

THAT GOES WITHOUT SAYING: A TREATISE ON SILENCE

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I.

Music is the cup that holds the wine of silence. Sound is that cup, but empty. Noise is that cup, broken.

—Robert Fripp¹

My mother was a literalist of the imagination. A dirty mouth, she knew, demanded scouring. She was also the empress of congealed cream: a sultana of soap. When I repeated a filthy word overheard at the playground, she straightaway grabbed her four-year-old son by the neck, marched him into the bathroom, held him over the sink, and washed his mouth. Though Ivory bars were 99 44/100 percent pure, the caustic taste of that chalky cake might have been enough to make a young boy swear off speech, even speech devoid of swearwords. Yet other children have had more telling reasons to go mum. Raped at eight, Maya Angelou went mute for the next five years. Separated from his parents at six, Jerzy Kosinski claimed not to have spoken throughout his ordeal of surviving the Nazi devastation of Eastern Europe. At fifteen, the Little Mermaid sacrificed her tongue for the chance to be loved by a mortal prince.

“Will You Please Be Quiet, Please” demands a character in the Raymond Carver story. For most of us, quiet abides in the ethereal expanses beyond 20 kHz or in the nether realm beneath 20 Hz. What we do not or cannot hear, might, like Bishop Berkeley’s tree falling in the forest, not even exist. Auditory range contracts with age, which is why classroom teachers tend to be oblivious to The Mosquito, a mobile-phone ringtone whose frequency, set as high as 17 kHz, is nevertheless heard by youthful students more attentive to messages from peers than from pedagogues. Senescence: the contraction into soundlessness. The parameters of silence vary among bats and elephants (who register ultrasonic vibrations), whales and rhea (intimate with infra-

¹ http://www.elephant-talk.com/wiki/Interview_with_King_Crimson_in_Musician.

sonic vibrations), and middling humans (proud arbiters of what is infra- and ultra-). Alternative universes collide in houses where dogs scamper about alert to sounds unheard by the masters' ears.

Whatever the sound of silence, it is for one lyricist, Paul Simon, pathological. "Silence," he sings, "like a cancer grows." For another, Joseph Mohr, it is sacred. Mohr's familiar "*Stille Nacht, Heil'ge Nacht*" equates the silence of the night before Christmas with its holiness. The silence of serenity is not identical with the silence of despair, any more than the silence of the lambs ought to be confused with the silence of the tapeworms or the owls. Reflecting a taxonomy of silences, the standard system of musical notation employs several different marks to punctuate the intervals between performance, including the caesura (/), general pause (-), fermata (^), and break mark ('). Silences resonate differently for us depending on age, personality, and philosophy. Renouncing speech is a way for ascetics to purge themselves of worldly impurities. But if culture is, in Lionel Trilling's resonant phrase, the "buzz and hum of implication,"² then silence is antisocial, a rude refusal to participate in the raucous human comedy. "Hasn't art been the human creature's rebellion against silence?" asks composer Toru Takemitsu,³ as if succumbing to silence is a repudiation of humanity. And Lennard J. Davis seized on sound as a way of rebelling against his deaf parents and the hushed household in which they brought him up: "The only way I knew to exist against the silence was to make noise. Whimpers, sniffs, throat-clearings, song—these sounds let me know I was there."⁴

Silence can be plenitude, a state that renders any sound superfluous, or it can be utter vacancy, a symptom of the cosmic void. It can be active, something that we create and embrace, or passive, something we endure and that, according to Maurice Maeterlinck, is "the shadow of sleep, of death or non-existence."⁵ "Ask me about my vow of silence," quips the bumper sticker, summing up the culture's ambivalence toward quiet. Honk if you don't like noise.

² Lionel Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination* (New York: New York Review, 2008), p. 206.

³ Toru Takemitsu, *Confronting Silence: Selected Writings*, trans. & ed. Yoshiko Kakud and Glenn Gasow (Berkeley, CA: Fallen Leaf Press, 1995), p. 17.

⁴ Lennard J. Davis, *My Sense of Silence: Memoirs of a Childhood with Deafness* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2000), p. 15.

⁵ Maurice Maeterlinck, *The Treasure of the Humble*, trans. Alfred Sutro (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1910), p. 7.

II.

Cave tibi a cane muto et aqua silenti. (Beware of a dog that does not speak to you and of silent waters.)

—Latin proverb

My parents belonged to a world that still believed in part that children should be seen and not heard (The part they denied was that children should be seen). Speech is strength, which is why grievances of the weak remain by definition unvoiced; breaking silence is seizing power. Richard Nixon presumed to speak for what he called “the silent majority”—Americans who shared his political beliefs but lacked effective means to express them. It requires uncommon mettle for those denied a voice to speak up on their own behalf. There are many reasons to believe that silence is golden, but when it betokens repression, neglect, and negation, the metal is leaden. William of Orange, who led the forces for Dutch independence, acquired the epithet William the Silent not for heroic stoicism but for calculated circumspection. Though monastic vows of silence betoken and facilitate spiritual purification, the Mafia’s *omertà* is an instrument of criminal concealment—deceit through radical meiosis. Like mushrooms, injustice and atrocity thrive in the dark, and conspiracies of silence are strategies to erase the shame of rape, incest, alcoholism, and other behavior that a culture deems unspeakable. So, when the emperor has no clothes, few dare call it nudity. “In the end,” said Martin Luther King, Jr., speaking for the cause of civil rights, “we will remember not the words of our enemies, but the silence of our friends.”⁶ And it is not a fond memory. *Qui tacit consentit*: the mute concur.

Though some find transcendent harmony in the music of the spheres, Blaise Pascal, gazing into the abyss, was terrified by the absolute lack of sound. “*Le silence éternel de ces espaces infinis m’effraie*,” he wrote.⁷ Franz Kafka, too, dreaded eternal silence. Reimagining Odysseus’ voyage in “*Das Schweigen der Sirenen*,” he writes that the silence of the Sirens is more fearful than anything they might have sung. Not for him

⁶ Martin Luther King, Jr. “Loving Your Enemies.” Sermon delivered at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, Birmingham, Alabama, November 17, 1957.

⁷ Blaise Pascal, *Pensées, Oeuvres complètes* (Paris: Gallimard/Pléiade, 1954), p. 1113.

the reassuring claim, in “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” that “Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard/ Are sweeter” or Stendhal’s observation that the best music is the kind that becomes inaudible after a few bars. The benign void of John Cage’s *4’33”*—four minutes and thirty-three seconds in which, though the pianist does not strike the keys, the audience is all ears—would be unimaginable for Pascal. Yet Cage insisted that “there is no such thing as silence. Something is always happening that makes a sound.”⁸ He noted that, even when he entered an anechoic chamber at Harvard, he could not escape the sound of blood coursing through his body. In a sonnet called “Rest,” Christina Rossetti evokes a “Silence more musical than any song,”⁹ but for Kafka it is closer to the starkness of Schönberg’s compositions than the euphony of Mozart’s.

“*Aber Schweigen ist Wohnort der Opfer*” (“But silence is where the victims dwell”), observes Nelly Sachs,¹⁰ who survived the Holocaust and gave poetic voice to those who did not. Breaking the silence is a metaphor commonly employed by African Americans, Latinos, gays, the indigenous, the indigent, the disabled, and others who reject the marginal position to which they were historically consigned. “Let those who have a voice speak for the voiceless,” proclaimed Archbishop Oscar Romero, who was assassinated for his efforts to champion the peasants of Nicaragua. “If nothing else is left one must scream,” declared Nadezhda Mandelstam, who lived to bear witness to Stalinist oppression. “Silence is the real crime against humanity.”¹¹

Increasingly vocal about their own experiences, women often speak of dispelling the silence imposed on them by a patriarchy that enforces reticence as a feminine virtue, as if, like children, they should be seen and not heard. “The history of most women is hidden, either by silence, or by flourishes and ornaments that amount to silence,” declared Virginia Woolf. The sentiment was echoed by Adrienne Rich, in a book she titled *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence*: “The entire history of women’s struggle

⁸ John Cage. *Silence: Lectures and Writings* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1961), p. 191.

⁹ Christina Rossetti, “Rest,” *The Complete Poems* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1979-90), Vol. I, p. 60.

¹⁰ Nelly Sachs, “Ein Spiel.” *O The Chimneys: Selected Poems, Including the Verse Play, ELL*, trans. Michael Hamburger (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1967), pp. 297, 296.

¹¹ Nadezhda Mandelstam, *Hope Against Hope: A Memoir*, trans. Max Hayward (New York: Atheneum, 1970), pp. 42-3.

for self-determination has been muffled in silence over and over.”¹² *Silences* is the name that Tillie Olsen gave a 1978 collection of essays about women writers who were discouraged or ignored. Philomela, whose brother-in-law, Tereus, ripped out her tongue after assaulting her, became a totem of the movement to empower women. “The problem lay buried, unspoken, for many years in the minds of American women”¹³ is the way Betty Friedan begins *The Feminine Mystique*, her manifesto for conquering that problem, by enabling women to speak up and assume control of their own lives.

Yet, despite—or because of—a history of stifling their voices, women are popularly associated with loquacity. Telephone operator, office receptionist, and other occupations requiring continual talk were long the exclusive province of women. One of the definitions that, in his impudent *Dictionary of the English Language*, Samuel Johnson assigned to “gossip” was “one who runs about tattling like women at a lying-in.”¹⁴ In the 1959 pop song “You Talk Too Much,” the imaginary interlocutor is female, like most of the species’ other troubling chatterboxes from Eve to Barbara Walters and Oprah Winfrey. However, the word *omertà* is thought to be derived from the Sicilian *omu* and Italian *uomo*, suggesting that manliness expresses itself in reticence. Hollywood and much of the rest of the world are drawn to strong, silent men such as Gary Cooper, Henry Fonda, and Clint Eastwood, as though silence is strength itself. Stoicism is traditionally masculine, and stiff upper lips do not facilitate speech. Women, though, are assigned the role of consolers, conveyers of bedtime tales and lullabies; when darkness approaches, silence for some is no solace. The world’s most famous mime, Marcel Marceau, is a man, but celebrity tattling—the otiose activity of harpies such as Louella Parsons, Hedda Hopper, Rona Barrett, and Liz Smith—has long been seen as women’s work. In fact, the Greeks conceived of Harpies as loathsome, voracious, and female. The transgendering wit behind the graffito “Marcel Proust is a yenta” derives from knowing that yentas are verbose women, *A la recherche du temps perdu* is seven volumes long, and the novel’s gay author hardly conformed to the category of strong, silent man.

¹² Adrienne Rich, *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence: Selected Prose 1966-1978* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1979), p. 11.

¹³ Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) (New York: Dell, 1983), p. 15.

¹⁴ Patricia Meyer Spacks, *Gossip* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985), p. 26.

Nevertheless, what Lord Alfred Douglas, Oscar Wilde's companion, called "the love that dare not speak its name" has long since revealed its name and much else, publicly and prolifically. The "play" button is more popular than the "mute." In 1968, Norman Mailer proclaimed that "true liberty . . . consisted of his right to say shit in *The New Yorker*."¹⁵ But within thirty years, the infamous fecal term and others like it were appearing regularly in that fastidious magazine. In June 2004, the Vice President of the United States was even heard to utter "fuck" on the floor of the Senate. No one hauled him into the Congressional washroom to douse his mouth with soap. Though the Federal Communications Commission still pounces on broadcast profanity, and vestiges of Victorianism linger among legionnaires of decency, Western cultures are more apt to celebrate than denigrate the shattering of silence. Free citizens eschew the quaint gymnastic clinch of holding their tongues.

III.

Seul le silence est grand, tout le reste est faiblesse. (Only silence is great, all else is weakness.)

—Alfred du Vigny, "*La Mort du loup*"

For all the negative qualities ascribed to silence, it can also mean safety. "*En boca cerrada no entran moscas*": According to the Spanish proverb, if you keep your mouth shut, you keep out the flies. But silence also keeps the Pentagon from discharging uniformed gays and lesbians. According to the "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy of the United States military, homosexuals are tolerated in the ranks as long as they remain mum about their sexual orientation. And though it is not necessarily true that tight lips float ships, the conviction that loose ones can sink them is dogma during war. Silence is the white flag that stands apart from combat. It offers sanctuary from a garrulous, perilous world of percussive bruit force. "Words are like leaves," wrote

¹⁵ Norman Mailer, *The Armies of the Night: History as a Novel, the Novel as History* (New York: New American Library, 1968), p. 38.

Alexander Pope, a poet often terse but rarely taciturn, “and where they most abound,/ Much fruit of sense beneath is rarely found.”¹⁶

However, more than merely a negative tactic, a refusal to commit clamor, silence can be a value in itself. Though Benjamin Franklin chose the ludicrous name “Silence Dogood” for the loquacious, self-righteous narrator of his early satirical essays, a formic aphorism he included in *Poor Richard’s Almanack*—“None preaches better than the ant, and she says nothing”—suggests a genuine respect for reticence. And his *Autobiography* assigns Silence a paramount position in its catalogue of moral virtues. Listing Silence second, just after Temperance, among the thirteen virtues that “occurr’d to me as necessary or desirable,” Franklin advises: “Speak not but what may benefit others or yourself. Avoid trifling Conversation.” A belief that all conversation is trifling quickened the Symbolists of the late nineteenth century, who favored suggestion over assertion: “It is idle to think that, by means of words, any real communication can pass from one man to another,” asserted the playwright Maeterlinck.¹⁷ The Talmudic sage Shammai also counseled verbal restraint: “*Emor m’at v’asey harbey*” (“Say little but do much”).¹⁸ Taoist enlightenment, too, is wordless. According to Lao Tzu, “Those who know don’t talk. Those who talk don’t know.”¹⁹

Moreover, silence can even surpass mere virtue or enlightenment. If, as J.D. Salinger’s Seymour Glass contends, “The human voice conspires to desecrate everything on earth,”²⁰ then the pre-vocal state is sacred. A vow of cleansing silence—the verbal analogue of fasting—is common to much monastic life, and societies cope with profound communal grief by invoking a collective moment of silence. Contemplative silence permits and marks a return to the still center of being, and it is the foundation upon which Quakers meet in worship. Quietism is the term for a condition of beatific serenity, and in the mystical traditions of many religions and cultures, quiet signals ultimate accord with the ineffable Absolute. “Words failed me,” says the visionary about the final moment of inexplicable rapture. After attaining enlightenment dur-

¹⁶ Alexander Pope, “Essay on Criticism,” Part II lines 109-10.

¹⁷ Maurice Maeterlinck, *The Treasure of the Humble*, p. 4.

¹⁸ Talmud, Pirke Avot, 1:15.

¹⁹ Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*, trans. Stephen Mitchell (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), chapter 56.

²⁰ J.D. Salinger, *Raise High the Roof Beam, Carpenters and Seymour: An Introduction* (Boston: Little Brown, 2001), p. 78.

ing a night of the full moon, the Buddha went silent for seven days. Apollonius of Tyana, the first-century ascetic sage, refrained from speech for five years. The Trappist Thomas Merton contended that what he called “elected silence” is essential to spiritual clarity:

In silence we learn to make distinctions. Those who fly silence, fly from distinctions. They do not want to see too clearly. They prefer confusion.

A man who loves God necessarily loves silence also, because he fears to lose his sense of discernment.²¹

“Silence itself had become my teacher,” writes Karen Armstrong, recounting her personal progress in a spiritual memoir, *The Spiral Staircase: My Climb out of Darkness*.

After a time I found that I could almost listen to the silence, which had a dimension all of its own. I started to attend to its strange and beautiful texture, which, of course, it was impossible to express in words. I discovered that I felt at home and alive in the silence, which compelled me to enter my interior world and walk around there.²²

A scholar of world religions, Armstrong situates her enlightenment within the context of monotheistic theology, but explorer Richard Byrd, drawing his inspiration from the stark Antarctic void, experiences a pantheistic delirium. Amid the noiseless expanse that surrounded him during the winter of 1934, Byrd feels himself in harmony with a cosmic soundless symphony:

I paused to listen to the silence. My breath crystallized as it passed my cheeks. Drifted on a breeze gentler than a whisper. The wind vane pointed toward the South Pole. Presently the wind cups ceased their gentle turning as the cold killed the breeze. My frozen breath hung like a cloud overhead. The day was dying, the night was being born—but with great peace. Here were the imponderable processes and forces of the cosmos, harmonious and soundless. Harmony, that was it! That was what came out of the silence—gentle rhythm. The train of a perfect chord, the music of the spheres per-

²¹ Thomas Merton, *No Man Is an Island*, p. 260.

²² Karen Armstrong, *The Spiral Staircase: My of Climb out of Darkness* (New York: Knopf, 2004), p. 284.

haps. It was enough to catch that rhythm momentarily to be myself a part of it.²³

“Stout Cortez,” as imagined by John Keats, encountered a very different landscape when he (or rather, Vasco Núñez de Balboa) ventured across the Isthmus of Panama. Attempting to convey the ecstasy he experienced on first reading George Chapman’s translation of the Homeric epics, Keats likens himself to Spanish explorers in the Western hemisphere who suddenly beheld the vast Pacific Ocean. What can one say about such an extraordinary event without being oafish and banal? “Wow?!?” Keats concludes his famous sonnet by leaving his awestruck conquistadores mute: “Silent, upon a peak in Darien.”

The poem stops, admitting that it has nothing left to say. And what could it say that is not a desecration of the silence that it posits as the only proper response? Convinced that words are meager means to convey his ecstatic state, Keats devises a verbal structure that deftly undercuts itself. The first thirteen lines of his Petrarchan sonnet are written in conventional iambic pentameter. The final line, however, is hypostressed. It contains only four—rather than five—accented syllables, and even a casual reader will sense something missing at the end. The poet has managed to use language to intimate something that transcends language. “On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer” assembles its own words to convey how the words of Homer refracted through the words of Chapman leave Keats speechless.

IV.

Qui veut se donner à la peinture doit commencer par se faire couper la langue. (Whoever wishes to devote himself to painting must begin by cutting out his tongue.)

—Henri Matisse²⁴

A mathematical equation has afflicted the most ambitious literature of the past two centuries. If a picture is worth a thousand words, then economics, if not aesthetics,

²³ Richard Byrd, *Alone*, 1938.

²⁴ Henri Matisse, *Jazz* (New York: George Braziller, 1992), pp. 9-10.

demands that those who work with words be more efficient. Why fill page after page with phrases describing a haystack when a painting or a photograph can do the job more efficiently and effectively? For Flaubert, James, Chekhov, and Hemingway, economy of expression demanded frugal narratives that show rather than tell, that emulate the immediacy of pictures. In “Ars Poetica,” Archibald MacLeish, declaiming against poems that declaim, demands, through a series of paradoxes, literature that denies its own medium—poems that are “mute,” “dumb,” “silent,” and “wordless.” Instead of statements, he called for images: “An empty doorway and a maple leaf” or “The leaning grasses and two lights above the sea.”²⁵ The development of photography during the nineteenth century precipitated a crisis not only for painting; the new technology was able to produce more accurate images more rapidly and inexpensively than the old. But it also induced in authors the anxiety of flatulence. Words seemed such a crude instrument for interpreting the music of the spheres.

For some uneasy writers, music became the paradigm. “*De la musique avant toute chose*” (“Music before everything else”), demands Paul Verlaine in his 1885 verse manifesto “Art poétique.” Wary of verbal wiles, he demands, “*Prends l’éloquence et tords-lui son cou!*” (“Take eloquence and wring its neck!”), as if it were possible to beat speech into silence. Verlaine concludes his poem by dismissing all writing that has not attained the condition of music, that remains stubbornly, irremediably verbal: “*Et tout le reste est littérature*” (“And everything else is literature”). The line oozes contempt, as if writing were unworthy of the most talented writers.

Stephen Dedalus’s “silence, exile, and cunning” supplanted “faith, hope, and charity” as the modernist credo, and the greatest of those is silence. In the valedictory poems that he composed as death approached, in 1941, Rabindranath Tagore casts aside the chimera of words. “Human beings, with their self-drawn lines,” he writes, “forget the epochs’ message.” In the final line of “Sickbed 30,” that message is: “silence flows within earth’s womb, mocking.”²⁶ The aspiration toward erasure can be found not only in much of modern literature, perhaps most emphatically in Elbert G. Hubbard’s 1905 *Essay on Silence*, a book of fifty-six pages that are so blank they are not even numbered

²⁵ Archibald MacLeish, “Ars Poetica,” *American Poetry: The Twentieth Century, Volume 1: Henry Adams to Dorothy Parker*, ed. Robert Hass, John Hollander, et. al. (New York: Library of America, 2000), p. 846.

²⁶ Rabindranath Tagore, “Sickbed 30,” trans. Wendy Barker and Sarandranath Tagore, *International Poetry Review* XXXI No. 2 (Fall 2005), p. 55.

(Hubbard's text was copied verbatim in 1974 in Bruce Harris's *The Nothing Book*). However, the monochromatic canvases of Kasimir Malevich and Mark Rothko, like Cage's soundless score (anticipated in 1897 by Alphonse Allais's *Marche funébre pour les funérailles d'un grand homme sourd*, a funeral march consisting of twenty-four empty bars), also posit vacancy as verity.

"The art of our time is noisy with appeals for silence," proclaimed Susan Sontag, who, in an essay called "The Aesthetics of Silence," brought sound thoughts to the subject.²⁷ Along with Roland Barthes, Maurice Blanchot, Ihab Hassan, Jacques Derrida, and George Steiner, she was a leading aesthete of silence, of vacancy as the zero degree of human expression. Philosophical and theological underpinnings to self-effacing art can be traced to Plato, Gnosticism, Sufism, Quakerism, Zen, and the Kabbalah, among other sources. In a sense, though, all modern philosophy culminates in Ludwig Wittgenstein's terse tautology: "*Wovon man nicht sprechen kann, darüber muss man schweigen.*" ("Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent.")²⁸ However, the preeminent virtuoso of wordlessness is surely Samuel Beckett, who lamented, "I could not have gone through the awful wretched mess of life without having left a stain upon the silence."²⁹

He left an indelible stain. But Beckett's long literary career, in English and in French, constituted an extended quarrel with language. According to Moran, who cancels his opening statement in *Molloy* ("It is midnight. The rain is beating on the windows") with his conclusion ("It was not midnight. It was not raining"), any discourse is dispensable: "It seemed to me that all language was an excess of language."³⁰ Desperate to find fit words to recount "the inenarrable contraption I called my existence,"³¹ Moran, like every other Beckett narrator, is baffled by the gap between mute reality and clangorous language. In Beckett's first novel, *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* (1932), the protagonist, Belacqua, proclaims an ambition that presages the author's own: "I shall state silences more competently than ever a better man

²⁷ Susan Sontag, "The Aesthetics of Silence." *Styles of Radical Will* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1969), p. 12.

²⁸ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, ed. & trans. C.K. Ogden (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), pp. 188-89.

²⁹ Deirdre Bair, *Samuel Beckett: A Biography* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1978), p. 640.

³⁰ Samuel Beckett, *Three Novels* (New York: Grove, 1965), p. 116.

³¹ Samuel Beckett, p. 114.

spangled the butterflies of vertigo.”³² Increasingly, Beckett pared his luxuriant, playful prose to the threshold of nullity, so that his 1965 film *Film* is a single-character study in mime and his 1967 play *Come and Go* contains only 121 words. All of his oeuvre covets the title *Acte sans paroles* (1957). It is constructed on the premise that truth is pre-verbal, that the only reason to break the primal silence is to try to articulate the futility and mendacity of all speech. Molloy advises that “you would do better, at least no worse, to obliterate texts than to blacken margins, to fill in the holes of words till all is blank and flat and the whole ghastly business looks like what it is, senseless, speechless, issueless misery.”³³ The Unnamable is the label applied to the ultimate narrator of Beckett’s novelistic trilogy, but the word could apply to anyone and anything within his ineffable universe. Moran explains that “not one person in a hundred knows how to be silent and listen, no, nor even to conceive what such a thing means. Yet only then can you detect, beyond the fatuous clamour, the silence of which the universe is made.”³⁴

V.

All artists dream of a silence which they must enter, as
some creatures return to the sea to spawn.

—Iris Murdoch³⁵

No whoosh is heard beyond the ionosphere, and it is only by cinematic convention that melodies by Richard Strauss or John Williams serenade travelers through outer space. If any of our species ever sounded the depths of the cosmos, it would be a silent flight. However, it is impossible to stifle the songs of the earth. There are few places on this planet where it is possible to wander for hours without audible evidence of another living being. The Galápagos Islands, a Pacific archipelago formed by volcanic

³² Samuel Beckett, *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*, ed. Eoin O’Brien and Edith Fournier (New York: Arcade, 1993), p. 193.

³³ Samuel Beckett, p. 13.

³⁴ Samuel Beckett, p. 121.

³⁵ Iris Murdoch, *The Black Prince* (New York: Penguin, 1975), p. 414.

eruption, seemed unearthly to Charles Darwin when he came upon them in 1835. In a diary entry about Isla San Cristóbal, he notes:

The whole is black Lava, *completely* covered by small leafless brushwood & low trees.—The fragments of Lava where most porous are reddish & like cinders; the stunted trees show little signs of life. The black rocks heated by the rays of the vertical sun like a stove give to the air a close & sultry feeling. The plants also smell unpleasantly. The country was compared to what we might imagine the cultivated parts of the Infernal regions to be.³⁶

Today, the human population of the Galápagos numbers about 30,000, and neither they nor the thousands of ecotourists who scramble across the petrified lava beds take a vow of silence. Yet the youngest of the islands, Fernandina, which rose from the sea a mere 700,000 years ago, remains uninhabited by *Homo sapiens*. Darwin never stopped at Fernandina, but when I did, 171 years after the voyage of the *Beagle*, no din from cars or planes disturbed the primal peace. However, indigenous creatures, including sea lions, marine iguanas, penguins, boobies, and a few of the thirteen species of songbird that have come to be called Darwin's finches, emit their own distinctive tones. The decibel level in the Galápagos is surely lower than in Mexico City, Cairo, or Kuala Lumpur, but, like Prospero's remote domain, these isles, too, are "full of noises,/ Sounds and sweet airs, that give delight, and hurt not."³⁷

Even amid the desolate pale expanses of Antarctica, Sir Ernest Shackleton was haunted by the presentiment of a phantom companion. "Who is the third who walks always beside you?" asks T. S. Eliot in "The Waste Land," echoing the testimonies of Shackleton, Thomas Crean, and Frank Worsley that they sensed a stranger escorting them during their arduous trek across the mountains and glaciers of South Georgia.

For a nineteenth-century European, Abyssinia, untamed and unmapped, was, as much as the South Pole, the Galápagos, or the dark side of the moon, *ultima Thule*. And it was there that, after renouncing poetry at age nineteen, Arthur Rimbaud made his way, growing the tumor that killed him at twenty-nine. During his last ten years of life, Rimbaud did not quit speaking or writing letters, but his unwritten poems,

³⁶ Charles Darwin, *Charles Darwin's Beagle Diary* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp. 351-2.

³⁷ William Shakespeare, *The Tempest* act III scene 2, lines 135-6.

like those of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz submitting to the muzzle of her Archbishop, constitute a kind of “silence” that thunders through the pages of literary history. Artistic abdications—eighteen-year-old Thomas Chatterton choosing arsenic over poetry, Glenn Gould withdrawing from public performance, Greta Garbo wanting to be alone instead of on camera—invite and defy interpretation precisely because silence from the eloquent is a provocation. “What really knocks me out,” says Holden Caulfield, “is a book that, when you’re all done reading it, you wish the author that wrote it was a terrific friend of yours and you could call him up on the phone whenever you felt like it.”³⁸ Many felt that way about *The Catcher in the Rye*, and when, in 1965, J.D. Salinger himself retreated to the fastness of Cornish, New Hampshire and terminated all contact with the public, devoted readers felt betrayed.

In 1964, when *Call It Sleep* was rediscovered as a forgotten masterpiece, thirty years after its initial publication, astonished critics made their way to a duck farm in Maine to interrogate the Rip Van Winkle of modern American literature. They tried to assimilate the fact that Henry Roth had published nothing during the interim. It would take Roth another thirty years to publish his second novel, *A Star Shines Over Mt. Morris Park* (1994). Roth’s prolonged (sixty-year) residence on writer’s block might be the most sustained case of mogigraphia among major American writers, but, at his death in 1994, Ralph Ellison was still working on the second novel (published posthumously in 1999 as *Juneteenth*) that he began after *Invisible Man* in 1952. Just as mathematicians differentiate among orders of infinity (aleph-zero, aleph-one, aleph-two . . . etc.), it is possible to parse disparate sorts of literary silence. And the silence from a hiatus in creativity sounds different from the kind produced by Harper Lee and Arundhati Roy, who declined to follow up on their first novels, *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *The God of Small Things*, respectively. They defy the convention of literature as a calling; once the silence is broken, the writer feels compelled to keep on calling.

Yet another kind of silence ensues when an author such as Cormac McCarthy, Thomas Pynchon, B. Traven, or William Wharton writes and publishes but spurns interviews, blurbs, readings, workshops, and most of the other promotional activities expected of successful contemporary authors. The taunting figure of the reclusive and/or reluctant writer who becomes famous by repudiating the trappings of fame

³⁸ J.D. Salinger, *The Catcher in the Rye* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1951), p. 25.

shows up in contemporary fiction as a way of contesting the sentimental tenet that art is self-expression. In *Mao II* (1991), Don DeLillo, himself notoriously elusive, offers as protagonist Bill Gray, who has been living in seclusion for the past twenty-three years while writing the novel he refuses to release into the culture. Gray is a variation on Bucky Wunderlick, once the world's most famous rock star who, in DeLillo's *Great Jones Street* (1973), retreats from clamorous public appearances to anonymous, ascetic solitude in a bare New York apartment.

In *The Book of Illusions* (2002), Paul Auster tells the story of David Zimmer, a scholar who tracks down Hector Mann, a great filmmaker who disappeared in 1929. Early in the novel, we are told that Zimmer is the author of something called *The Road to Abyssinia*, “a book about writers who had given up writing, a meditation on silence. Rimbaud, Dashiell Hammett, Laura Riding, J.D. Salinger, and others—poets and novelists of uncommon brilliance who, for one reason or another, had stopped.”³⁹ When he finds Mann, in New Mexico, Zimmer discovers that, in addition to the early work for which he gained renown, the director secretly made fourteen later films. Mann intends to destroy them at his death, and he now lies on his deathbed. Zimmer struggles to get a glimpse at films made not for viewing, created by “the first artist to make his work with the conscious, premeditated intention of destroying it.”⁴⁰

That claim of primacy is hyperbolic, not just fictional. Tibetan sand paintings, intricate, arduous designs obliterated at the moment of their completion, are a humbling exercise in aesthetic effacement. Kafka's dying request, of his friend Max Brod, to burn all his manuscripts, is another precedent, as are Yves Tinguely's self-destructing sculptures.

But the most striking case of willful literary muffling might be that of Bob Kaufman, sometimes called “the black Rimbaud.” Kaufman (1925–86), who inspired Herb Caen to coin the term “beatnik,” produced two classic Beat documents—*Abominist Manifesto* (1959) and *Solititudes Crowded with Loneliness* (1964)—that, like his poetry, deploy words to express mistrust of language. Born in New Orleans to an African-American mother and an Orthodox Jewish father, Kaufman settled in San Francisco after twenty years in the Merchant Marine. His writing was strongly in-

³⁹ Paul Auster, *The Book of Illusions* (New York: Henry Holt, 2002), p. 14.

⁴⁰ Paul Auster, p. 208.

fluenced by Buddhism and jazz, both of which disdain the merely verbal. But what, within the tradition of literary silence, is most remarkable about Kaufman is that for the ten years following the assassination of John F. Kennedy (1963-73) not only did he cease publishing or writing, he chose not even to speak.

Qui tacit conturbat, silence is disturbing: to readers, who crave sequels, and critics, who are trained to interpret everything, even and especially blankness. The hermeneutics of silence is the revenge of scholarship on the uncooperative artist. See Myles Weber's *Consuming Silences: How We Read Authors Who Don't Publish* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2005) for a tenacious attempt to interpret the muteness of Tillie Olsen, Henry Roth, J. D. Salinger, and Ralph Ellison. In *Stone Reader* (2003), filmmaker Mark Moskowitz testifies to his own inability to accept silence from a gifted writer. The film documents Moskowitz's attempt to track down Dow Mossman, whose first and only novel, *The Stones of Summer* (1972), had fascinated him thirty years before. *Stone Reader* becomes a meditation on squandered talent and the discontinuities of an individual life. Few literary lives have been as discontinuous—if symmetrical—as that of Friedrich Hölderlin (1770-1843). By age thirty-six, Hölderlin had established himself as one of the greatest of German poets, before succumbing to inarticulate insanity for his final thirty-six years. "Ich verstand die Stille des Aethers" ("I understood the stillness of the ether"), wrote Hölderlin before losing his command of language. "Der Menschen Worte verstand ich nie" ("I never understood the words of men").⁴¹

VI.

How imagine a silent world.

—Hannah Merker, *Listening*⁴²

Who better to comprehend silence than those who cannot hear? Though Cage insisted that the rumbles of his own organs were audible even in an anechoic chamber, might he have apprehended pure silence if he had lacked the physical capacity for

⁴¹ Friedrich Hölderlin, "Da Ich Ein Knabe War . . .," lines 26-27.

⁴² Hannah Merker, *Listening* (New York: HarperCollins, 1994), p. 7.

audition? If a tree falls in a forest and you simply cannot hear it, you experience hush in a way that most people, even with the aid of earplugs, cannot. The memoirs of the deaf abound with details about the loss of hearing, the ordeal of education, encounters with bigotry, and the relative advantages of signing and oralism. Some authors use their personal histories to demonstrate that “Deaf Is Dandy,” that the non-hearing constitute a self-sufficient community with a complex culture of its own. The accounts of the prelingual deaf, those who were born without hearing or who lost their hearing before acquiring language, naturally differ from those of the postlingual deaf, those who learned to speak before losing their ability to hear. But none provides a description of silence that could satisfy the curiosity of those who never cease to hear something.

Despite the title of her memoir, *The Feel of Silence*, Bonnie Poitras Tucker is more intent on sussing out the feel of sound. “I know that the rain makes noise: the heavier the rain the louder the noise,” she writes. “I know that because many people have told me so. But no one has told me when—or how—the rain makes noise. Is it the fall of rain itself that carries sound, or does the sound come only when the rain hits something, such as the ground or the windowpane?”⁴³ A resolute oralist who rejects deaf separatism, Tucker insists on seeing her condition as a handicap (“I would gladly grab any opportunity to fix my deafness”)⁴⁴ and attends to sound rather than silence.

If deaf writers provide no privileged access to silence, it might be due to the limitations of written language, which evolved as a surrogate for speech. To publish a book on the deaf experience, Tucker, like Pierre Desloges, Helen Keller, Henry Kisor, or Hannah Merker, has to resort to English, French, or another semiotic system that ultimately derives from sounds. Within such a system, absolute silence is inconceivable because it cannot be represented. Perhaps the only accurate way to express silence is through signing, through one of the purely visual languages that are entirely autonomous and that empower the deaf to communicate without recourse to spoken languages. Benny Sidransky’s view of American Sign Language resembles the utopianism of those who have advocated Hebrew, Latin, Esperanto, or Volapük as perfect

⁴³ Bonnie Poitras Tucker, *The Feel of Silence* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995), pp. 10–11.

⁴⁴ Bonnie Poitras Tucker, p. xxi.

conduits of thought and antidotes to linguistic muddle after Babel. Using ASL, Sidransky, who was deaf, assured his (non-deaf) daughter Ruth:

Not need to speak to know language. I late to learn my language, never really learn hearing language, to speak with tongue well, but sign language is real language, separate from English, separate from tongue language. It is first language from God, before man talk with mouth.⁴⁵

However, David Wright, a South African poet who lost his hearing at age seven, contends that the deaf are no closer than anyone else to silence. Insisting, like Cage, that “no one inhabits a world of total silence.”⁴⁶ Wright describes the “phantasmal voices” that he, remembering sound, continued to “hear.” Hospitalized with the scarlet fever that destroyed his auditory nerve, he had no trouble continuing to understand the people he knew:

My mother spent most of the day beside me and I understood everything she said. Why not? Without knowing it, I had been reading her mouth all my life. When she spoke I seemed to hear her voice. It was an illusion which persisted even after I knew it was an illusion. My father, my cousin, everyone I had known, retained phantasmal voices. That they were imaginary, the projections of habit and memory, did not come home to me until I had left the hospital. One day I was talking with my cousin and he, in a moment of inspiration, covered his mouth with his hand as he spoke. Silence! Once and for all I understood that when I could not see I could not hear.⁴⁷

Yet Wright sees much, feelingly. Ludwig von Beethoven and Gabriel Fauré famously continued to compose after losing their hearing, and Wright and others report that the deaf indeed “hear” music, by feeling the vibrations it produces. In a room with a wooden floor, he “listened” to the instruments of an orchestra through his feet. So, though silence functions as a modernist metaphor for the absolute, a kind of magnetic North for situating purity in art, it does not exist—or, at least as soon as we try to experience it, the very act of observation stirs up the stillness. “It is not necessary to be able to hear in order to hear,” says Wright, who, experiencing music as tactile, sug-

⁴⁵ Ruth Sidransky, *In Silence: Growing up Hearing in a Deaf World* (New York: St. Martin’s, 1990), p. 20.

⁴⁶ David Wright, *Deafness* (New York: Stein & Day, 1969), p. 22.

⁴⁷ David Wright, p. 22.

gests synaesthesia as a universal condition. Though we and other species are attentive to differing frequencies, everything leaves an impression, in one sense or another.

VII.

Speech is of Time, Silence is of Eternity.

—Thomas Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus*⁴⁸

Moving to Tel-Aviv in August, 1973, I realized shortly after signing a lease that I had bungled my choice of residence. I rented an apartment that was conveniently located near both the main coastal highway to Haifa and the small but busy Sde Dov Airport. You might say that the unrelenting tumult of traffic was so abrasive that I could not even hear myself think—except that my thoughts were loud and frantic. Sleeping with my head under the pillow did not help, because under those conditions sleep was as elusive as sanity. Had I been selected by the Mossad to be a subject for some experiment in aural torture?

Relief arrived a few weeks later, with the outbreak of war. Many of my neighbors were mobilized, sent off to hold the fragile lines against the Syrian and Egyptian armies. Commercial aviation was grounded, and the six-lane highway was transformed into a virtual promenade. Except for an occasional air-raid siren, my apartment was as quiet as the reading room in the Gallaudet University library. While the massive violence and suffering left me stunned, dismayed, and grieved, I experienced the Yom Kippur War as an oasis of calm. However, even without gunpowder, bombs, and missiles, the battlefield in the *Iliad* is a very noisy place. And front-line service in the infantry has become ever more cacophonous during recent centuries. If hell is war, damnation means being sentenced to eternal clamor. John Milton named the capital of his hell, the raucous place where all the demons congregate, *Pandemonium*. Those who raise hell do not speak softly.

World War II concluded in 1945, but the bellicose ambient clangor has gotten only shriller. It is harder and harder to find a place to live that is free of noise pollution, that is not within earshot of the grating, jarring, strident sounds of planes, cars,

⁴⁸ Thomas Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 166.

trucks, motorcycles, lawnmowers, leafblowers, boomboxes, power saws, and power drills. “Nothing has changed the nature of man so much as the loss of silence,” wrote Max Picard,⁴⁹ and in the fifty years since he made that observation nothing confirms it so much as the fact that we take the perpetually elevated level of sound for granted. If repeated exposure to volumes greater than 85 dB causes physiological as well as psychological damage, the species has been subjected to profound stress.

Until the advent of recording less than a century ago, sound was a singular phenomenon. One might cherish for an entire lifetime the memory of having heard the Philadelphia Orchestra perform a Schubert symphony or William Jennings Bryan deliver a campaign speech. Now it is impossible to escape endless reiterations of the same sounds, and a dental appointment, a telephone hold, or a visit to a shopping mall means serving as captive audience to sounds selected by an invisible agent. Though released as late as 1936, nine years after *The Jazz Singer* made talk seem indispensable to cinema, Charles Chaplin’s *Modern Times* is still a silent film, except when Charlie’s boss barks orders at him. For Chaplin, sound, which threatened his art and his livelihood, is ominous. We can always close our eyes to unpleasantness, but ears are not equipped with lids, and nothing is as tyrannous as forcing sound on someone else. In George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, the voice of Big Brother, in fluent Newspeak, booms out from ubiquitous speakers.

Muzak, the company that pioneered the commercial distribution of melodic wallpaper, has become more sophisticated than it was when clients needed only to upholster their elevators with a faintly recognizable upbeat tune. Its repertoire is much larger, and it faces competition. But, according to an official in Muzak’s marketing department: “Our biggest competitor is silence.”⁵⁰ Yet that competitor seems teetering on the brink of bankruptcy. Weary of all the sound and fury and the sound of fury, I yearn to listen to the lesson of the cosmos, the silence of ineffable truth. I use my mother tongue to long for moments when all goes mum. Amid the enervating din of speeches, beats, and screeches, I dream of tender mothers armed with bars of soap scouring discord from a raucous world. The rest of course is silence.

⁴⁹ Max Picard, *The World of Silence*, trans. Stanley Goodman (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1952), p. 221.

⁵⁰ David Owen, “The Soundtrack of Your Life,” *The New Yorker*, April 10, 2006, p. 71.