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Silence

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Silence used to be, to varying degrees, a means of isolation. Now it is the absence of silence that works to render today's world empty and isolating. Its reserves have been invaded and depleted. The Machine marches globally forward and silence is the dwindling place where noise has not yet penetrated.

Civilization is a conspiracy of noise, designed to cover up the uncomfortable silences. The silence-honoring Wittgenstein understood the loss of our relationship with it. The unsilent present is a time of evaporating attention spans, erosion of critical thinking, and a lessened capacity for deeply felt experiences. Silence, like darkness, is hard to come by; but mind and spirit need its sustenance.

Certainly there are many and varied sides to silence. There are imposed or voluntary silences of fear, grief, conformity, complicity (e.g. the AIDS-awareness "Silence=Death" formulation), which are often interrelated states. And nature has been progressively silenced, as documented in Rachel Carson's prophetic Silent Spring. Nature cannot be definitively silenced, however, which perhaps goes a long way in explaining why some feel it must be destroyed. "There has been a silencing of nature, including our own nature," concluded Heidegger (Heidegger, 1967: 288) and we need to let this silence, as silence, speak. It still does so often, after all, speak louder than words.

There will be no liberation of humans without the resurrection of the natural world, and silence is very pertinent to this assertion. The great silence of the universe engenders a silent awe, which the Roman Lucretius meditated upon in the 1st century BCE: "First of all, contemplate the clear, pure color of the sky, and all it contains within it: the stars wandering everywhere, the moon, the sun and its light with its incomparable brilliance. If all these objects appeared to mortals today for the first time, if they appeared to their eyes suddenly and unexpectedly, what could one cite that would be more marvelous than this totality, and whose existence man's imagination would less have dared to conceive?" (Hadot, 2000: 212).

Down to earth, nature is filled with silences. The alternation of the seasons is the rhythm of silence; at night silence descends over the planet, though much less so now. The parts of nature resemble great reserves of silence. Max Picard's description is almost a poem: "The forest is like a great reservoir of silence out of which the silence trickles in a thin, slow stream and fills the air with its brightness. The mountain, the lake, the fields, the sky—they all seem to be waiting for a sign to empty their silence onto the things of noise in the cities of men."(Picard, 1952: 139).

Silence is "not the mere absence of something else." (Dauenhauer,1980: vii). In fact, our longings turn toward that dimension, its associations and implications. Behind the appeals for silence lies the wish for a perceptual and cultural new beginning.

Zen teaches that "silence never varies…." (Chung-Yuan, 1971: 12). But our focus may be improved if we turn away from the universalizing placelessness of late modernity. Silence is no doubt culturally specific, and is thus experienced variously. Nevertheless, as Picard argues, it can confront us with the "original beginnings of all things,"(Picard, op.cit.: 22) and presents objects to us directly and immediately. Silence is primary, summoning presence to itself; so it's a connection to the realm of origin.

In the industrially-based technosphere, the Machine has almost succeeded in banishing quietude. A natural history of silence is needed for this endangered species. Modernity deafens. The noise, like technology, must never retreat—and never does.

For Picard, nothing has changed human character so much as the loss of silence (Picard, op.cit.: 221). Thoreau called silence "our inviolable asylum,"(Thoureau, 1946: 241) an indispensable refuge that must be defended. Silence is necessary against the mounting sound. It's feared by manipulative mass culture, from which it remains apart, a means of resistance precisely because it does not belong to this world. Many things can still be heard against the background of silence; thus a way is opened, a way for autonomy and imagining.

"Sense opens up in silence," wrote Jean-Luc Nancy (Nancy: 2007:21). It is to be approached and experienced bodily, inseparably from the world, in the

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silent core of the self. It can highlight our embodiment, a qualitative step away from the hallmark machines that work so resolutely to disembody us. Silence can be a great aid in unblocking ourselves from the prevailing, addictive information sickness at loose in society[2]. It offers us the place to be present to ourselves, to come to grips with who we are. Present to the real depth of the world in an increasingly thin, flattened technoscape.

The record of philosophy vis-à-vis silence is generally dismal, as good a gauge as any to its overall failure. Socrates judged silence to be a realm of nonsense, while Aristotle claimed that being silent caused flatulence (Aristotle, 1927:896). At the same time, however, Raoul Mortley could see a "growing dissatisfaction with the use of words," "an enormous increase in the language of silence" in classical Greece

(Mortley, 1986: 110).

Much later, Pascal was terrified by the "silence of the universe," (Pascal, 1991: 256) and Hegel clearly felt that what could not be spoken was simply the untrue, that silence was a deficiency to be overcome. Schopenhauer and Nietzsche both emphasized the prerequisite value of solitude, diverging from anti-silence Hegel, among others.

Deservedly well known is a commentary on Odysseus and the Sirens (from Homer's Odyssey) by Horkheimer and Adorno. They depict the Sirens' effort to sidetrack Odysseus from his journey as that of Eros trying to stay the forces of repressive civilization. Kafka felt that silence would have been a more irresistible means than singing (Kafka, 1967: 54).

"Phenomenology begins in silence," according to Herbert Spiegelberg (Spiegelberg,1969:693). To put phenomena or objects somehow first, before ideational constructions, was its founding notion. Or as Heidegger had it, there is a thinking deeper and more rigorous than the conceptual, and part of this involves a primordial link between silence and understanding (Heidegger, 1992:258). Postmodernism, and Derrida in particular, deny the widespread awareness of the inadequacy of language, asserting that gaps of silence in discourse, for example, are barriers to meaning and power.

In fact, Derrida strongly castigates "the violence of primitive and prelogical silence," denouncing silence as a nihilist enemy of thought (Derrida, 1978: 130). Such strenuous antipathy demonstrates Derrida's deafness to presence and grace, and the threat silence poses to someone for whom the symbolic is everything. Wittgenstein understood that something pervades everything sayable, something which is itself unsayable. This is the sense of his well-known last line of the Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus: "Of that which one cannot speak, one should remain silent." (Wittgenstein, 1974: 89).

Can silence be considered, approached, without reification, in the here and now? I think it can be an open, strengthening way of knowing, a generative condition. Silence can also be a dimension of fear, grief—even of madness and suicide. In fact, it is quite difficult to reify silence, to freeze it into any one non-living thing. At times the reality we interrogate is mute; an index of the depth of the still present silence? Wonder may be the question that best gives answers, silently and deeply.

"Silence is so accurate," said Mark Rothko (Breslin, 1993: 387), a line that has intrigued me for years. Too often we disrupt silence, only to voice some detail that misses an overall sense of what we are part of, and how many ways there are to destroy it. In the Antarctica winter of 1933, Richard Byrd recorded: "Took my daily walk at 4PM… I paused to listen to the silence…the day was dying, the night being born—but with great peace. Here were imponderable processes and forces of the cosmos, harmonious and soundless" (Merker, 1994: 127). How much is revealed in silence through the depths and mysteries of living nature. Annie Dillard also provides a fine response to the din: "At a certain point you say to the woods, to the sea, to the mountains, to the world, now I am ready. Now I will stop and be wholly attentive. You empty yourself and wait, listening" (Dillard, 1982:89).

It is not only the natural world that is accessible via silence. Cioran indicated the secrets in the silence of things, deciding that "All objects have a language which we can decipher only in total silence."(Cioran, 1995: 53). David Michael Levin's The Body's Recollection of Being counsels us to "learn to think through the body… we should listen in silence to our bodily felt experience" (Levin, 1985:60). And in the interpersonal sphere, silence is a result of empathy and being understood, without words much more profoundly than otherwise.

Native Americans seem to have always placed great value on silence and direct experience, and in indigenous cultures in general, silence denotes respect and self-effacement. It is at the core of the Vision Quest, the solitary period of fasting and closeness to the earth to

2 I first encountered this term in Ted Mooney's novel, *Easy Travel to Other Planets* (New York: Farrar Straus & Giroux, 1981).

discover one's life path and purpose. Inuit Norman Hallendy assigns more insight to the silent state of awareness called *inuinaqtuk* than to dreaming (Hallendy, 2000: 84-5). ative healers very often stress silence as an aid to serenity and hope, while stillness is required for success in the hunt. These needs for attentiveness and quiet may well have been key sources of indigenous appreciation of silence.

Silence reaches back to presence and original community, before the symbolic compromised both silence and presence. It predates what Levinas called "the unity of representation" (Levinas, 1996: 4), that always works to silence the silence and replace it with the homelessness of symbolic structures. The Latin root for silence, *silere*, to say nothing, is related to *sinere*, to allow to be in a place. We are drawn to those places where language falls most often, and most crucially, silent. The later Heidegger appreciated the realm of silence, as did Hölderlin, one of Heidegger's important reference points, especially in his Late Hymns (George, 1973: 308). The insatiable longing that Hölderlin expressed so powerfully related not only to an original, silent wholeness, but also to his growing comprehension that language must always admit its origin in loss.

A century and a half later, Samuel Beckett made use of silence as an alternative to language. In Krapp's Last Tape and elsewhere, the idea that all language is an excess of language is strongly on offer. Beckett complains that "in the forest of symbols" there is never quiet, and longs to break through the veil of language to silence (Beckett, 2004:221). Northrup Frye found the purpose of Beckett's work "to lie in nothing other than the restoration of silence" (Frye, 1970: 34).

Our most embodied, alive-to-this-earth selves realize best the limits of language and indeed, the failure of the project of representation. In this state it is easiest to understand the exhaustion of language, and the fact that we are always a word's length from immediacy. Kafka commented on this in "In the Penal Colony," where the printing press doubled as an instrument of torture. For Thoreau, "as the truest society approaches always nearer to solitude, so the most excellent speech finally falls into silence" (Thoureau, op.cit.: 241). Conversely, mass society banishes the chance of autonomy, just as it forecloses on silence.

Hölderlin imagined that language draws us into time, but it is silence that holds out against it. Time increases in silence; it appears not to flow, but to abide. Various temporalities seem close to losing their barriers; past, present, future less divided.

But silence is a variable fabric, not a uniformity or an abstraction. Its quality is never far from its context, just as it is the field of the non-mediated. Unlike time, which has for so long been a measure of estrangement, silence cannot be spatialized or converted into a medium of exchange. This is why it can be a refuge from time's incessancy. Gurnemanz, near the opening of Wagner's Parsifal, sings "Here time becomes space." Silence avoids this primary dynamic of domination.

So here we are, with the Machine engulfing us in its various assaults on silence and so much else, intruding deeply. The note North Americans spontaneously hum or sing is B- natural, which is the corresponding tone of our 60 cycles per second alternating current electricity. (In Europe, G-sharp is "naturally" sung, matching that continent's 50 cycles per second AC electricity.) In the globalizing, homogenizing Noise Zone we may soon be further harmonized. Pico Ayer refers to "my growing sense of a world that's singing the same song in a hundred accents all at once" (Ayer, 2000: 271).

We need a refusal of the roar of standardization, its information-noise and harried, surface "communication" modes. A no to the unrelenting, colonizing penetrability of non-silence, pushing into every non-place. The rising racket measures, by decibel up-ticks and its polluting reach, the degrading mass world—Don De Lillo's White Noise.

Silence is a rebuke to all this, and a zone for reconstituting ourselves. It gathers in nature, and can help us gather ourselves for the battles that will end debasement. Silence as a powerful tool of resistance, the unheard note that might precede insurrection. It was, for example, what slave masters feared most (Smith, 2001:68)[3]. In various Asian spiritual traditions, the muni, vowed to silence, is the person of greatest capacity and independence—the one who does not need a master for enlightenment (Wayman, 1974: 389-403).

The deepest passions are nurtured in silent ways and depths. How else is respect for the dead most signally expressed, intense love best transmitted, our profoundest thoughts and visions experienced, the unspoiled world most directly savored? In this grief-stricken world,

3 See also Thomas Merton, The Strange Islands (New York: New Directions, 1957); specifically, this passage from "The Tower of Babel: A Morality":
Leader: Who is He?
Captain: His name is Silence.
Leader: Useless! Throw him out! Let silence be crucified!

according to Max Horkheimer, we "become more innocent" through grief (Horkheim,1 978: 140). And perhaps more open to silence—as comfort, ally, and stronghold.

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