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Ferber, Ilit. *Language Pangs. On Pain and The Origin of Language.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019. 193 pp.¹

The main objective of this book is to raise objections to two common-place assumptions about the relationship between language and pain: on the one hand, to the idea that the radically intimate character of pain makes it uncommunicable –and thus, to a certain extent, un-shareable; and second, that because pain has such an effect on our capacity for communicating it, it also shatters language altogether, becoming therefore a limit-case for language’s potentiality to express and communicate (our) experience. As a response to these two assumptions, Ferber’s book shows that, precisely *because* of the intimacy of pain, and precisely because it would seem to be a limit case for our capacity to communicate and thus to understand others’ private experiences, pain forces us to reshape our conceptions of language and communicability. Ferber argues that,

even though from our usual conceptions of language pain seems to place on us a paradoxical demand– it both rejects our comprehension while simultaneously calling for our understanding and our capacity to “hear” someone’s pain and respond to it accordingly – rather than letting the paradox trap us in an impossible dilemma, and instead of making the gap even deeper by describing pain as the most isolated and isolating experience, we ought to revise our conceptions of language and the structures that allow us to make sense of it as a site for communicability. In Ferber’s words, “any thinking that surrenders to mutually-exclusive structures, lacks the power to grasp pain’s singular nature” (94)– and, I would add, the singular potentiality of language.

To take up this challenge, Ferber goes back to Herder’s theory of language and, more particularly, to the enigmatic role that the Sophoclean character of Philoctetes plays in Herder’s writings. By looking attentively at Herder’s arguments, and by reading them, quite rigorously but also very creatively, as a locus for an alternative theory of language in its relation to pain, Ferber destabilizes the two main assumptions regarding the contradictory and mutually exclusive relation between pain and language. Contrary to the usual paradigms regarding these questions, Herder locates pain at the very origin of language, not only for its immediate need to become vocal expression, but also, for its capacity therefore to call for an other (independently of whether the other is present) and thus for

1 Los siguientes comentarios fueron leídos en una primera versión en el contexto de una discusión del libro de Ferber en el Workshop on Literature and Violence *Sound and Violence*, organizado por Andrea Potestá y Aicha Messina en París, Mayo 16 de 2019. A continuación, más que una reseña, las preguntas y discusiones que me surgieron en la lectura del libro de Ferber en conexión con mi propio trabajo sobre la escucha, junto con las respuestas de la autora.

inaugurating, in each case, a demand for community. Thus, instead of being the opposite of language, or the moment when language shatters and becomes mere noise, pain is at the center of a theory of language as expression, where language is not reduced to a mere instrument for communication, but is rather the site where communicability is made possible as such. And, instead of being an isolating experience, uncommunicable and thus completely inaccessible to any (human) other, pain is the call for, and in a way, the instantiation of a community with others, where what binds us is neither knowledge and clear understanding of each other's intimate experiences, nor empathy as our capacity to project onto others our own feelings, but rather the *acknowledgment* of the suffering of another in the (in)comprehensible expression of their pain. Ferber goes to Heidegger and Cavell to reinforce the latter points, taking Herder's original insights into a more developed and in-depth philosophical analysis of the kind of intimate community that is summoned through pain and made possible by our capacity to truly listen to it ("hearken" in Heidegger's terminology), and the form of ethical acknowledgment pain calls for and inaugurates for us.

All this is being done while also performing something that I find fascinating in Ferber's book: her own capacity to "listen" to the texts she is working with, and to let this listening guide us through key questions in the history of thought. Ferber's attention to the character of Philoctetes in Sophocles' play, and its various reenactments up to the present, allow us to "hear" something that is not exhausted by the philosophical analysis,

and that stays throughout the book in Ferber's accounts of the singularity of pain and its multiple expressions. The book, therefore, not only says but *does*, it not only analyzes carefully and slowly all the sides of a phenomenology of language that would have always been embedded in Herder's essays and connects them in insightful ways to Heidegger and Cavell's accounts. It also performs a hermeneutics of listening that allows for all these authors to resonate in a very original way in and through Ferber's voice, while also calling for what I would like to call, perhaps provisionally here, an *ethics of listening*, that is, the responsibility that is shaped by and entailed in the other's address when language does nothing but express pain and the need to be listened to, even if all this listening can do is to acknowledge there is perhaps nothing else to say.

In what follows, I would like to pose several questions that came to my mind while reading the book; questions that particularly arise at the intersection of Ferber's book and my own work on listening. I think that our projects intersect in many places, challenging each other, making each other stronger, but also, perhaps, at some points, giving way to disagreements that I would like to explore together with Ferber further along the way.

First, key to Ferber's project, and key to my own explorations on the question of language and memory after trauma, is the way that pain demands –and not only breaks– language. And here I would like to insist a bit more on the two paradoxical sides of this claim, as I find them equally important for any approach that attempts to take up the question of the

kinds of challenges that extreme forms of violence –in the case of my work– or extreme forms of pain –in the case of Ferber’s own terminology– pose to our conceptions of language and experience. In my work, I have insisted, like Ferber, on the capacity that specific experiences have of driving language to its breaking points, where words simply shatter and become mere expression, rather than communication, of an event that may not even properly be described as “event,” since its radically singular and unprecedented character has not only shattered language but the very same notion of experience that we usually rely on to elaborate and make sense of what happens to us in the world. In the case of some forms of experience, everything that is entailed in this statement –“elaborating” and “making sense,” happening “to us” and “in the world”– is radically disturbed and suddenly destroyed, in such a way that the world (and “us”) literally stop making sense altogether. The categories we used to rely on to signify and elaborate our experiences stop being adequate to contain what looks rather like a paradoxical encounter between an *excess* and an *absence of sense* (cf. Acosta 2019). There is simply *too much* that cannot be contained in language, there is also simply no word, no concept, that will suffice to represent the radicality of the experience. This paradox is for Ferber, as it is also for me, the beginning and not the end, of the story. She writes:

When pain encounters language it tears it apart, and in doing so, its essence is laid bare [...]. Pain’s uniqueness [...] reveals language’s innermost being [...] it does not work against language; instead, it realizes

its inclination and drive to express and get language to work. (3)

I would like to attend here to a number of issues that I find essential to Ferber’s position, and I’ll try to distill the similarities and differences between my own emphasis and hers when it comes to attend to the problem at hand.

1. I agree entirely with Ferber that the shattering of language produced in the face of a radical experience of pain cannot be the end of language but rather the demand for a reconceptualization of language, beyond its representative function and its propositional structure. In these cases, Ferber argues, “pain encapsulates the very conditions of possibility of expression and language” (3). I also agree that this comes with the need for a “redefinition of our conceptions of experience as such,” one that has been opened “in ways that are not open to us otherwise, that is, without pain” (*ibid.*). And I agree all this needs to be done with enough care not to romanticize these forms of experience, since the *truth* they carry with them is not a call for their need, but rather a call for the need not to give up on making sense of them. I wonder, however, how far we want to go in insisting on these experiences to be the place where we actually locate the *origin* of language. Because it seems to me that, if such is the case, as singular as these experiences may be, they will become universal –universal to the extent that, in opening up another possibility of conceiving language altogether, they become the basis for a theory of language that needs then to go beyond these singularities to explain what language is *as such*–.

If I ask this question, is because I have also found it very difficult in my own work to sustain the two sides of the problem Ferber wants to sustain in her own approach: how not to renounce the possibility of language in the face of what is usually treated as its radical limit, and, thus, left to the realm of unintelligibility, while also keeping in mind the radically singular character of such an experience and its resistance to being universalized? That is, how to insist on the possibility of intelligibility without universalization? How to insist on the demand of communicability and share-ability (going to the literal meaning of *Mittelbarkeit* in German) without operating already under the assumption of turning what is communicable into a universal or at least universalizable experience? I understand that Herder is interested in this universalization –and in turning pain into the experience that establishes our connection with one another, more than any other feeling, and that this tells us a lot too about language and what it means to be together in and through language–. I also understand that this is a very important aspect of Ferber’s work since pain for her, rather than closing up our world to others, “has the power to completely open us to the possibility of sharing, participating, and reciprocating our pain with others” (13). Finally, I understand that this might come precisely out of the difference between dealing with something like “pain” and what I deal with, the question of “trauma,” that is narrower and needs to be treated perhaps with much more care to not banalize it by turning it into a universal –nonetheless communicable– experience. Still, I would like to hear more of what Ferber

would have to say about this dilemma, and how she sees her own position –with and beyond Herder– in relation to this question.

2. Also perhaps in the same line of thought, I would like to pay attention to the kind of shattering taking place in the experience of pain. In my work, and with the help of authors Sigmund Freud and Walter Benjamin (and a sort of combined reading of the two as theorists of the breakdown of language in and by trauma), I have insisted that the shattering is not merely a loss of words –of our capacity to find the right words to represent or describe pain, for instance– but also a shattering of meaning altogether: in the face of trauma, the world has stopped *making sense*. It is not then just the acoustic, sonorous experience of expression without words, but also, the silences and fragmentations that occur in our expressions when, in attempting to tell a story, we do not and cannot make sense –and the kinds of challenges that come out of this experience of the shattering of meaning, as well as the kind of ethical demands that are here imposed on the listener (something that Ferber also emphasizes on) (*cf.* Acosta 2017)–. In Ferber’s analysis, this becomes the point where a reconceptualization of language is called for, where expression and not representation, become language’s original and most constitutive feature, and where silence and crying, as she puts it in the case of Philoctetes, “are inseparable on one another” (123). Thus, Ferber insists, on the one hand, in pain the sufferer is not “cut off from his or her ability to express” (*id.* 26). On the other hand, expression is now understood also in connection to a radically

somatic conception of language, where body and voice become one and meaning is no longer dependent on *making sense*.

I find this all very compelling and fascinating. It depends on a conception of meaning-making that is also entirely connected to the ways in which language *constitutes* and not only expresses our experience of the world. Experience is shaped by language, in such a way that any language is the result of our expression. Hence, when listening to others we should not expect them to “make sense,” rather, sense and meaning making will happen in the encounter between their sounds and our experience of listening to them, in the site opened up by the “environment of the event of saying,” as Ferber puts it quoting Wittgenstein (*cf.* 60), rather than in the actual words that are being pronounced or in the categories we have at hand to *make sense* of what is being said. If I am understanding this correctly –and I very much share the consequences this will have for what it means to *listen to others*, as I will also explain soon– I would like to know however what this means for understanding and communicating the *shattering as such* and the extents to which language *has been* shattered after radical experiences of pain and suffering. How is it possible to operate with language as expression in the face of the shattering of language (something I think Herder and Ferber’s reading address really well) and still have an experience of language as both communicability *and* being *heard* in one’s own pain, while also being able to express and thus to communicate the extent to which the world has been taken away from me, shattered to pieces in its previous given meanings, and become an

unnamable, unrecognizable place? What happens to the shattering when language is reduced to –or can be reclaimed as– expression but no longer as representation? What happens to me in the face of such an isolating event where perhaps I am accompanied in my pain but not in an *understanding* of the kind of destruction that has taken place, namely the destruction of the who that feels –or no longer entirely feels– the pain? Where can one then claim for the need of a production of sense making that is not reduced –even if this is no little accomplishment– to the call for and expression of sympathy and acknowledgment?

Second, as mentioned above, Ferber’s reading of Herder, initially, and then of Heidegger and Cavell, among others, elicits an understanding of the language of pain as the beginning and not the end of community. Listening to the pain of others allows for a way of being together that comes with the very specific kind of summoning actualized by language as sound and, more importantly, as the expression of pain. This is as much a phenomenological as an ethical experience for Ferber. Going back to Herder, she shows how it is precisely the primacy of the acoustic that puts the sense of hearing at the center of an explanation of our becoming human. It is in listening to the pain of others, in recognizing someone else’s voice, and in the physical reaction of the musical strings of ears to the primal cry –and here the voice is and can be stripped from meaning making, it is just the guttural expression, and the singularity of what voice expresses on its own, even before “speaking”– that provokes *sympathetic reverberations*, a resonance and an attunement that happens both at

the level of the body and of the soul for Herder: “their nerves -Ferber quotes- come to a similar tension, their souls to a similar pitch” (49). Thus, our sense of hearing puts us “in touch” with one another, in an intimate yet non-violent form of closeness; an un-violent form of touch that nonetheless brings us closer together than the distance produced by seeing. Also, because of sound’s capacity for traveling and resounding, echoing and resonating, listening situates us in and within sound, different from the visual experience of merely *facing* one another. More than our capacity to express pain, it is actually our sense of hearing that brings us together, putting the ethical emphasis on the side of the listener and presenting the groundwork of a community constituted in and by the act of being summoned rather than in the need to communicate.

3. In this context, I would like to know more about how Ferber understands the ethical primacy of the experience of listening when it comes to thinking the sorts of challenges I was posing before with my previous questions. Like Ferber, I have also emphasized the ethical responsibility of the listener, rather than on the one trapped in the need and the impossibility of recounting their pain. In my work, this is tied to the responsibility of producing a site for the encounter where simply *hearing* the expression of pain is not enough, and where the silences and fragmented, shattered, forms of expression that are coming out of the kind of destruction of sense that has taken place in trauma are not merely *acknowledged* and given resonance to, but where bearing witness means also to *listen* and produce a *grammar* that will allow those “unintelligible”

forms of communication to be rendered *intelligible* and thus *believable* (cf. Acosta 2019). This is all to avoid the same risk Ferber wants to avoid with her own approach: the risk of isolating even more the one who has already felt isolated in their pain. I would like to know how much of this is also part of what Ferber has in mind, and if this production of meaning in the encounter with the other is something that plays an important role in what she describes as the origin and constitution of community through the acoustic. That is, whether the acoustic here belongs to a realm of intelligibility or remains tied to a form of togetherness that is not yet connected to intelligibility, communication, understanding, and discursivity, and thus, not yet to a form of belonging that is grounded on what Ferber calls “the distribution of pain” in a shared realm (cf. 43), but also to the production and reconstitution of meaning after pain has been inflicted.

I realize too that my own questions are related to a form of pain that has been produced, inflicted, caused by another, rather than merely the result of a natural disposition we all share to be vulnerable and sensitive, sentient beings, capable and susceptible of feeling pain. I recognize therefore that my own questions are leading the discussion somewhere else, different from Ferber’s point of departure, and that, as I said before, speaking of trauma and of the kind of destruction of experience that it elicits in its survivors can be narrower, or perhaps even a very different kind than the pain Ferber is considering in her book. However, given that her discussion is also with authors like Elaine Scarry (cf. 1985), who are also preoccupied with forms of pain

that are induced –like that of torture for instance– and that I know Ferber has been dealing with these questions from different angles (cf. Ferber 2016), my questions are just trying to explore the connections she sees between this book and these other sides of her work, and whether a meditation on pain and language can also take us further on the possibilities of restoring community even in the face –or in the midst of the resonating, deafening sounds– of violence.

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Response of the author

Let me begin by thanking María del Rosario Acosta for her careful and thoughtful reading of *Language Pangs: On Pain and the Origin of Language*. Her comments touch on the heart of the book's main arguments, but at the same time offer a fresh viewpoint on what I

would call its moral implications. Since most of the book consists of close readings of Herder, Heidegger, and Sophocles, it is sometimes easy to lose sight of its core, namely, the relationship between language and pain that I think, in a broad sense, is ultimately a question about suffering and its relation, on the one hand to expression, and on the other, to a sense of a community. These are the issues that stand at the center of Acosta's evocative response. Before I respond to her interpretation of the book in detail, however, let me say a few words of introduction about the book.²

Whether an all-consuming agony induced by violence or a mere passing headache, we have all experienced pain in one way or another and we all have some basic intuitions about it. We seem to know the suffering inherent to pain at first hand, we have felt its constraints and have all, to some extent, been lost for words in the face of its intensity. Pain seems to violently invade us with its invincible force, soon becoming the exclusive focus of our being. Pain becomes, almost unnoticeably, inseparable from us as it isolates us. But beyond the violence it exercises on our bodies and our souls, the experience of pain is also unique in its ability to interrupt, even block, our language. We tend to think of pain as an experience that cannot be fully expressed in language, something we can never entirely communicate or share with others. The experience of pain therefore fundamentally challenges our trust in language and its ability to express and

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2 My introduction is largely based on the first chapter of the book (cf. Ferber 2019 1-23).