are not prepared to accept the kind of things he says from an Arab."¹²

In the college's deliberations about the case it seems clear that they interpreted Hassan's motivations as simply a

¹¹ Jonathan Cook "‘Honour the Israeli Army Uniform or be Sacked,’ Lecturer told' *Counterpunch* <http://www.counterpunch.com/cook02292008.html> Downloaded 5th March, 2008.

¹² Ibid.

reflection of his Palestinian identity and an objection to the Israeli military as a symbol of Israeli sovereignty. It is this that surprised Hassan: “They wanted me to be the Palestinian in the room, and I refused to oblige. They wanted to believe that I object to the army uniform because I am Palestinian. But I reject the uniform because it is opposed to my universal human values. I acted as I did because I am a teacher and a human being. What shocked me was that the committee refused to believe that could be my motivation.”¹³

The reason why this case speaks to the argument being suggest here is because it foregrounds the way in which certain or assured positions lead to a kind of fatalism i.e. that things can only be the way I understand them to be. Another world where a Palestinian acts out of a commitment to general human values is not possible from the standpoint of such certainties. My point is the lie contained in such a position can be exposed if a different kind of attentive listening is practiced. Taking Hassan at his word invites a different set of relationships, a wider range of problems and a cosmopolitan loyalty to thinking itself.

Following Primo Levi’s suggestion we need to develop norms of listening and hone a contrasting form of attention. Perhaps a good starting point would be to stop talking over each other. How many times in discussions about Israel do the respective voice representing each side simply produce a cacophony with all speaking at once and each voice attempting to have the final word with the result that little thought is actually put on the air. Perhaps, another rule of listening is to hear one’s own voice and then to develop a

¹³ Ibid.

mild aversion to it. This might produce a situation where one's own speech is more judicious, careful and measured. Like the narrator in Primo Levi's novel who has to limit the impulse to interrupt the first principle is to refrain from interjection or ventriloquism.

The main lesson that Primo Levi offers is that listening is not merely about communication. What is animated in *The Canto of Ulysses* is an alternative way to live achieved through two men hearing each other. This active listening creates another set of social relations and ultimately a new kind of society if only for an hour. In the midst of the seemingly intractable nature of the world's problems in the Middle East and elsewhere such an ordinary virtue is needed now more than ever before.

Les Back is the author of *The Art of Listening* (Berg, 2007)