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Review of Daniel Heller-Roazen, *Echolalias* and Heller-Roazen, *The Inner Touch*

Dorian Stuber
Hendrix College

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Daniel Heller-Roazen, *Echolalias: On the Forgetting of Language*. New York: Zone Books, 2005. 287 pp. ISBN 1890952498.

Daniel Heller-Roazen, *The Inner Touch: Archaeology of a Sensation*. New York: Zone Books, 2007. 386 pp. ISBN 1890951764.

Reviewed by Dorian Stuber, Hendrix College

Echolalias: On the Forgetting of Language and *The Inner Touch: Archaeology of a Sensation* are the most recent books by Daniel Heller-Roazen, Professor of Comparative Literature at Princeton. Together they explore the relation of rationality to its excess, where rationality is defined as the conjunction of language and consciousness, and the subjectivity made possible by that conjunction. Excess is defined as whatever troubles, undoes, and yet grounds that rationality. In *Echolalias* excess inheres in language itself, specifically in certain limit instances such as the babbling designated by the book's title; in *The Inner Touch* excess inheres in sensation, specifically in the sense common to all beings that allows them to feel themselves as sensing and thus as living.

We might then situate these books among other recent work on theories of affect, on crises of language and representation, and, especially, on the relation of the human to the nonhuman animal. The comparison is made difficult, however, by the unusual nature of the books under review. Especially in terms of style and method, they function quite differently from most scholarly texts. Most strikingly, they are not organized around a clearly stated argument that is then developed over the course of a handful of lengthy chapters. Rather, they are composed of a series of short chapters (*Echolalias* has twenty one, *The Inner Touch* twenty five) that are only obliquely connected. Readers will not find any explicit discussion of how one chapter might lead to another, and why that connection is important; nor will they find any claims for the importance and novelty of an argument, as demonstrated by its similarity or (more usually) difference from related work in its field.

Instead they will find references to a rather breathtaking array of philosophers, writers, and psychologists, whose arguments are summarized and ventriloquized by Heller-Roazen, making it difficult to discern his own original claims. Ultimately, these claims can be said to reside primarily in these very juxtapositions, leaving readers in the position of having to make sense of the books for themselves.

As might be imagined, reading Heller-Roazen is at once exhilarating and frustrating. The power of his erudition is matched only by the paucity of his guidance. Although these books offer the pleasures of unexpected and wide-ranging comparisons, they also fall victim, in the absence of clearly-evoked transitions, to a lack of methodological grounding. This absence is most gratingly manifested in a reliance on mere assertion to move us from one thought to another. Ultimately, Heller-Roazen's comparisons come across as organized and authorized only by his admittedly vast and wide-ranging knowledge of Classical, Islamic and Western philosophical and literary traditions. The book's logic is thus suggestive, even associative, rather than consequential.

Consider, as an example of this method, the central chapter of *Echolalias*. In Chapter Thirteen, entitled "The Writing Cow," Heller-Roazen begins by telling the story of Io as it appears in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. We are reminded that the nymph Io, daughter of the river god Inachus, loved by Jupiter, is turned into a heifer by a suspicious and jealous Juno. Io is imprisoned under the watchful eyes of Argus and, perhaps worse, in silence, since all her efforts at speech come out only as lowing. One day, she manages to make her way to her father. Unable to communicate with him in speech, she resorts to scratching the letters of her name, the line of the "I" and the circle of the "O," in the soil with her hoof. Her writing is enough to communicate her plight to her distraught father. In so doing, Heller-Roazen suggests, Io communicates more than her name: she communicates the very fact of her transformation.

Heller-Roazen takes this narrative to be exemplary: "the tale of the writing cow can be read as an allegory of metamorphosis as such" (*E* 123). He argues that metamorphosis requires that a body pass completely from one form to another; anything less would be a modification rather than a transformation. But some sign of the transformation must nonetheless be apparent. Otherwise, there would be no way to determine that the transformation had in fact occurred. Yet this exigency fatally undermines the transformation by making it necessarily incomplete. Put differently, transformation requires a remainder that paradoxically vitiates its own integrity. In the case of Io, this residue is the written name. Io's writing betrays—that is both shows and shows up—the fact of metamorphosis. Writing, then, is the primary example of metamorphosis as Heller-Roazen defines it, as that which persists in and by its own destruction. Writing, he argues, "is the creation of the cow: the remainder produced in the definitive disappearance of the voice" (125).

Heller-Roazen concludes his chapter by discussing the nature of this constitutive remainder. He turns to two twentieth-century European intellectuals who, he suggests, offer contrasting models for how to understand language as remainder. He first considers the political philosopher Hannah Arendt, who stands for the possibility that language might be actively maintained rather than being abandoned or forgotten. In an interview from 1967, Arendt described what remained for her of the period before National Socialism: "The German language is the essential thing that has remained and that I have always consciously preserved" (quoted in *E* 125). For Heller-Roazen, this sort of remainder fails to speak to Io's situation. The nymph, he argues, did not consciously seek to hold onto something from her past life. The remainder of her metamorphosis is not a leftover of her past. The thing that remains, then, emerges only in the process of remaining; it is "utterly unlike that to which it bears witness" (126).

Against Arendt and with Io, as it were, Heller-Roazen turns to the poet Joseph Brodsky and his claim that language remains beyond poet and reader alike, not because it is more lasting than the human but because it is more mutable. Language, for Brodsky and, it would seem, for Heller-Roazen, is maintained beyond the will of its speakers, because it uses them to pass into new forms. From this cryptic example (the citation from Brodsky is offered out of context; it's not clear what Brodsky even means by "mutation"), Heller-Roazen concludes that for language to remain it cannot remain itself. Thus all language would be a kind of metamorphosis, and all writers like the cow who is and is no longer Io.

In alluding to at least three linguistic traditions (I haven't even mentioned an excursus on Medieval allegorical readings of the myth), and by juxtaposing classical and contemporary material, this chapter is typical of Heller-Roazen's method. Its strengths and, especially, weaknesses are readily evident. Readers of Arendt and Brodsky alike might rightly protest that these are not especially thorough readings of their positions. In particular, the connections between these varying claims about language, not only to each other but also to the story from Ovid, are left unclear. Heller-Roazen forces the comparison upon us by virtue of an erudition that here at least seems merely willful.

Heller-Roazen, it soon becomes clear, is not much of a close-reader. He tends to make his chosen texts serve his purposes, rather than to submit to their own, difficult waywardness. Even a cursory glance at Ovid's text reveals Heller-Roazen's hastiness. He neglects to tell the end of the story, which is that Io is transformed back again into her old self. How does this transformation—seemingly without remainder—fit with Heller-Roazen's thesis? And what about the text's own indications of communication beyond writing? The lowing that comes from Io's throat when she attempts to bemoan her plight startles her to further silence, yet that lowing, like the other elements of her first attempts to communicate to her father (she cries at his approach, licks his hand, and "cow-kisse[s]" his palms), intimates the relation of the body to language, a relation that would seem to be an example of the excesses to language with which the book is concerned (*Metamorphoses* 20).

Equally frustrating is Heller-Roazen's conception of language. Sometimes the terms "writing" and "speech" are differentiated, as in his reading of Io, where writing is the remainder when speech fails. But sometimes they are used interchangeably, as undifferentiated elements of language. The echolalias of the title would seem to privilege speech, yet what then to make of the valorization of writing in the description of Io? For Heller-Roazen the lesson of Io's story is that by losing herself, she gains writing. Is this the same as saying that she gains language? Heller-Roazen is content to leave this question open; throughout the book, he describes various crises of language, some of which inhere at the level of speech and some at the level of writing, without distinguishing between those disorders.

This ambivalence can perhaps be explained by the fact that what interests Heller-Roazen is the fact of linguistic crisis in general, not the specific difference between writing and speech. Moreover, he is principally concerned with suggesting that every instance of linguistic crisis is an instance of ambivalence. Io's newfound ability, for example, might as easily be seen as a disability. The intimate connection between ability and disability is acutely felt in the many descriptions throughout the book of people whose ability to use language has come under threat.

One of those descriptions concerns the Bulgarian-born, German-speaking, eventual British-émigré and Nobel-laureate Elias Canetti. The languages of his early childhood were Ladino and Bulgarian, but after the sudden death of his father, Canetti's mother forced him to learn German (the language the married couple had used with each other). The methods she used to do so were so violent that he forgot his earlier languages: she forced the boy to memorize, in the absence of any written script, complete German sentences, which she would only later tell him the meaning of. (Canetti aptly called this "a dreadful hypnosis," a startling, quasi-suicidal attempt by a mother to eradicate the "mother tongue.") Yet, in later life, while traveling through Eastern Europe,

Canetti would feel he could understand Slavic languages even though he had apparently forgotten his Bulgarian entirely.

As another example of the counterintuitive relation between language's absence and presence, its forgetting and/as remembering, Heller-Roazen considers aphasia. He notes that Freud studied the condition before turning to hysteria, a turn that has seemed to many commentators a kind of renunciation, since Freud kept the book out of his complete works. Heller-Roazen argues, by contrast, that this early neurological work fits with the later psychoanalytic work, since aphasiacs as much as hysterics suffer from a disorder of memory. For Heller-Roazen, what is typically called a lack (aphasics are unable to speak) might in fact be an ability. He suggests not that aphasics cannot speak, but rather that they are faithful to the absence of speech from whence speech came. The memory of aphasiacs, Heller-Roazen suggests, might be said to be "better than good. For it would extend to the age of infant babble in which every individual life begins" (146). Who, he asks, "does more, and who does less—the one who can remember but cannot talk, or the one who forgets and can thus speak?" (147). The double meaning of his subtitle thus becomes clear—*Echolalias: On the Forgetting of Language* is about instances in which language is forgotten, but also about language itself as a kind of forgetting.

What is forgotten is a kind of speech that is not speech—the echolalia of the title. At the beginning of the book, Heller-Roazen describes the Czech linguist Roman Jakobson's investigation into infant prattle and his discovery that before they can speak, infants can make phonetic sounds that they will later be unable to make when they learn a specific language. Vestiges of this facility remain, Heller-Roazen explains, reading the work of Jakobson's colleague, Nikolai Trubetskoi, in onomatopoeia or exclamation, such as the trilled "r" in the sound English-speaking children make to imitate a ringing phone: Brrring-brring! (I'm led to wonder whether children today, unfamiliar with a ringing phone, still make this sound.) Heller-Roazen concludes that these exclamations are at once necessary but excessive to language: "They are the unwelcome yet inalienable members of every phonological system that no language can do without and that none shall recognize as its own" (17).

These remainders are constitutive of language—they are an excess that language cannot do without: "It is here that one language, gesturing beyond itself in a speech that is none, opens itself to the nonlanguage that precedes and follows it" (18). The exclamation is a specific example of the more general echolalia of infant prattle, which, Heller-Roazen concludes, "in being lost, allowed all languages to be" (12). For Heller-Roazen, "it is as if the acquisition of language were possible only through an act of oblivion, a kind of linguistic infantile amnesia" (11). In gaining language—and thus our status as speaking subjects—we lose our access to the non-linguistic abilities that ground the linguistic.

Heller-Roazen's insistence that, when it comes to language, ability and disability are clearly linked leaves unanswered the question of what work loss or oblivion is meant to perform in his argument. The book depends upon an equation of "loss" with "forgetting." Surely, though, there are other ways to lose things than to forget them. And if something is forgotten, is it lost? Mightn't it simply be misplaced or, more deviously, purloined? After all, Io has lost the use of language but she hasn't forgotten it, as her hoof-writing suggests. One of the difficulties of the book, then, is that this central metaphor of loss is not used systematically. It is particularly

surprising that, notwithstanding his excursus into Freud's investigation of aphasia, Heller-Roazen ignores the concept of the unconscious, that form of knowing that is not explicitly known. The unconscious is a powerful modern model for the sort of forgetting Heller-Roazen in fact seems to have in mind, in which to forget is always to remember, but to remember is to forget (forgetting itself).

In general, Heller-Roazen is frustratingly silent on the nature of that which his metaphor of forgetting is meant to name, however catachrestically. What is the nonlanguage from whence language comes? Is it corporeal? (There is no sense here, as there is, for example, in the work of Julia Kristeva, that a disruptive corporeal element inheres in every linguistic utterance.) I'm sympathetic to Heller-Roazen's desire to show the precariousness of language—the way in which it is split open by a constitutive excess. But it's unclear what he would have us do with this thought—is speech thereby upheld? Or is it undermined? Is this an expanded notion of language or a reduced one? And what difference would this difference make?

A conclusion nowhere explicitly stated but everywhere implicitly intimated in these books is that language is destructive of human agency and consciousness. What is even more clear in *The Inner Touch* than in *Echolalias* is Heller-Roazen's belief that consciousness, considered as a reasoned manifestation of something called a self, has been overstated by the Western tradition (and indeed Eastern, since the Islamic tradition, particularly in its preservation and transformation of Aristotle, is central to Heller-Roazen's narrative). In *The Inner Touch*, Heller-Roazen argues that consciousness is not equivalent or even central to life. He thus contests the Cartesian claim that to think is to be, especially inasmuch as that idea has been used, retrospectively, to distort and misread Classical philosophy. Heller-Roazen here argues against what he takes to be the undue valorization of consciousness qua reason—undue because it is typically taken to be most fully expressed in the human and indeed to exemplify or define human life.

Life, Heller-Roazen argues, is not the same as (self-)consciousness. Rather, it is characterized by a primordial sensation, which we might call sentience, and which has taken many names over the past 2500 years. Some of these names and the names of their authors, all discussed at least in passing by Heller-Roazen, are: "feeling in common" or "common sense" (Aristotle), "central sense" (the Neoplatonist Priscian of Lydia), "inner sense" (Augustine), "shared faculty" (Albertus), "innate sense" (Tommaso Campanella), "apperception" (Leibnitz), "first sensation" (Rousseau), "fundamental feeling" (eighteenth-century philosopher Maine de Biran), "coenaesthesia" (eighteenth-century psychologist Christian Friedrich Hübner), and "common feeling or sense" (nineteenth-century psychologist Theodule Ribot). Heller-Roazen's preferred term is the one that gives his book its title, the "inner touch" of which the Stoics spoke.

Whatever name we give to this primary sensation that ultimately characterizes life—and it is one of the tricks of the book to show how each of these terms is historically particular, distinct, and yet nonetheless synonymous, part of a great but obscured intellectual tradition—we thereby refer to something quite different from consciousness: "the significance of the primary sensation of the classical philosopher [Aristotle] lies not in its proximity to the modern notion of consciousness but in its removal from it" (40). Heller-Roazen shows that the history of this master or primary sense reveals a repeated uncertainty on the part of those who theorized it as to its status.

Inasmuch as it is the sense of sentience, it would seem to be basic, even primal or primitive. But inasmuch as it is the sense of being able to sense, it would seem to be self-reflexive, or refined and higher-order. One of the aims of Heller-Roazen's text is to insist on the value of this basic thing, and to cast doubt on the value of what has been taken to be more refined and sophisticated.

With the exception of an opening chapter on E. T. A. Hoffmann and a closing one on Avicenna, Aristotle, and Merleau-Ponty, *The Inner Touch*, unlike *Echolalias*, proceeds chronologically. Like the early Foucault, alluded to in the book's subtitle (*Archaeology of a Sensation*), Heller-Roazen seeks to uncover a forgotten history. However, also like the early Foucault, Heller-Roazen risks imagining a monolithic outside to the rationalism he would contest. Moreover, he never suggests why rationalism and self-consciousness have attained the intellectual predominance he so mistrusts. This difficulty might have been avoided had he been able to suggest that the philosophic tradition is more self-divided than he lets on. Certainly, others have done so. It is surprising, for example, not to see the work of Michel Henry referenced here. In *The Genealogy of Psychoanalysis*, Henry reads a series of philosophers, including Kant, Nietzsche, Freud and, most notably, Descartes, to suggest that a primary auto-affectivity—a concept very much in sympathy with Heller-Roazen's primary sensation—already inheres in occluded moments *within* the work of those otherwise rationalist and linguistic-based thinkers.

Although Heller-Roazen protests a little too much about the necessity of an alternative reading of the Western tradition, the consequences of his way of thinking are nonetheless significant. He concludes that sensation should replace cognition as the determinative or most characteristic quality of living beings, and that the ways of categorizing, and thus valuing, that living being be reorganized.

Here we are brought up against the concept of the animal as a central, if also ambivalent, element of Heller-Roazen's thought. Midway through *Echolalias*, Heller-Roazen refers to observations by Spinoza and the eighth-century Arabic writer Al-Jahiz, that failure is constitutive of the human: "Human beings can do many things, but their actions pale, on a number of counts, when compared with those of other living creatures" (E 129). Whereas animals do the things they do perfectly, humans are distinguished in that they can always do something imperfectly. Birds, for example, do not sing out of tune, but humans often do. For Heller-Roazen, the exemplary moment of such failure inheres in the very thing that ostensibly distinguishes the human from the animal: language. If *Echolalias* is a book about failures, then *The Inner Touch* is one about perfection. The singular mode of perfection here examined is called sensation, and Heller-Roazen says it is shared by humans and animals alike.

Consider, for example, the tortoise. In Chapter Ten, called "Appropriation," Heller-Roazen considers the ancient Greek term *oikeiosis*, defined as "the process by which a living being comes to be appropriate to its own nature" (IT 107). *Oikeiosis* is a form of self-preservation—but a peculiar one, since it predates and undermines the very notion of the self. Heller-Roazen cites Seneca's attempt to explain why it is that a tortoise that has come to be overturned will struggle mightily to upright itself, even though, according to the philosopher, it is not in any pain. Seneca concludes it is in the animal's nature to be on its feet rather than on its back, and it seeks to regain this "natural position" (112). This observation allows Seneca to conclude that "all animals possess a sense of their constitution" (112). Possession, of course, is a double-edged term,

implying both agency and its lack. Living beings, Heller-Roazen concludes, glossing Seneca, are more possessed by this fundamental first principle than they are the possessors of it. For the tortoise senses rather than understands its predicament. And this not because it is a mere animal, but because it is a living being. In other words, there is no difference here between the human and the animal. The necessary, inevitable or fundamental attempt to be appropriate to one's own nature is not a delimited event but rather an endless process that characterizes the life of the being; it is "a movement, to be continually achieved anew throughout all animal life" (112).

Heller-Roazen emphasizes that the tortoise, here emblematic of all living beings, does not simply sense itself. Were this the case, then we would have to conclude that Seneca is suggesting "that the first of all things sensible was the self" (113). Rather, what it senses is its own sense of itself, this primary sensation, "which refers not to itself but to its nature" (113). For Heller-Roazen, the Stoic understanding of *oikeiosis* "posits, at the heart of every living being, a difference without which it could not come to be itself: the difference between the self and its constitution, that 'most proper thing' to which the animal, in relating itself to the world about it, comes by nature to be appropriated" (113). The constitution or nature to which a living being is by necessity drawn is a key moment of difference, something "within each animal which is not the animal itself and, in not being it, allows it ... to come to be" (114). The life of every living being is therefore always excessive of the containment that we might call self or consciousness.

We need to have this definition of living being in mind in order to make sense of the end of the book. In the last four chapters, Heller-Roazen examines some nineteenth- and twentieth-century conceptions of living being. As he suggested in *Echolalias* with relation to language, what modernity contributes to the concept of primary sensation is a fascination with disability or disorder. (We might say that Heller-Roazen is a modern when it comes to language, but not when it comes to sensation. That is, he celebrates disorders of language but he distrusts disorders of sensation.) Turning to neurology and psychology, Heller-Roazen compares the phenomenon of "phantom limb" (the felt presence of an absent, because amputated, part of the body) with the phenomenon of "negation delirium" or "Cotard's syndrome" (the felt absence of body parts that are physiologically present—named for Jules Cotard, the French neurologist who diagnosed it in the 1880s). Although the two phenomena would seem to be opposed—one advocating a false presence and the other a false absence, one physiological and neurological, and the other psychological—both present a disorder of that vital sense or primary sensation that Heller-Roazen has claimed characterizes all living being. Yet even these supposed deformations of what is most proper to living being serve to affirm Heller-Roazen's characterization of that sense as a self-divided, differential thing that is not synonymous with rationality and consciousness.

In the penultimate chapter, Heller-Roazen examines the phenomenon of "depersonalization" or "coenesthopathy" as described by psychologists like Ludovic Dugas and Pierre Janet. In such cases, patients feel themselves to be incomplete or lacking wholeness. As Janet put it, those afflicted have "a negative feeling of not being unitary enough, of not being alive enough, of not being real enough" (quoted in *IT* 282). They do not consider themselves mad but rather as incomplete—that is, they do not sense themselves in the way that Heller-Roazen has been claiming all living things do. Coenesthopathy is then "a life of conscious cogitation in the absence of any perception of being alive" (286). For Heller-Roazen, this development of modern psychiatry appears as a pathology of the primary sense as it has been defined from Aristotle

onwards—it is, he asserts, "nothing less than the illness of the master sense of the tradition" (286). As such, a phenomenon like coenesthopathy is not opposed to primary sensation, but rather simply the most attenuated form of it. The "feelings of emptiness" that patients describe are, after all, "still 'feelings' of a kind: liminal feelings, to be sure, that touch upon the edge of the tactile world, but sensible impressions nonetheless" (288).

Heller-Roazen concludes that the contemporary world is best characterized by a kind of not-quite general anesthesia—marginal feelings that describe the evanescence or impoverishment of feeling. (He cites examples in Benjamin, Heidegger, and Levinas.) This leads him to conclude that the modern world "has bid farewell to the primary perceptual power of the tradition," such that "our world is by now the inverted image of the ancient" (289). In this lament for a lost world, Heller-Roazen's book reminds me of an earlier, foundational text of comparative literature that also manifests vast erudition, Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis*, which similarly concludes with the impoverishment of the modern world, or at least modern forms of representation.

The specter of bodies who think but do not feel might seem rather far from the upside-down tortoise—and, indeed, if we consider Heller-Roazen's final claim that "any ethics worthy of the name" must examine the absence of the primary sensation that has accompanied thought into modernity but now risks destruction by it (290), we might well ask who this ethics-to-come is aimed at. For despite Heller-Roazen's repeated invocations of nonhuman living beings, his book ends without making it clear what relation the nonhuman ought to have to the human, and whether the human is to be reconsidered, perhaps even subordinated to some nonhuman other. This uncertainty is not ameliorated by the absence of any investigation into the anthropomorphisms that (perhaps necessarily?) characterize many of the examples cited by Heller-Roazen and certainly by his appropriation of them. (We might think, for example, of Hoffmann's tomcat Murr, with whom Heller-Roazen begins and ends the book, and whose celebration of a non-rational life is figured by Heller-Roazen in quite human terms, such as "celebration.") In other words, what Heller-Roazen fails to do is to consider what it would mean to figure or represent nonhuman living being. It is striking that Heller-Roazen speaks, at the end of *The Inner Touch*, of a "transformation in the speaking living being" (290). Is this a synonym for the human? What does this final invocation do to the concept of the nonhuman living being that has been so readily invoked elsewhere? Does the latter remain subordinate to the human? And how does this speaking being relate to the writing being "personified" by Io? What constitutes language, and how is that language related to a presumably non- or extra-linguistic sensation?

For all the brilliance of these two works, the crucial question of the relation between language and life remains frustratingly unacknowledged. Presumably the two concepts are linked by a shared quality of difference or non-self-identity. (Cue the familiar tropes of remainder, trace, phantoms, ghosts—all of which appear in Heller-Roazen's work, although without any reference to the post-structuralism that has done so much to investigate them.) But isn't the difference that inheres within life different from the difference that inheres within language?

Readers can only hope that the already prolific Heller-Roazen will write the third book these two seem to beg. This book would directly address the difficulty—but perhaps also the necessity—of conceptualizing, representing, and thus putting into language that thing called life, no matter how

much that life would seem to resist conceptuality, representation, and language. Until then, Heller-Roazen's investigations into disturbances of sentences and the triumph of sentience will remain frustratingly at odds.

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