MANIFESTO FOR SILENCE

CONFRONTING THE POLITICS AND CULTURE OF NOISE

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EDINBURGH UNIVERSITY PRESS

Edinburgh University Press Ltd
22 George Square, Edinburgh

Typeset in Palatino
by Servis Filmsetting Ltd, Manchester, and
printed and bound in Great Britain by
Cromwell Press, Trowbridge, Wilts

A CIP record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978 0 7486 2591 8 (hardback)

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Acknowledgements

My thanks go to Jackie Jones at Edinburgh University Press for her encouragement to develop this project from its fairly vague early form, and for the many insightful suggestions she made over the course of its writing. My colleague at the University of Sunderland, Professor Richard Terry, gave helpful comments about the proposal and an early draft chapter. Caspar Melville at *New Humanist* magazine helped to get the project off the ground by accepting a short sketch of its main themes ('Sssshhhhh', *New Humanist*, 121, January/February 2006, p. 15). Dr Helene Brandon provided invaluable expertise in the medical issues discussed in Chapter 3, and was, as always, supportive throughout.

Introduction: The Virtues of Silence: The Politics of Silence

We live in an increasingly noisy society in which silence is a threatened phenomenon. Noise and silence are locked in conflict in contemporary existence, with noise pollution becoming a major problem of the developed world, one that encroaches on the life of nearly everyone in the West. It is a growing problem in the Third World too, with China's seemingly inexorable industrial and technological advance rapidly bringing it into line with the West in this regard. Struggling to cope with the demands of the biggest building boom on the planet today, the Shanghai City Council authorised 24-hour construction in the city in 2006, which means 24-hour noise pollution from that source too. As that example indicates, there are simply more sources of noise each year, building up in relentless progression: more cars on the road, more roads for those cars; more planes in the sky, more flight-paths for those planes; and of course, more airports to cope with those planes and chart their flight-paths. Our culture is committed to such expansion, and the current enthusiasm for globalisation can only make it worse: to export technology is also to export noise. On an international scale, noise is altering the environment for the worse.

Yet silence has played a crucial role in human history in such key areas of activity as religion and the arts, and its loss would seriously impoverish our lives. The ability to think, to reflect and to create are all to a significant degree dependent on our being able to access

silence and quiet on a regular, and reasonably predictable, basis, as is sleep, an absolute necessity of existence, which the trend towards a 24/7 society is rendering more and more difficult for many of the population. Various studies have demonstrated how sleep disturbance can increase stress levels and affect performance, so this is a worrying development.[1] New York has long proudly proclaimed itself to be the city that never sleeps, but that is fast becoming the ambition of almost all major cities in the West. Noise is in fact a key part of the business ethic that drives our culture, a means of capturing and holding our attention. The assumption in bars, for example, is that loud music increases alcohol consumption by drowning out talk; so as the night goes on the sound level goes up too, until by the evening's end you can hardly hear those standing next to you, even if they are shouting in your ear. Shopping malls are awash with music – some of it relatively bland and placid, some strident (the Christmas period traditionally will provide your fill of both); so are airports. More and more, it is coming to seem that a life of noise is our destiny.

This book is a challenge to that state of affairs. It constitutes a manifesto for silence, arguing that we need more rather than less of it in our lives; in other words, that silence matters and that the human race will suffer if significant space is not made for it. Why silence matters and where it matters – in religious practice, the arts, the environment, thought itself – forms our subject of enquiry. I shall also be exploring the exploitation of noise in our society by the business world, for whom silence and quiet are generally anathema, being states of reflection and, in most cases, of non-consumption. In such an avowedly consumerist society as ours the latter state will always be a target of attention, a test for the marketing temperament. Silence can therefore become a political statement, a refusal to accept the swamping of our culture by the imperatives of big business corporations and multinationals. Just as there is a politics of noise, so there can, and should, be an opposed politics of silence.

The confrontation between the politics of noise and the politics of silence underpins my argument. When the Israeli government uses sonic booms created by low-flying aircraft 'to break civilian support

for armed Palestinian groups responsible for . . . suicide bombing', with the resulting shockwaves creating havoc amongst the unfortunate inhabitants of the Gaza Strip, then the politics of noise moves to a new, altogether more menacing and alarming level that cannot go uncontested.[2] The US military is also experimenting with noise-creating devices as an alternative to conventional weapons, and we can only assume this is a trend that will gain momentum amongst the world's military.

The book will also look into the scientific side of silence, in terms of both the physics involved and the psychology (individuals' reaction to noise and silence varies enormously, not just within but across cultures), in order to gain as wide a perspective as possible. Posing the question of what silence is takes this enquiry into the realms of philosophy and sociology as well as physics and psychology, in what becomes a genuinely interdisciplinary project with wide-ranging implications. Silence has extremely interesting metaphysical ramifications which deserve, and will receive, close scrutiny in these pages.

I want us to recognise the manifold virtues of silence, how they are being put at risk and why we should strive to keep them in the forefront of public consciousness. My main themes accordingly will be the confrontation between noise and silence in our society, and the respective politics of each; the role of silence in religious practice, the arts and everyday existence. Silence needs a champion in the face of the many forces that seek to invade its domain, and I intend to fill that role for the remainder of this book, campaigning on its behalf.

Speaking up for Silence

Many high-profile cultural figures over the ages have emphasised the importance of silence to the human race. Oliver Wendell Holmes, for example, spoke of silence in one of his poems as a cure for 'the blows of sound' destroying the peace of the environment.[3] Aldous Huxley complained of there being an 'assault against silence' in the twentieth century which was making daily life unbearable, and the problem he identified sixty years ago takes on a new dimension with

each passing year.[4] Looking back from our current perspective, the world of the mid-twentieth century can seem like an age of relative tranquillity, rather than the 'Age of Noise' that Huxley pictured it as being.[5] Noise pollution is a recognised menace of twenty-first-century life, and there is a growing body of legislation dealing with it, although it has to be said not particularly effectively. It is, for a start, mainly reactive. Very few people, or businesses, think about such pollution until asked to do so by way of complaint, seeming to lack any in-built censor as to the effect of their activities on others or the environment. Noise consciousness differs from individual to individual, and can be very subjective.

It has been suggested that the development of amplification is arguably the most anti-social invention of modern times, and even though amplification can be used creatively in rock and jazz, one can understand the reasoning that lies behind the claim. Outdoor pop concerts can saturate the surrounding environment with noise for several square miles. Amplification means that you cannot escape such events: the sound finds you, rather than you seeking it as used to be the case. Even if you remain indoors, it makes precious little difference: amplified sound has a life of its own, goes where it will, and respects few barriers. Silence becomes harder to achieve, harder to maintain, harder to guarantee. A debate is currently raging in Britain about the increasing use of public parks as concert venues, and the noise aspect is at the forefront of the exchanges. Parks are traditionally retreats from the bustle of urban life, but amplified music in the open air destroys that status with contemptuous ease. Again, the environment is being altered for the worse – radically the worse as far as opponents of this development are concerned.

Amplification comes down to the local level as well. Your neighbours, for example, can play music at volumes unheard of even just a generation or two ago, although houses have not evolved in the interim to cope with this improved technology (a wall can only absorb so much, a window far less). In the city silence is under threat – and cities continue to grow at alarming rates globally. The majority of humanity now live in an urban environment and noise is most certainly their destiny. At least in part this development helps to

explain the appeal of personal downsizing and the retreat to rural life this decision so often involves. But that is not an option that most can exercise; it is essentially a middle-class Western solution of limited applicability.

Perhaps we will adjust; perhaps every generation has the capacity to bear more noise than its predecessor. That is an argument often put forward by the more optimistically-minded of cultural commentators as well as by assorted apologists for new technology which, with the mobile phone as the most obvious example, offers increasing opportunities for the individual to introduce more noise into the public sphere (even in the supposedly forbidden areas of the library, theatre and cinema). Or perhaps we won't adjust, and the quest for silence will become ever more desperate for a substantial number of us. Perhaps there will simply be more flashpoints between those who want more noise and those who don't – a new source of division in an already deeply divided world, the politics of noise versus the politics of silence in combative action. Lifting the ban on mobile phones on planes has opened up a new front in this conflict. The crucial point is that noise sells, and in a consumer society that is always going to be the bottom line: where there is a market there is a producer and a distributor, and it is in the direct interest of producers and distributors to increase the number of consumers and the rate of consumption.

For many of us, however, loud, unsought noise is mental torture, and prolonged exposure to it makes rational thought and behaviour increasingly difficult to sustain. Whether this constitutes a moral issue is, admittedly, more contentious. Solitary confinement is a form of mental torture also, largely because of the enforced silence the individual is forced to endure through the absence of everyday conversation. If noise is bad for the mental and physical health of some, then plainly it is not for others. Some of us seek out the desert because of its lack of noise and potential for solitary contemplation:

> The grandeur of deserts derives from their being, in their aridity, the negative of the earth's surface and of our civilized humours. . . . [A]n aridity that drives out the artificial scruples of culture, a silence that exists

> nowhere else. The silence of the desert is a visual thing, too. A product of the gaze that stares out and finds nothing to reflect it.[6]

Others are far happier sitting on a crowded beach surrounded by humanity for as far as the eye can see, every gaze reliably reflected, with numerous ghetto-blasters competing for their attention. The decision as to where to locate oneself is a mixture of aesthetic and psychological considerations, all of which have their particular value and can be defended. We are social beings after all, and social interaction inevitably involves noise. It is just that there are some of us who do not want this on a permanent basis, or above a certain volume, and crave regular release. If we are perhaps not a silent majority, then we are definitely a very sizeable silent minority, sizeable enough to make it practicable for noise to be included in torture programmes against political prisoners, as claims made about US military practices in Afghanistan in recent years clearly indicate:

> The detainees, who called the facility the 'dark prison' or 'prison of darkness', said they were chained to walls that often made it impossible to lie down, deprived of food and drinking water, and kept in total darkness with loud rap, heavy metal music, or other sounds blared for weeks at a time.[7]

Terrorist groups, particularly in the West, had long since pioneered this method of breaking down resistance in captives.

Noise can be a weapon, therefore, and at the personal level, a psychologically and physiologically highly destabilising one. The 'Shock and Awe' tactics favoured by the US military in invasions – most recently in Iraq – rely on precisely those destabilising qualities to force the rapid surrender of the enemy. The enemy are to be overwhelmed, with noise playing a significant part in the exercise. Battle shock is generated by noise as much as by anything else, which can lead to severe disorientation and an inability to function naturally.

Afghanistan presents an extreme example of the use of noise and patently does raise moral issues, whereas in everyday life the moral aspect is far harder to pin down, as there is not the same malicious intent. It is important to note that noise takes many forms, and that

our reaction to it will vary accordingly. Some noise has to be tolerated for the public good: industrial noise, for example – as long as some boundaries are set to protect local populations. (This is not always the case in the Third World, however, and many people's lives are made a misery as a result; not to mention hearing loss and impairment amongst workers in noisy industries in such countries. The link between noise and health is one we shall return to in Chapter 1.) Some noise is celebratory and promotes individual well-being, as in the case of crowds at sporting events, where mass cheers and chants create a sense of tribal belonging which most human beings desire at some point in their lives, even if only fleetingly. Individual and group identity is being asserted by means of noise in such cases, although there are those of us who may find this threatening. Noise is also a marker of religious fervour amongst Pentecostal Christians, whereas silence has more often been the recommended way of showing one's respect for divinity. The various categories of noise have to be recognised, and their role in our culture identified, if the claims for silence are to be upheld: noise cannot simply be demonised in blanket fashion (there are various categories of silence as well; I shall outline these shortly).

Even so, it is still possible to speak of the virtues of silence in a general sense and to wish to preserve them in an era where the environment is being scarred by noise pollution. Silence has a fascinating and complex cultural history. It has been a deeply significant element in many religions, and continues to be so to our own day. Quaker meetings are traditionally constructed around the notion of a silence that is deemed to be the proper condition for worship:

> What is so amazing about Quaker worship? It is that for over 300 years groups of ordinary people have met together in silence, without the aids of a trained leader, or of liturgy, ritual or outward sacraments. Week by week they have shared in a corporate experiment of silent, yet open worship. In it they have felt the sense of the grandeur and tragedy of life; its defeats and triumphs. They have been aware of something overwhelming: a presence, a sense of transcendence, of truth, of the love of God. By this awareness they have been held and at the same time

> invigorated and re-created. So they have been drawn to make a tremendous affirmation about life's essential goodness and purpose, for they have become real people.[8]

While the silence of a Quaker meeting can be broken if any worshipper feels moved by the Holy Spirit to speak, it is in the communal experience of silence that spirituality is most profoundly registered. One commentator, George H. Gorman, has spoken of 'a greater depth of silence' coming over a meeting after a prolonged period of reflection, which has 'an eternal quality that diminishes the limitations of time and space'.[9]

In similar vein, Trappist monks take a vow of silence in order to distance themselves from the distractions of the world and concentrate all the more intensely on their belief, the 'more strict observance' of their faith to which they are committed demanding such austerity and self-denial on their part.[10] As the American Trappist monk and writer Thomas Merton explains in his journal, at the centre of the believer's experience there lies

> [t]he dialectic between silence and utterance. We have to keep silence for two reasons: for the sake of God and for the sake of speech. These two reasons are really one: because the only reason for speaking is to confess our faith in God and declare his glory. In practice, a priest lives in silence – or should have much silence in his life – for the sake of his Mass. The Canon of the Mass should emerge from that silence with infinite power and significance. Mass is the only thing we really say. . . . But it is terribly important to keep silence. When? Almost all the rest of the day. It is essential that priests learn how to silence all their routine declarations of truths that they have not yet troubled to think about. If we said only what we really meant, we would say very little.[11]

Silence for Merton is a source of inspiration: 'Writing and teaching must be fed by silence or they are a waste of time.'[12] As with the Quakers, there is a strong sense of silence as a living presence which should be accorded the greatest respect by the individual believer. Silence is held to be the condition towards which we should be disciplining ourselves. As the founder of Quakerism, George Fox, put it:

'It is a strange Life for you to come to be Silent; you must come into a new world.'[13] Once in that new world, however, one gains a very different perspective on existence and of one's place within the scheme of things. A similar transformation through silence occurs in Buddhism, with believers reaching a state of selflessness that brings a sense of tranquillity. All forms of meditation throughout the world's religions serve to facilitate access to this special state, although one does not need to be religious to appreciate the benefits of meditation.

Creative artists are very aware of silence as a living presence. Music is unthinkable without silence, which is an integral aspect of all musical composition. John Cage's *4′ 33″* (1952) deploys silence to striking effect, since nothing much happens over its 'performance' time, which is divided into three separate movements: 33″, 2′ 40″, and 1′ 20″. The performer closes the piano lid at the beginning, remains seated at the piano for the requisite stretch of time, and then opens the piano lid to signal the work's conclusion. Strictly speaking it is the incidental noise that occurs that constitutes the work's content, *complete* silence being unachievable for human beings. (As Cage himself once observed, 'There is no such thing as silence. Something is always happening that makes a sound.'[14]) If it verges on the intellectually pretentious, *4′ 33″* nevertheless scores a valid point about the critical role of silence in music. There is more than a passing resemblance to Quaker worship in the work's conception as well – if also a difference with regard to being expected to be attentive to incidental noise in Cage. Music is as much the organisation of silence as it is the organisation of sound; the two are symbiotically linked.

Cage's blank score has its analogue in the art world in the blank canvasses of painters such as Kasimir Malevich. In Malevich's *White Square on a White Ground* (1918), for example, the viewer is confronted by a pure white surface rather than, as expected, an organised composition. We shall be considering the aesthetic of such a 'refusal' to conform to convention in a later chapter; suffice it to say here that it can become a powerful comment on the enterprise of painting and the commercial edifice that has grown up around it. The viewer is subjected to the painterly equivalent of silence, deliberately constructed, and asked to reflect on what is going on in his

or her interaction with art. The art establishment, too, is asked to reflect on its practice in this 'picture which should have ended all abstract pictures', as it has been described.[15] Alexander Rodchenko's so-called 'monochrome paintings' *Pure Red*, *Pure Yellow* and *Pure Blue* (1921) operate on a very similar principle of refusing to offer the viewer a painterly composition. The linguist Adam Jaworski, who has written very informatively of the role played by silence in speech, has referred to such use of 'silence' in the creative arts as 'extensions of silence' (although he restricts these to the visual arts).[16] I plan to increase those extensions, which I will call 'analogues', over the course of this book.

Creative use of silence can also be found in the theatre, where it can be more expressive than dramatic dialogue on occasion. The well-timed pause can convey layers of meaning to the audience, as both playwrights and actors are very aware: Harold Pinter is a past master of this technique, particularly in his early plays. As in Cage's *4′ 33″*, this can be taken to extremes by radical practitioners. Samuel Beckett's *Breath* (1969) is a play with no characters and no action, save for the sound of two cries during its very brief duration plus a rising and dimming of the stage lights – if that can count as action. Here silence is a brooding presence that positively invites the audience to invest it with meaning, as do the pauses in Pinter's plays, drawing the spectator into the characters' thought processes. Linguistics theorists are also very aware of how important silence and pauses can be in verbal communication. For such theorists silence is a rhetorical device within discourse which is as loaded with meaning as words are – if perhaps even more in need of interpretation.

Silence is also one of the great themes of poetry; a resonant metaphor for divinity, death and the unknown. Thus for Gerard Manley Hopkins silence is one of the routes to an experience of God's perfection:

> Elected Silence, sing to me
> And beat upon my whorlèd ear,
> Pipe me to pastures still and be
> The music that I care to hear.[17]

A Grecian urn silently evokes an antique past for John Keats, its sheer muteness encouraging the poet's imagination to roam:

> Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard
> Are sweeter: therefore, ye soft pipes, play on;
> Not to the sensual ear, but, more endeared,
> Pipe to the spirit ditties of no tone[.][18]

In Ingmar Bergman's film *The Seventh Seal* (1956), where the knightly protagonist Antonius Block engages in a protracted game of chess with Death (a sinister, black-robed and hooded figure), some of the most dramatic moments occur when Death remains resolutely silent as the knight pleads for spiritual guidance:

> KNIGHT: Is it so cruelly inconceivable to grasp God with the senses? Why should he hide himself in a mist of half-spoken promises and unseen miracles?
>
> *Death doesn't answer.*
>
> KNIGHT: How can we have faith in those who believe when we can't have faith in ourselves? What is going to happen to those of us who want to believe but aren't able to? And what is to become of those who neither want to nor are capable of believing?
>
> *The Knight stops and waits for a reply, but no one speaks or answers him. There is complete silence.*[19]

Scenes such as this succeed in revealing what is often taken to be the central concern of Bergman's early films, 'the silence of God'.[20] Anxiety replaces the peace Quaker worshippers manage to find in that situation, or the tranquillity of Buddhism, signalling divine indifference rather than spiritual affirmation.

In Laurence Sterne's great comic novel *Tristram Shandy* (1759–67) death is symbolised by a black page, marking language's inability to capture the experience. Death reduces language, and the author, to silence:

> Alas, poor YORICK!
>
> Ten times a day has *Yorick's* ghost the consolation to hear his monumental inscription read over with such a variety of plaintive tones, as denote

> a general pity and esteem for him; – a foot-way crossing the church-yard close by the side of his grave, – not a passenger goes by without stopping to cast a look upon it, – and sighing as he walks on,
>
> Alas, poor YORICK![21]

At which point the text fades to black. When other inexplicable phenomena arise, the author resorts to strings of asterisks – again, language proves inadequate to the task of expressing our emotions (which does not stop the reader from speculating as to what lies behind those asterisks, that being part of silence's fascination). What binds human beings together in Sterne's fictional world is sentiment, an emotional response to the misfortunes of others. All that one can do at such points is empathise with the plight of one's fellow human beings; no language can do justice to the situation.

The sense of there being a limit to our language is also present in Ludwig Wittgenstein's closing remarks in *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1921): 'What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence.'[22] There is a realm of the unsayable, therefore, that human beings have to acknowledge – and paradoxically enough this has led, as we shall discover in Chapter 5, to a body of writings dealing with this most slippery of topics. To wax even more metaphysical for a moment, silence is the condition in which most of our universe exists: 'In space, no one can hear you scream!' as the advertising for the film *Alien* (1979) so strikingly put it, with silence representing the vast unknown where human values simply have no purchase.

Concept, Theme and Symbol

Silence is an abiding fascination, therefore, a source of comfort to some, of threat to others. But it is my intention to go beyond a mere diatribe against noise pollution; rather, it is to set the current opposition of silence and noise in a much wider cultural context, so that what is at stake in that clash stands revealed. I want to explore the cultural history of silence to determine the role it has played in our development, from religion through to the arts and thought in general: silence as concept, silence as theme, silence as symbol.

Collectively, we are in danger of forgetting the virtues of silence and of creating a world where there is no space for those virtues to flourish, and that, I submit, would be a very considerable loss. Perhaps, as George Fox suggests, there is a fear of silence that needs to be overcome. Reflection on its history seems the ideal place to start, a process, I am convinced we can only gain by. I am intrigued as to why the notion of silence can generate such a wide spectrum of response, from extremely positive to extremely negative, so we are embarking on an odyssey with a list of issues to be pondered and questions to be addressed. What has silence meant? What could it still mean? Why is it desirable to some, but not to others? Why is it arguably psychologically necessary? Many other questions will emerge as we work our way through silence's multifaceted history: the history of silence as devotion, silence as art, silence as science (as well as concept, theme and symbol, silence is also a physical condition answering to the laws of physics), silence as site of social conflict.

Silence also takes many forms, and we need to categorise these. In the first instance silence is, as just noted, a physical condition – the obverse to noise pollution we could say. But it is also an absence in a more diffuse sense, a gap in our discourse, behaviour or professional practice. From this latter perspective silence can be a refusal to do what is expected: a refusal to engage in artistic activity, for example, in order to make a comment about that activity and the various professional and institutional structures that have grown up around it. Modernist creative artists are particularly prone to such gestures: Malevich's refusal is one example, Cage's another. But these decisions can be more extreme, to the extent of giving up one's practice on either a long-term temporary or even a permanent basis, Marcel Duchamp being one such prominent example. As we shall see in Chapter 9, silence is also an integral part of our language use. What holds all these cases together is that silence takes on meaning within a context of discourse. Not to say something becomes as meaningful as saying something when there is a conscious decision to refrain from communicating verbally. Dramatists, as we have said, are very aware of this; but all of us are capable of using silence in that way in our everyday speech, and with a similar desire for effect.

We must differentiate, therefore, between silence as a condition and silence as a response. This will never be an absolutely precise distinction and there will be much overlap and interaction between the two, but it gives us a form of shorthand to work with for the course of this exploration, two main lines of enquiry to pursue. Another distinction to bear in mind is that between silence as an environmental issue and silence as a metaphysical issue: again, these can overlap, but they do help to provide a framework for analysis.

We might also take note of the distinction offered by the American humorist A. A. Rooney, for whom noise can be 'natural' (from nature itself, as in the case of thunder and lightning) or 'unnatural' (man-made), and if the latter, then either 'justified' or 'unjustified'.[23] The noise from your next-door neighbour's lawnmower might be thought of as justified, but a wild, all-night party at the same neighbour's house manifestly would not be. Neither would a lawnmower going in the middle of the night be justified, of course: context is clearly another element to be borne in mind in making such classifications. Natural noise may feel unjustified too, but we realise that it lies beyond our ability to affect in any meaningful sense and must simply be endured. Having to endure the unjustified unnatural is another matter entirely; as far as this book is concerned, that is the enemy to be confronted.

Speech theorists have been very exercised with the role that silence plays in communication and how we might distinguish the various forms it can take there. J. Vernon Jensen, for example, proposes five main functions for silence in the communicative process: linkage, affecting, revelation, judgemental and activating. In each case silence can have a positive or a negative aspect: the linkage function means that silence can bond a group or divide it: the affecting function that it can heal or hurt; revelation that it can reveal or withhold information; judgemental that there is agreement or disagreement over an issue; and activating that thought is or is not taking place.[24] This is a very useful set of distinctions and I shall have recourse to them as we pass through the rest of this study – they will be particularly helpful in analysing how silence is being deployed in literary texts such as *Tristram Shandy*, for example.

If it seems paradoxical to be discoursing at length about silence, it can be pointed out that both writing and reading are essentially silent activities which do not contribute to noise pollution. Thomas Merton claimed that we needed to say very little in this life, but I hope to convince you that there is much worth saying about silence (Merton himself certainly wrote a great deal about it), and that the more we understand its significance for humanity the more we shall be moved to resist the assault that is being conducted against it. Nor do I mean this to be an exercise in New Age mysticism: silence is a very practical requirement in our everyday lives, and it offers enlightenment of various kinds, not just the spiritual.[25] The politics and culture of noise affect us all at every level of our existence. Silence should not be perceived of as a withdrawal from the world (as it can be by some religious adepts), but as a means of engaging more fully within it, part of our dialogue with the wider world; and that will be the imperative behind my argument. Far from being isolating, I believe that silence, to use Jensen's terminology, is more likely to lead to 'linkage' between us in the long term, and that is reason enough to cultivate it.

I will plunge now, in Part I, into a more detailed exposition of the politics and culture of noise, outlining the conflict that is being enacted between noise and silence in contemporary global culture, before proceeding to an elaboration of the virtues I am claiming for silence in Part II. I shall argue that noise versus silence is one of the key ideological battlegrounds of our time and that we cannot stay neutral about it, not with noise pollution and the marketing of noise making such inroads into our lives. If we are to preserve those virtues I will be identifying, we need a manifesto for silence in the new century.

A Brief Reflection on Terminology

Some of you may be wondering why the term 'noise' is being preferred to 'sound'. Surely, music is sound rather than noise. And why 'silence' rather than just 'quiet'? Noise is often a term of abuse, especially when applied to music one does not like: nearly every Western

teenager will be familiar with the phrase 'Turn that noise down!' in response to their music choice at home. Where does one draw the line between sound and noise? One possibility is that noise refers to sound one does not want or at a disturbing level of loudness. Admittedly, these are not precise categories either, but they do take us some way forward. We speak of noise pollution not sound pollution, and a Noise Abatement Act not a Sound Abatement Act, so there is a general acceptance that noise is the appropriate term to use. In such cases noise equals unwanted, invasive sound. The Noise Abatement Society website reminds us that 'noise' is derived from the Latin 'nausea', meaning seasickness, which nicely communicates the physical distress and disorientation that noise can so often induce.[26] One technical definition is that noise constitutes 'an audible acoustic energy that adversely affects the physiological or psychological well-being of people', which brings out the invasive quality I am emphasising.[27] And when notices or events enjoin us to 'silence' rather than 'quiet', we understand the underlying message, which is to take the command very seriously. Silence is a more extreme command than quiet would be, requiring greater effort and concentration on the part of each individual: as in the two minutes' silence we are asked to observe on Armistice Day.[28]

I will continue to prefer noise and silence to sound and quiet throughout most of this book, partly because of general usage and partly because they foreground the emotional content that is such a critical element in the debate (this is missing when we take on board the scientific definition of sound as simply 'a succession in time of varying-intensity waves of pressure').[29] In Chapter 1 we shall be going into the scientific aspects of such terms in greater detail, which will lend more precision to their use. Suffice it to say for the present that this *is* an emotional issue and that the terminology chosen by individuals can be very revealing about what is at stake. If something qualifies as sound for you but noise for me, then there is a problem that has to be addressed – a problem that goes much deeper than mere terminology.

Part I

The Politics and Culture of Noise

1
The Science and Technology of Silence

We might usefully start our investigation into the conflict between noise and silence by considering the scientific side of each phenomenon. Both silence and noise are physical conditions, which can be measured – and are required to be when it comes to noise pollution. To catalogue what the science of silence involves also takes us into the area of pyschology, since reactions to noise and silence can be very subjective – both noise and silence can be used as forms of punishment and torture, for example. There is evidence to suggest that the former has been used by the US army in the 2003 Iraq war, and terrorist groups have been known to employ it on kidnap victims, often subjecting them to rock music played at ear-shattering levels through headphones for long periods. The Israeli military has unleashed sonic booms, caused by low-flying jet aircraft, over the Gaza Strip. Carried out at night, these 'sound bombs' are designed to terrorise the local population, giving us noise as official state policy. On the other side of the divide, solitary confinement is a well-established technique for breaking down resistance in awkward prisoners, for whom the prolonged absence of everyday noise, such as conversation, can be very destabilising.

Interesting metaphysical questions arise in contemplating this issue. Just what *is* silence, and can it even be defined? Just what is *conceived* to be silence? And, for that matter, how reliable a guide to noise and its impact is the decibel scale?

Measuring the Decibels

Decibels have been defined by an acoustics expert, Karl D. Kryter, as follows: 'In acoustics the decibel is 10 times the common logarithm of the ratio of 2 entities proportional to power (e.g. instantaneous sound pressure'.[1] This is fairly technical, but the notion of pressure is what we need to hold on to. The higher the decibel the more pressure we are being subjected to, and potentially the more unpleasant we shall find the experience, leading to the adverse physiological or pyschological effects we saw Kryter warning us about earlier (although as we shall find out, it is not always that straightforward). A decibel scale gives us a quick and easy way of defining silence and sound in our everyday experience. One such chart, in *The Essential Medical Miscellany*, goes from 'Inaudible' (0 decibels) to 'Rocket Launch Pad' (180 decibels). It is then observed that, '[p]ermanent damage to the ears can occur after prolonged exposure to noise above just 85 decibels, and after just ten minutes at 110 decibels'.[2] Rock concerts, with their 150 decibel potential, can therefore represent a health hazard of some concern, although the most interesting aspect of the *Miscellany*'s decibel scale is the reference to audibility. Audibility levels vary according to the quality of one's hearing, which, as we know, deteriorates as one grows older. This would suggest that older people can cope with higher levels of noise than the young, although the psychological aspect also becomes more important as one ages: less sensitivity, on the one hand, is countered by greater sensitivity on the other. Tolerance is not just a matter of decibels but of expectations of what one's environment should be like: and when it comes to the latter the generations can differ quite dramatically. This is borne out by studies which indicate that aircraft noise, for example, is more likely to wake up the elderly than the very young, despite the far greater acuteness of the latter's hearing. One such study reported that 'the youngest subjects (ages 7–8 years) were not aroused at all by sonic booms more intense than those that awakened the 67–72-year-old men nearly 70% of the time'.[3] Another study concluded that 'the probability of a 70-year-old awakening is shown to be about twice that expected for a 20-year-old'.[4] The 24/7

society is clearly not a desirable development for the elderly, with their tendency towards light rather than deep sleep states – a natural phenomenon occurring over most people's lives (hence the very young's envious ability to sleep almost regardless of surrounding noise levels).

Kryter expands on the matter of tolerance when he notes that,

> It is generally believed that the louder a sound is, the more unacceptable, or noisy that it is. While this is generally true, it does not follow that measuring the physical energy in a sound is sufficient for predicting the subjective noisiness, or unwantedness of different sounds.[5]

The rock devotee, in other words, will positively welcome the buzz created by the high decibel level of a rock concert, whereas the same person might well object to an equivalent sound level from an aircraft taking off if it disturbs his or her sleep. On that latter point, Kryter observes that, '[o]ne of the major correlates of disturbance from aircraft noise is that of the "fear" people feel when the noise becomes sufficiently intense'.[6] That fear is not so much to do with the sound level as the recognition of the power of the aircraft to create devastating damage should it crash or explode (a fear undoubtedly magnified in these days of terrorist outrages, with aircraft as a favoured target). The psychological factor is dominant in such responses, but the experience is no less disturbing for that, suggesting that we have an almost visceral reaction to loud noise as a potential threat. We might also ponder the natural/unnatural distinction at such points: do we feel any less fear when listening to a gathering storm? A hurricane is far more likely to cause damage than a randomly chosen aircraft taking off, as the fate of New Orleans in 2005 alone proves. But we know that such natural events lie beyond complaint for all that they can count as unwanted sound, and that we cannot extend the concept of noise pollution to nature. Fear of the natural and the unnatural must be kept distinct.

Decibels measure sound, of course, rather than silence, although it is possible to come up with a working definition of the latter in terms of audibility. Kryter's definition of sound shows how we might do this: 'For the human listener, sound is defined as acoustic

energy between 2 Hz and 20,000 Hz, the typical frequency limits of the ear. The lowest frequency of sound that has a pitch-like quality is about 20 Hz'.[7] Anything below 20 Hz presumably counts as silence, although one can always wonder if we can ever put ourselves in a situation where nothing at all is audible to us. There is the famous story of John Cage discovering that even in a supposedly completely sound-proofed room (anechoic, to give the technical term) he could still hear noise:

> instead of the total silence he had expected, he heard two sounds in the chamber, one high and one low, and was told when he came out that the high sound was his nervous system in operation and the low one was his blood circulating.[8]

In scientific terms, the notion of what Merton calls '[i]nterior silence' is a misnomer.[9] It is also interesting to record that neither of Kryter's two highly technical books on noise includes an index entry under 'silence'.

The legislation on noise pollution introduced in New York City in 2004 established various decibel levels as a means of registering pollution (see Chapter 3 for more on this). By the standards of such a noisy city these seem to be set quite low, and quite possibly to be unachievable on a regular basis given the current state of public consciousness. The novelist Malcolm Lowry once memorably described the continual background noise of New York as being 'like the unbandaging of great giants in agony', and most visitors (particularly first-time ones) are likely to agree.[10] Yet cities have to start somewhere, and until the political powers-that-be push the point it is hard to say what might ultimately be achievable. Eradicating smoking from public places seemed an impossible dream not that many years ago but massive strides have been made in that direction around the globe. There is a real sense, in the West at least, of the tide having turned in terms of what is acceptable with regard to smoking in public, so it is not far-fetched to suggest that such a radical change could happen with noise if enough effort is expended. It will not happen until the authorities feel there is consensus that it should, so a manifesto for silence is a small step

towards creating that state of affairs, even if one suspects it will be a tougher battle than even smoking generated – for one thing, the enemy is much more diffuse.

Science versus Noise

Science can be drawn on to expedite noise reduction; an enterprise we might dub the science of silence since the more successful it is, the more it approaches that condition. Sound waves can be blocked or redirected, and the technology this involves can be quite ingenious. One such product, the Silenceair, was discussed in the 15 May 2004 edition of 'The Science Show' on the ABC radio network in Australia, with the claim made for it that it reduces noise dramatically as well as the level of air conditioning needed in buildings. The Silenceair device is fitted on the outside of buildings and works even if windows are left open. As one of its inventors, Chris Field, explained:

> what I've done is come up with a series of tubes inside a box which are tuned to a particular frequency of noise, sort of like pan pipes. So when sound enters this box, which has a ventilation opening in it, the sound interacts with the tubes and is reflected back away from the inside of a building.[11]

What the device does is cancel out noise waves by producing a wave that is out of phase with the incoming one. It is relatively simple in design as well as fairly compact, and its inventors envisage it as a mass market product which could be fitted on any building, or even inside buildings to prevent noise transfer between rooms. The product has won 'The Invention of the Year' award in the ABC TV 'New Inventions' competition.

Silenceair offers a reduction of up to 34 decibels, which is fairly significant, and is also more user-friendly than most other noise-cancelling devices, particularly those which come in the form of headphones (of which there are several on the market). The great virtue of Silenceair is that it allows life to go on much as normal, with the proviso that its range of effectiveness is quite limited.

The Case of the Screeching Skyscraper

Science has also been called on to combat an unusual problem that is becoming increasingly common in urban life: noisy buildings. Tall buildings create eddies and vortices around them that generate noise, generally a screeching or whistling sound. Since skyscrapers are found in all the major cities of the globe and are proliferating at a rapid rate, this means that a major new noise pollution problem has arrived: what the science writer Mick Hamer, in an intriguing *New Scientist* article, has dubbed 'Downtown Uproar'.[12] Hamer takes as his starting point the Beetham Tower in Manchester, a newly constructed 171-metre high building topped by a 14-metre glass-and-steel 'blade', and it is the blade that is creating the problem:

> On windy days, the air around the blade vibrates at a frequency of 250 to 260 hertz – close to middle C on a piano. People have variously described the sound as being like a flute or a UFO landing. 'In 20 years of investigating complaints about noise, I have never come across anything like it,' says Rachel Christie, head of the local council's health department.[13]

Hamer also cites the case of the 248-metre high Cityspire Building between 6th and 7th Avenue in Manhattan. The louvres around the building's top were responsible for an ear-splitting din (like an air-raid siren) that could be heard over an area stretching from 3rd to 9th Avenue – a very substantial slice of the city. Eventually, in 1991, the building's owners were fined for noise pollution, and forced to redesign the louvres to cut down the whistling they were producing in interaction with the wind. Louvres are often the cause of the problem, which is unfortunate as these have become popular features of buildings in recent years as ways of cutting down glare from the sun and thus reducing the amount of air conditioning that high-rise buildings require. What starts out as an eco-friendly device can soon turn into the exact opposite.

Although the science of this is well understood, a matter of 'identifying the source of the vortices and position of the resonant cavity, and breaking the link between them', it has nevertheless been difficult

to formulate general principles that can prevent whistling buildings from being built in the first place.[14] As one expert has admitted, every building is different in this respect: 'There aren't any perfectly good rules for avoiding wind-induced noise. What works in one building may be a problem in another.'[15] It does not help that little has been published on the topic to guide architects and building engineers in drawing up their plans – a mere two conference papers and one journal article in the last 25 years, for example, which in academic research terms is minuscule. It has even been suggested that there is 'a construction industry cover-up', with Hamer pointedly noting how reluctant the industry's executives are to talk about the issue, taking refuge, ironically enough, in a 'culture of silence' instead.[16]

It is not hard to see why such a culture of silence would develop: construction is very big business these days, with China in particular driving a worldwide boom that yields massive profits for the companies involved, and looks set to do so for some time. There is every incentive to keep noisy buildings out of the news and to play down the problem as much as possible; the less interference from the authorities the better as far as this sector is concerned. It seems likely that the problem will continue to be dealt with on ad hoc basis for the foreseeable future, as is so often the way with noise pollution. Downtown uproar is a new phenomenon to add to the list of serial offenders, one that we shall all become much more familiar with in the years to come. Where you retreat to when the buildings are screeching at you becomes an interesting issue: at such points the assault against silence really does seem to have reached an inhuman level, with the inanimate becoming your enemy.[17]

Types of Noise

Are certain types of noise more disturbing than others, perhaps even to the extent of forcing us to reconsider the usefulness of the decibel scale as a measure for noise pollution? The effect of amplified bass lines, the staple of most rock and pop music, is worth reflecting on. These are notoriously penetrative, and many people find them peculiarly disturbing in a psychological sense, as they seem to reverberate

right through the body. That quality is what devoted rock fans can find attractive, however. Karl D. Kryter considers the impact of various kinds of noise in some detail in his work, surveying a series of studies that record how the various features of noise – volume, tone, etc. – affect our response. Unsurprisingly, he identifies a highly complex interaction of the physical and the psychological at work in terms of perceived noisiness:

> It is conjectured that perhaps the organism somehow senses when it is being stimulated by a sound such that the sensorineural receptors in the cochlea are being, or will be, unduly fatigued and that loss in hearing sensitivity may ensue. It is perhaps this sensing that gives rise to the unlearned sensation of unwantedness, noisiness, or annoyance, independent of and in addition to, any negative, or positive, learned meanings that the sound in question may convey to the listener. The aspects of sound . . . that appear to be correlated with the perceived noisiness – loudness (intensity), tonality, duration, and impulsiveness – are to varying degrees also correlated to temporary and permanent hearing loss.[18]

We seem to have an inbuilt warning system regarding noise, a recognition that it represents a danger to us above a certain level. Kryter even speaks of an effect of 'trauma' in the ear.[19] Yet this does not explain why such a sensation is sometimes wanted rather than unwanted. The rock fan suffers temporary hearing loss in the aftermath of a concert, but is rarely deterred from repeating the experience despite the fact that this may lead to further problems and most likely to long-term permanent hearing loss. There are, in other words, both acoustic and non-acoustic factors to be taken into account when measuring noise annoyance.

Environmental noise has become an increasing problem, and studies have indicated that 'attitudinal variables', such as 'fear of the source [and] preventability of noise', are arguably critical in the development of noise annoyance in residential neighbourhoods.[20] Demographic variables such as age, education and social status, on the other hand, seem to have little discernible effect (importantly, such studies are mainly concerned with traffic noise rather than

amplified music). All such studies chart a progressive rise in complaints about environmental noise from the 1940s onwards, that is to say, from the era when mass transportation began to expand and diversify into the system we know today. To return to our starting point: the world is becoming noisier year by year, and empirical studies merely confirm what all urban-dwellers can confirm on an anecdotal basis.

A recent regular addition to that diversification of traffic is the helicopter, something cities have become all too familiar with, particularly in its use by police, for whom it has become a highly prized, high-tech crime fighting tool. The sound a helicopter makes is called transonic noise, and it is beginning to come to the attention of politicians as a result of increasing complaints about a phenomenon that, as one journalist has put it, is 'more and more "intruding" on UK cities'.[21] The Environment Committee of the London Assembly (London's local government) is looking into its effect on the population, and researchers at Cambridge University have been asked to analyse the problem with a view to finding methods of reducing transonic noise.

If the UK government has its way, helicopters over urban areas will soon be joined by 'unmanned aerial vehicles' (UAVs). These machines, 'little more than a camera and a motor' as they have been described, have been enthusiastically adopted by the military for reconaissance use.[22] The Astraea project has been set up, with the objective of assessing how effective UAVs might be in monitoring the environment, providing information about damaged oil pipelines or chemical plants, for example. This may sound as if it is in the public interest, until we discover that the project is also designed to test whether UAVs could be used for commercial purposes as well: 'UAVs are low-cost vehicles which then allow you to put on to them an array of different facilities. The commercial market will determine what those facilities are', as the head of the project, Simon Jewell, somewhat blithely observed.[23] It is doubtful if the problem of noise pollution will feature very large in the list of commercial priorities, despite the fact that they can be very noisy. If commercial use does arrive – and Astraea confidently expects it will

within the next decade or so – then this will be yet another blight on an already very beleaguered environment. And if one country adopts the practice, others will soon follow. The combination of large numbers of UAVs and helicopters simultaneously in the sky is not an appealing prospect. Yet again it will be a case of allowing the market to dictate what the environment will be, and then trying to remedy its excesses after the event.

The problem of environmental noise is clearly recognised and scientifically delineated, but the solution remains stubbornly elusive, despite the help of technology. As Kryter reports, even insulation generally has only 'a marginally important alleviating effect on noise annoyance'.[24] Kryter also refers to studies which demonstrate that noise can affect your wealth as well as your health: house price depreciation as a result of environmental noise is an established phenomenon. To point up the complexity of the physical/psychological interaction, however, some studies have found that many airport workers are willing to accept a degree of noise annoyance in order to live near their work place.

Noise, Noise Everywhere?

Just to indicate how universal the problem of noise pollution truly has become, an article in *New Scientist* magazine brought to attention a new variety that I suspect most of us would never even have thought possible:

> There is no escape from industrial noise pollution – not even underwater. Since the 1960s there has been a tenfold increase in underwater ocean noise off southern California, according to a study published in *The Journal of the Acoustical Society of America*. The noise is blamed on the increase in global shipping and higher ship speeds. Its effects on wildlife are unknown.[25]

'Noise, noise everywhere' indeed, as the headline had it: above the earth, below the sea. No doubt one day science will be able to determine if there are any significant effects on wildlife from such pollution, but whether anything can be done about it by that stage is

another question entirely. There are such things as 'tipping points', as we are beginning to realise very belatedly with the phenomenon of global warming: damage cannot always be repaired, nor processes reversed. Any adverse effects on the ocean's eco-system would not be beneficial to humankind (the world's food stocks are difficult enough given a rapidly expanding population), and ships are unlikely to get slower or global shipping to decline – as long as globalisation keeps developing new markets. Noise and the market go together in fact, as we shall explore next.

2
Marketing Noise

Noise is used extensively as a marketing tool (bars, restaurants, public spaces in general, radio, televison, film), as a way of stimulating consumption. Put crudely, noise sells, and the corporate world is very aware of this and concerned to exploit it to the full. Noise as a product is accordingly our next concern, particularly the abusive use of noise. I will argue that such marketing techniques work to homogenise behaviour and restrict individualism; thus to resist them is to make a political statement. The areas of silence in our society are systematically being colonised by big business, for which a 24/7 culture of constant consumption is the ideal, no matter what the cost to individual peace and quiet. Sleep patterns are invariably severely affected in city areas which have embraced a 24/7 lifestyle, and studies are only just beginning to address what the long-term effects might be. The recent extension of the licensing laws in Britain provides an instructive case study of how socially divisive this trend can be, with heated debate still raging over the nature of its impact on the general public. The extra noise created by all-night opening is one of the most unwelcome side-effects of the policy, and it promises to be an area of contention for the foreseeable future. Noise in bars is unashamedly aimed at the younger generation because of their purchasing power, which corporate capitalism will always chase.

It has to be admitted, however, that noise can also be used as a form of social rebellion. This is the case with popular music, where the volume of the sound, achieved through amplification, since the 1960s has been part of its ethos of disrupting social norms. I will consider these claims, as well as the extent to which that ethos has been exploited by the business world for its own, anything but rebellious, ends. The grand narrative of 'big business' has a practised ability to commercialise, and thus neutralise, rebellious behaviour and lifestyles.

One ray of hope is the research that is going into ways of blocking noise from sources such as mobile phones and personal stereos, and given a large market enough these might become very attractive to producers. An anti-stereo device does raise the spectre of something like war between the respective camps, however, with damaging repercussions for social unity. It is an aggressive act to turn noise back on someone, since it indicates a breakdown of normal methods of resolving disputes. It is also, sadly, only too attractive in the more extreme episodes of noise annoyance: everyone has their personal breaking point. Let us now look at how sound is marketed to create such breaking points.

Sonic Bullets

Arguably the most sinister example of the marketing of noise in recent years is to be found in the product called 'sonic bullets'. These are 'narrow beams of noise that exceed the human threshold of pain', which 'can incapacitate people or compel them to flee'.[1] Whether any blocking device would work in this case remains to be seen. Designed by the American Technology Corporation, the bullets cause 'the equivalent of an intense migraine headache', and are, as their inventor Elwood G. Norris puts it, 'just totally disabling' (the note of pride in Norris's remark is distinctly worrying).[2] The main buyer is, as we might expect, the US military, who are reported to be 'very intrigued by these nonlethal weapons'.[3] No doubt other militaries are just as intrigued, and just as much in the market to buy. There are 50 different sonic bullets on offer from the company,

including one which 'plays backward the sound of a baby crying at 140 decibels, or 20 decibels above the threshold of pain. The noise is similar to that of a passenger jet taking off'.[4] As the journalist describing the device, Peter Pae, notes, the Pentagon envisages various uses for the technology such as dispersing crowds and neutralising hijackers and suicide bombers (one does wonder whether it would be counter-productive in the latter instance, however, as it is as likely to activate by panic as to neutralise the bomber).

Although classed as non-lethal, the Pentagon admits there is a risk of hearing damage, or even emotional trauma, from the use of these 'acoustic weapons', with their Shock and Awe potential. (Kryter's studies would seem to bear this out.) But they do have the desirable quality for the military of being unheard by anyone standing behind, or even alongside, the emitting device, so that they do not affect the operators – a problem in most previous examples of noise as a weapon, where it was almost as much a trial to the users as their enemy, both being caught in the sound field. Those trapped in the emitting beam, however, would be in serious trouble since the beam 'can penetrate any opening and bounce off surfaces before reaching the intended targets'.[5] Whether any unfortunate civilians situated between the device and its assumed terrorist targets would end up as that horrible euphemism 'collateral damage', is another interesting speculation. And who is to say that the device would always be used with the public good in mind? One can well imagine deeply repressive political regimes turning such technology against their own citizens if they felt the need to quash opposition and instil fear into the bargain – silencing the population by noise. If it can be bought, it will be used by whoever has the money to purchase it, and their moral status will be irrelevant to the deal: that's the way the market works.

One can also imagine hypocritical arguments being trotted out about sonic bullets being a 'cleaner' method of dealing with 'dissidents', thus demonstrating the rulers' 'humanitarian' concerns. No weapon is attractive, but there is something deeply distressing about the thought that goes into the development of such a product, especially when the long-term effects of sonic bullets are

unknown. And by the time we find out what they are it will be too late for those who have been at the receiving end. Acoustic weapons surely have to be one of the low points in the whole concept of marketing noise.

Just to give us further pause for thought, Pae reports that the 'hypersonic sound system', as the technology has been named, 'also is creating a major buzz within the commercial acoustics industry'.[6] One dreads to think where this interest might lead, and dreads to think also just how far such technology might be 'improved', as it almost undoubtedly will be – technology never stands still. How much further above the pain threshold is it possible to go, and what will be the effect on the recipients' physical and psychological health? Whatever happens, it will be, in Pae's words, 'music to Pentagon strategists'.[7] The rest of us might be more inclined to regard hypersonic sound systems as an insidious development threatening our well-being, and to consider them well worth campaigning against. The abusive use of noise is a blot on our culture, but here it is being given official sanction. Worse, it is being supported by public money.

The Sound of Popular Culture

Popular music is, as its name suggests, ubiquitous, and it is in the interests of its producers to saturate our culture in it. The more it is part of the daily background of our lives, coming at us from as many sources as possible and as often as possible, then the more it is likely to sell. Volume is a critical element in establishing its presence. Loudness, as we have noted, is traditionally part of rock's rebelliousness, but it is just as traditional for it to be subsumed under the business ethic. If volume sells, then the public will be given volume: the market will always dictate policy. This practice is seen to best advantage in bars and cafés, and to some extent restaurants also, which are often subjected to painful levels of noise to push the twin products of alcohol and music. Each side feeds on the other in marketing terms, and decibels are part of the equation. In the larger café bars in most cities in the UK (and in much of the West) the noise

level of the sound system is ratcheted up over the course of the evening until it is all but impossible to follow a conversation. Shouting becomes the norm, but even that becomes progressively less effective. Increasingly, the experience is like going to a rock concert, with that distinctive buzz in one's ears afterwards that more than likely signals hearing damage. It is a deliberate policy on the management's part. The noise helps to create a frenzied, over-stimulated atmosphere which promotes evermore frenzied consumption. More consumption equals more profit. Anyone can recognise, too, how homogeneous this world is: the product is much the same everywhere; difference is largely erased.

It could be argued that if one dislikes that kind of atmosphere, then one should simply avoid it, but it has to be recognised that each bar is creating its own zone of noise pollution, particularly in the UK, where the practice of standing drinking outside the bar ('vertical drinking' as it is known) is usually accompanied by doors being kept open to enable the bar's music system to reach the outdoor drinkers and keep them in the loop of over-stimulation. The predictable result is an increase in local noise pollution that can be hard for the individual to escape. All-day drinking has exacerbated the problem, and has led to clashes between local residents and the drinks industry in many British cities, where clubs stay open late into the night. There is no doubt that the industry has become a major factor in the growing noise pollution problem in Western urban life, especially since many cities now like to market themselves as 'party cities' to bring in outside trade and boost the local economy. The pollution is therefore a direct consequence of marketing policy, and the social impact of that policy is rarely considered by the polluters. The notion of a quiet, relaxed bar where you can chat is not on the industry's current agenda. Increasing consumption in a hyperactive atmosphere patently is, and that benefits the popular music industry too as an ideal showcase for its product.

The critical point is that certain lifestyle choices can have a dramatic effect on the environment, and the urban environment is under stress in many places from a particularly raucous form of

hedonism, based on alcohol and popular music, that is capable of generating huge profits if catered for enthusiastically, as it invariably is. Whether such hedonism is good for society at large is another matter (the sharp increase in alcohol-related health problems in the UK in recent years indicates it is at least questionable, and the public authorities are very worried about the trend), but one that goes beyond the remit of this study. What *is* important here is the low level of noise consciousness that the lifestyle involves, and what this means for the future in terms of the environment. Noise is so often a largely ignored factor until after the event and complaints are lodged, by which point it has become another cause of social division, another episode in the protracted struggle between noise and silence. It is in the interests of the popular music and drinks industries to saturate the environment with noise, and they are given ample opportunity to do so in a competitive, consumer-driven society. Supporters of silence can only observe such developments with dismay, conscious of how the episodes of conflict are proliferating and of how much more concerted the assault against silence is becoming.

Rock, Amplification and Rebellion

We have already signalled the importance of amplification to rock, and how central it is to the music's aesthetic. Loudness equals self-assertion and the rejection of cultural norms in this context, and much of the music's exhilaration derives from the sheer volume it is played at. Rock is designed to make an impact and the higher the decibel level, the greater that (physical and psychological) impact is, and, it is tacitly assumed, the greater its rebelliousness. It can be made to appear politically reactionary to criticise this aspect of rock. Looked at from the perspective of silence, however, this can all seem very different. From that position, high decibel readings equal unwanted noise, and, more to the point, environmental pollution. If you cannot escape from the noise, then it is an imposition, an invasion of your space and a transgression of your rights – in effect, a sonic bullet. Aesthetic conflict soon becomes political and

ideological conflict, one not always of an obvious, conservative versus radical, nature. Rock's rebellious side has long been appropriated by the corporate world, and rock has been comprehensively 'branded'. The link between the corporate and rock worlds has never been closer, and no major music festival or group tour lacks a sponsor.[8]

The latter development can lead us to question the often claimed social and political radicalism of rock, although it has to be conceded that there are exceptions to the rule and that new bands can still be idealistic about what they are doing, as can some established acts. In the main, however, rock is just another industry which exists to shift as much of its product as it can as quickly as it can. Since it is very successful in doing so it attracts branding by those who see a profitable marketing opportunity for their own product (often alcohol). Once we move past the possibility of radicalism, then the question of volume has to be looked at differently. It is no longer a challenge to cultural norms to be aggressively loud, it is instead a marketing tactic designed to stimulate the consumer and promote sales. The effect on the environment is of no interest to the rock industry or to the corporate sector, and it could be argued that it is far more politically radical to seek to protect the environment from those particular serial offenders.

Jeremy Bentham once notoriously claimed that the child's game of push-pin was as good as poetry if it made people happy.[9] Although heavily influenced by Bentham's utilitarian philosophy (which defined actions as good or bad depending on whether or not they led to the greatest happiness of the greatest number), John Stuart Mill chose to disagree, arguing that some human activities are more valuable than others and that we run the risk of losing those if popular culture is allowed to prevail unhindered. If that happens then the lowest common denominator rules and the bad drives out the good, unless someone speaks up unequivocally on behalf of the good.[10] I feel the same way regarding the relationship of noise and silence; that we are in danger of undermining some of our most important cultural values unless someone makes a vigorous defence

of silence. Noise must not be allowed to drive it out of our lives – and most definitely not noise in the service of marketing. That use of noise is part of the 'assault against silence' that our culture is experiencing: let us now open out on that to show just why silence matters so much to us.

3
The Assault against Silence and Why Silence Matters

The assault against silence affects all our lives on a daily basis. There is no doubt that noise pollution in its many forms is a large-scale global problem and, furthermore, one that shows little sign of diminishing. We have to recognise that noise pollution is an all but inevitable consequence of economic development, as the Third World is also coming to realise. This raises important political issues: how far are we willing to allow such development to encroach on the quality of life, for example? Building construction is noisy, airports are noisy, roads are noisy, expanding cities are noisy. The relationship between quality of life, in its widest sense, and noise deserves close attention, because quality of life is a health issue. Excessive industrial noise, as a case in point, can cause long-term damage to hearing, making life a misery for workers in a wide range of jobs internationally. There is a massive irony in being forced into a life of silence, cut off from proper communication with one's fellow human beings, as a result of the domination of noise over silence in one's workplace. That is not a form of silence for which we shall be campaigning: silence should be a choice not an imposition.

To add a further level of irony to this phenomenon, many rock musicians from the 1960s and 1970s have found their hearing very badly affected in later life from years of playing on stage with massive amplification all around them. The Who's Pete Townshend is a prominent example, being forced to take breaks in a soundproofed booth on

stage during reunion concerts of the group. It was that generation who pushed the boundaries of amplified sound for the first time, exploiting technological advances to experiment with feedback, etc. Many groups used to boast about their loudness and compete with each other on that basis. One wonders how much their audiences have been affected over the years as well.[1] Rock concerts have been registered as high as 150 decibels, yet 120 decibels is the officially agreed pain threshold. (Mind you, as we shall see, it is not hard to reach the pain threshold in everyday activities.) The '60/60' rule now recommended by Deafness Research UK, 'never listen to music louder than 60% of the maximum volume and don't listen for longer than 60 minutes at a time', is worth remembering[2] – although if it is 60 per cent of a volume above the pain threshold, even that would need revising.

The relationship between thought and silence also needs to be considered. Thought is an essentially silent activity and is difficult to sustain in a noisy society – and certainly is likely to become superficial when competing with other stimuli. This cannot be good for our collective cultural health. There is a limit to what can be blocked out, and individuals can very easily feel persecuted when this limit is breached, as well as alienated from their fellow human beings. The 'Shock and Awe' tactic of much modern war – particularly when American-led – trades on just this kind of reaction to reduce an enemy population to submission. Excessive noise causes panic in such instances, and if it does so in warfare it can also do so in more mundane cases. Anyone who has ever visited New York or Hong Kong can vouch for the sense of something approaching panic that can overtake one on first encountering the city, as well as the desire to seek refuge from the overdose of stimulation it presents. Rational thought hardly seems possible in such surroundings. Shock and Awe does not allow an escape route, however, and as we shall discuss later, constitutes a threat to our sense of humanity.

Silence matters, I am going to argue, because noise is a signifier of ideological power, of an insensitivity to the natural rhythms of human existence. Drawing on Jean-François Lyotard's work, I

would define noise pollution as part of the drive towards the inhuman encouraged by big business corporations and the techno-scientific establishment.[3] A defence of silence is a defence of the human, and is thus part of a much wider ideological struggle: in Lyotard's terms, of the conflict between the little narrative and the grand that lies at the heart of our culture.[4] The latter has a vested interest in keeping us in a state of Shock and Awe at the extent of its power, and noise is a significant part of its arsenal.

Huxley: The Age of Noise

Aldous Huxley's views on why silence matters, outlined in his pithy essay 'Silence' (1946), are worth considering at this point, especially since he identifies a close link between noise and modern corporate capitalism. For Huxley, the twentieth century was 'the Age of Noise. Physical noise, mental noise and noise of desire – we hold history's record for all of them.'[5] Technology was the root of the problem, leading the way in the 'assault against silence' that he identified as a prime feature of our culture. Huxley attacked radio in particular for introducing a 'pre-fabricated din . . . into our homes' and creating a craving for constant diversion: 'daily or even hourly emotional enemas', in his tart phrase.[6] Broadcasting swamps our lives and consciousness in Huxley's opinion, a phenomenon that becomes all the worse when it is combined with advertising – as it was almost from the beginning in America. Advertising is stigmatised as one of the worst culprits in the assault being waged against silence, its only purpose, as far as Huxley is concerned, being to instil useless cravings in us. Huxley feels that the more such cravings are stimulated, the more our spiritual nature suffers. The assault against silence is, by implication, an assault against our humanity also – from the point of view of the advertisers, a calculated one designed to enslave our attention. The latter want consumers, not thinkers, with the desire for instant gratification being encoded within them. Thought is the antithesis of that desire.

Huxley emphasises the spiritual virtues of silence, marshalling an array of thinkers from various cultures and eras to press home his

point that silence matters deeply, thinkers such as the eighteenth-century Quaker William Law, for whom

> The spiritual life is nothing else but the working of the Spirit of God within us, and therefore our own silence must be a great part of our preparation for it, and much speaking or delight in it will be often no small hindrance of that good which we can only have from hearing what the Spirit and voice of God speaketh within us.[7]

We shall return to Quakerism in Chapter 4, but it is clear that Law expresses the value of silence particularly well for Huxley, whose philosophy is very spiritually-oriented. Huxley argued for the existence of a 'perennial philosophy' at the heart of all cultures and major religions, describing this as being

> the metaphysic that recognizes a divine Reality substantial to the world of things and lives and minds; the psychology that finds in the soul something similar to, or even identical with, divine Reality; the ethic that places man's final end in the knowledge of the immanent and transcendent Ground of all Being.[8]

The perennial philosophy for Huxley was both a 'way of life and system of ethics'.[9] 'Idle words' get in the way of its operation, whereas silence serves to nourish and sustain it.[10] The kind of reflection necessary to appreciate the value of the perennial philosophy is only possible if silence can be easily and regularly accessed, yet in Huxley's view this is precisely what the 'pre-fabricated din' of our times renders very problematic.

We may not lay as much store in the spiritual dimension as Huxley does or conceive of it in the same way, but we can agree about the detrimental effect that the marketing of noise has on our consciousness. For someone who believes that '[u]nrestrained and indiscriminate talk is morally evil and spiritually dangerous', the corporate world, with its love of 'idle words' to beguile us, comes to represent all that is wrong in modern civilisation.[11] Rather like Merton, Huxley feels that far too much is being said and of too little consequence. Advertising is arguably the worst culprit, and it has reached a volume in our own time that would have amazed even

critics like Huxley. Our media are saturated by the idle words from this source, generally delivered in the most aggressive of manners. Advertising seems no less our destiny in the twenty-first century than noise does, with the Internet offering a vast new field for exploitation by corporate capitalism. In Huxley's terms of reference, advertising *is* noise in its own right.

Noise Pollution: A Global Problem

The 'Age of Noise' is an altogether more formidable phenomenon now than it was in Huxley's day – 'the volume knob on the world has been turned up full blast', as one musician has complained recently.[12] If even musicians are worried about increased noise, then there must be something seriously wrong. Huxley complained about radio, but we now have to contend with an infinitely more sophisticated world of technology than he was criticising in 1946, not to mention an expansion of the radio network into a 24-hour global phenomenon. Radio is available pretty well anytime, anywhere, and has broken free from its previous constraints to become accessible in a wide range of formats, such as the mobile phone, arguably the most portable and adaptable, and thus also potentially most invasive, of all modern gadgets. Almost nowhere on the face of the globe is safe from the mobile phone and its ever-increasing range of satellite-directed options. Television, still in its infancy when Huxley was writing, has an even greater power to create cravings and focus our attention on its flow of prefabricated din (again on a 24-hour basis in most countries). The latter, too, has broken free to become accessible by mobile phone.

In the UK, the Noise Abatement Society closely monitors the situation, and takes an active role in lobbying for more legislation to control noise in the community. The Society has been campaigning against noise as a nuisance for nearly half a century, having been founded in 1959 by John Connell, a civil servant, who complained in a letter to *The Times* newspaper that 'noise is the forgotten pollutant' in our society.[13] He devoted himself to raising public consciousness over this issue, and was successful to the extent that

a Noise Abatement Act was passed in 1960, providing a legislative framework for pursuing an anti-noise agenda. Connell was instrumental in the introduction of such products intended to reduce urban noise as rubber dustbin lids and plastic milk crates. These have had the desired effect and we should be grateful for his efforts on our collective behalf. Yet they pale into insignificance when we consider how the sources of noise pollution have increased in the interim led by amplification (now a widespead urban phenomenon in constant use in bars, restaurants, and shopping centres). The Noise Abatement Society has had its successes, but it finds itself confronted by an enemy that far outstrips its ability to respond. This is not to denigrate its efforts: we need such organisations more than ever, but it has to be recognised that it is fighting an increasingly unequal battle. There is no easy equivalent to rubber dustbin lids or plastic milk crates to dampen down the noise of jets taking off from a major international airport, or open-air pop concerts.

There is in fact an endearingly eccentric air to much of the Society's campaigning, with train whistles, for example, being one of its current (spring/summer 2006) obsessions. Thanks to faster trains and improved technology these are much more noticeable than they were in the past, piercing and high-pitched. While not wishing to mock its efforts, such a campaign does seem to suggest that the Society is often reduced to tinkering at the edges of a much vaster problem that perhaps has gone beyond its reach. It is the sheer scale of noise pollution that is depressing in this context, and train whistles are no more than a side issue, no matter how irritating they may be to many communities in the UK (and elsewhere too, presumably). Granted, they are a problem which can be addressed and the Society may score yet another success in its campaign (its representations are heeded by the powers that be), but it is action at the macro level that is required if noise pollution is to be curtailed significantly. Nevertheless, the Society must be given credit for trying to be as practical as it can, and for recognising that the bigger picture does exist. It may be unequally matched and lack the resources of its enemies, but it is a committed champion of silence and deserves the

support of anyone who is concerned for the future of silence in our culture. Silence needs all the help it can get.

New York City politicians have also decided that silence needs all the help it can get, and in 2004 Mayor Bloomberg introduced legislation overhauling the city's Noise Code for the first time in over thirty years. With noise having become 'the number one quality of life complaint in New York' (almost 1,000 complaints daily on the citizen service hotline), Bloomberg launched an initiative entitled 'Operation Silent Night', which concentrated on monitoring selected high-noise areas of the city with new high-tech equipment.[14] Older noise-detecting devices were not always able to give a decibel measurement to noises, with bass-level music being particularly elusive in this regard. 'Operation Silent Night' set out to correct such anomalies with a view to providing a better basis for the prosecution of persistent offenders.

Not all cities or countries are as sensitive to the problem, however, and commercial considerations all too often are permitted to take precedence over the environmental. The decision of Shanghai City Council to allow 24-hour construction in the city indicates how low a priority noise pollution can be for some. Building skyscrapers is a very noisy business. The Shanghai cityscape is a wonder to behold, and the city's residents are set to have an even more beleaguered existence for the indefinite future in the face of China's headlong drive to achieve the status of an economic superpower. One can only speculate on the effect on the health of the local population, but as the next section will suggest, the prognosis is not positive. There seems little doubt, too, that other ambitious Chinese cities will be moved to follow Shanghai's lead. Noise pollution would appear to off the agenda in that country for the time being.

Health and Silence

Noise is obviously a health issue and an overdose of it can cause a range of problems from the psychological through to the physical. Industry is a prime source of the latter, which has prompted some remedial action of late:

> An estimated 2.25 million people at risk from hearing damage within their workplace will receive protection under revised UK regulations that come into force next April. The new statutory limits lower acceptable noise levels by five decibels, meaning that more than double the number of workers than at present will be protected. Employers will be required to take action to limit staff exposure to excessive noise and also provide adequate protection from hearing damage.[15]

One of the main side-effects of hearing loss is the development of tinnitus – hearing loss accompanied by an incessant ringing noise in one's head. Noise triumphs with a vengeance in this instance, both cutting us off from standard communication with our fellow human beings and the personal experience of silence itself. In one of the cruellest of ironies, the tinnitus sufferer never really knows true silence again.[16]

Silence can play an important role in our general health, too, as an interesting study carried out by cardiology researchers at the University of Pavia, and reported in the British medical journal *Heart* in 2006, indicates. The study set out to determine the effect of music on the cardiovascular, cerebrovascular and respiratory systems of a group of volunteers (including both musicians and non-musicians), with the authors alluding to the various claims being made for music in health terms:

> Music now has an increasing role in several disparate areas. Music can reduce stress and improve athletic performance, motor function in neurologically impaired patients with stroke or parkinsonism, or milk production in cattle.[17]

After analysing various types and aspects of music – rhythmically fast, rhythmically slow, rock or classical, for example – the researchers came to the conclusion that silence was the most effective method of relaxation for the heart. This sense of relaxation came after the music had been played (several different tracks), since even listening to soothing music resulted in accelerated breathing and heart rates – although predictably lower than for music with fast tempi. (Interestingly enough, silent reading apparently induces a similar

arousal to rhythmically fast music, with the authors citing several other studies on this topic. It does have the considerable advantage of not affecting others than oneself, however.) When short pauses were inserted into the experiment's soundtrack, however, the effects on the subjects were marked:

> the two-minute rest randomly introduced into the sequence of tracks was characterised by the lowest systolic and diastolic blood pressure, heart rate (longest RR interval), and minute ventilation and (in musicians) LF:HF ratio and by the highest end tidal carbon dioxide.[18]

The tests led the authors to speculate that any relaxing quality that music proves to have is heavily dependent on periodic silences, as in the case of pauses.

Once again, it is a question of a balance being struck between silence and noise, with the authors noting that

> A pause in the music induces a condition of relaxation greater than that preceding the exposure to music and leads to the speculation that music may give pleasure (and perhaps a health benefit) as a result of this controlled alternation between arousal and relaxation. It may be viewed as an alternative technique of relaxation or meditation.[19]

Composers have long since intuitively grasped this fact, using such alternations as a method of creating a sense of drama in their works. The build-up and then release of tension is integral to musical composition, and silence is self-evidently crucial to that process – even the breaks between movements in a symphony can play a role in the work's overall impact, being charged with expectation of what will happen when the silence is finally broken. Observations such as these lead the authors to suggest a possible treatment regime for heart disease based on an alternating sequence of music and silence:

> alternating fast and slower rhythms and pauses, can be used to induce relaxation and reduce sympathetic activity and thus may be potentially useful in the management of cardiovascular disease.[20]

There seems little doubt in the authors' minds that silence has a determinable health benefit and is a necessary part of our daily

regime. Loud music, on the other hand, carries potential heart risks, and the longer the exposure to it the higher the risk becomes. By extension that applies to excessive noise in general.

Other medical studies have identified a close link between noise and heart attacks, even in such mundane settings as the office:

> Working in a noisy office can increase the chances of having a heart attack, scientists have revealed. A major study involving more than 4,000 men and women found startling associations between long-term noise exposure and heart attack risk. . . . Heart attack risk rose with increasing noise levels until a threshold point above which it remained constant. This appeared to be around 60 decibels – the level of noise typically experienced in a large, busy office. Study leader Dr. Stefan Willich, director of the Institute for Social Medicine, Epidemiology and Health Economics at the Charite University Medical Centre in Berlin, said: 'Our results demonstrate that chronic noise exposure is associated with a mildly to moderately increased risk of heart attack. The increase appears more closely associated with actual sound levels rather than with subjective annoyance'.[21]

'Startling' is not an unreasonable word to use in this context, since few of us would think that noisy offices count high up on the noise pollution scale; irritating perhaps, but not on the level of, say, heavy industry with its massive machines. The implication is that 'chronic noise exposure' is actually a common occurrence that most of us experience on a regular basis, in urban traffic, shopping malls, restaurants, cinemas, etc.

Silence has other interesting roles to play within medical science and practice, as in the case of RNA intereference (RNAi), where it is used as a marker of specific conditions and their treatments. RNAi is a method for regulating cell behaviour in the body to combat diseases such as cancer, being described as 'a form of gene silencing that in no way involves the gene itself. Instead, the messenger RNA transcribed from the gene is attacked and destroyed, thereby obliterating the gene's message before it is translated into protein'.[22] Keeping the gene silent allows for 'fine-tuning of gene expression', which has critical implications for dealing with disease, at the very least

preventing its spread.[23] One current study is exploring the possible use of silencing in treating neurodegenerative diseases such as Alzheimer's, by suppressing the 'dominant acting toxic gene' that is involved.[24] The technique is still at an early stage of development, but its potential is obvious to researchers who are excited at where their work might lead: 'There are still substantial problems to overcome before we see RNAi as a therapy. Of course, if they *are* overcome, then this will really be quite revolutionary', in the words of one of the leading figures in the field.[25] Gene silencing looks set to be one of the hot areas of medical research for the immediate future.

Silencing in this case has very positive connotations, even if another word for it would be suppression. In Chapter 9 we shall see the notion of silencing taking on a more sinister meaning, however, when it is applied to the political realm and the practice of silencing one's opponents (a favourite tactic of totalitarian regimes throughout history). It may be a semantic point, but in a book advocating the virtues of silence we do need to acknowledge that some manifestations of the concept can arouse a negative response – and justifiably so. There is a spectrum running from silence to silencing that has to be kept under constant review. The politics of silence and the politics of silencing may not always be the same, and the latter does not always deserve support. Gene silencing, however, seems to be clearly enough on the side of the angels for us to look forward to its continued development.

Nursing care has also come to recognise the importance of quiet for patient welfare. As a recent study has put it, systematic 'noise control' is needed on recovery wards.[26] The study was conducted at the Mayo Clinic's St Mary's Hospital in Rochester, Minnesota, after patients had complained of noise levels at night in the hospital (causing sleep disturbance), and it came up with some surprising findings. It was discovered that the noise generated by such regular events as a shift changeover on the ward registered 113 decibels, louder than the sound of a jackhammer in action. Even such mundane items as phones ringing in the hallway or bedside alarms could reach 80 decibels, roughly the same order as heavy traffic. Other hospitals in America have been inspired by the Mayo Clinic's

example to conduct studies of their own, and have reached similar conclusions, recognising the obligation to reduce noise levels to improve patient well-being: 'We constantly work on it', as one administrator has declared, indicating a new level of noise consciousness within the system.[27] St. Mary's has since implemented measures designed to muffle noise in its wards (rubber padding on patients' bedside charts, for example, recalling the Noise Abatement Society's campaign for rubber dustbin lids), and has been pleased to find that patient questionnaires have given a positive response. Noise control is now an accepted part of the hospital regimen.

Silence is also recognised as a critical element of psychotherapeutic counselling, with studies suggesting that the most successful sessions are those with significant periods of silence occurring between client and therapist. When speech dominates, the counselling is notably less effective, presumably because less reflection is taking place on each side: as we shall discuss below, thinking and silence are symbiotically connected.[28] Counselling in general has now recognised the importance of leaving space for reflection, as in the increasingly influential practice of 'coaching' in the business world. In the words of one recent study in this area: 'It is within an attentive silence that managers come to know their internal emotional states and their ways of processing experiences. . . . As a colleague used to say, "Ask an open question, and then zip the lip".'[29] Another observes, '[e]ffective coach/mentors create golden moments by looking for and recognizing where silence is better than asking yet another question'.[30]

Current theories about patient–doctor interaction certainly place considerable emphasis on the role of silence, with patients being seen to need space in which to formulate their concerns. Medical practitioners are making increasing use of the Calgary Cambridge Communication Skills technique, whereby patients are asked open questions and then given time to respond. The practitioner refrains from breaking any silence that may ensue as the patient considers the question (more often put in the form of a statement to be pondered on), in a bid to prevent dominating proceedings, as is only too easy for someone in a specialist capacity to do, interpreting silence

as lack of knowledge or confusion. The idea is to make the patient feel an equal partner in the relationship and the treatment, whereas in the past there was a definite sense of hierarchy with the doctor in the position of authority. Rather as in the case of psychotherapy, the silence is treated as a positive sign, and the patient is not put under pressure to respond quickly, but is encouraged to reflect on his or her condition instead. The doctor '[l]istens attentively, allowing patient to complete statements without interruption; leaves space for patient to think before answering or go on after pausing'.[31] The assumption is that patients are more likely to reveal their real concerns under the circumstances, rather than what they expect the doctor wants to hear, and that their problems will be more thoroughly addressed and dealt with in consequence.

There are several stages to the information-gathering process by which the doctor conducts an initial exploration of the patient's particular problems, one of which is the 'facilitative response', which 'facilitates patient's responses verbally and non-verbally (use of encouragement, silence, repetition, paraphrasing, interpretation)'.[32] In the further exploration that occurs the doctor 'encourages the expression of the patient's feelings and thoughts', and again silence comes into play – along with zipping the lip on the doctor's part – with the patient being afforded time and space to work through the exercise. Silence can be said to empower the patient in such instances.

Thought and Silence

Silence matters when it comes to our health, therefore, both physically and psychologically. It matters when it comes to thinking too, in that thinking is unlikely to be effective when subject to the distraction of excessive noise. Concentration always suffers from noise, and although we have the ability to block out a certain amount of noise while thinking (even in public places), there are limits. The noise pollution of today's society breaches these limits on a regular basis. Anyone who has ever sat an exam in noisy surroundings will know how difficult it can be to think clearly and formulate one's

thoughts. The higher the noise level the greater the difficulty becomes (the author vividly remembers one of his final-year university exams being rudely interrupted a few minutes into proceedings by a pneumatic drill digging up the road just outside the exam room, causing distress to the entire group of examinees.) In a similar manner to recovering from illness in hospital, we require time and space to focus our thought process, and that means ready access to silence.

A debate is currently raging about noise in research libraries in the UK, with the world-famous British Library Reading Room in London, designed to be a haven for intense intellectual activity, becoming a subject of complaint because of a recent change of policy. Whereas in the past undergraduate students were barred from using the Reading Room, now they have been admitted and many regular users – academics and postgraduate students in the main – have reported a sharply increased noise level, with mobile phones and conversations being identified as the main culprits. The Library's management has contested these claims, but its admission that it has created 'additional quiet spaces for readers' does indicate that they are aware that the environment is not being respected as it used to be.[33] The entire Reading Room was once assumed to be quiet enough for scholars to work in, with one complainant against the new admissions policy remarking on the 'studied calm' that once prevailed.[34] While there may well be an element of nostalgia here – there was always a certain amount of background noise in the Reading Room even in its previous incarnation in the British Museum, under its cavernous dome, which could magnify even tiny noises – it is none the less a fair observation that behaviour in libraries in general has been affected by the spread of the new technology and the change in individual behaviour this has occasioned. All library users across the globe can testify to the fact that restrictions on mobile phone use are systematically broken, and that confrontations on this are now a regular occurrence of library life.

What is indisputable about the mobile phone is that it has led to the development of a different kind of personal consciousness that institutions are having considerable difficulty coping with. Theatres,

for example, are just as vulnerable to this as libraries are, and actors are constantly frustrated by phones ringing in the audience. Concert halls, too, experience such disruptions. The promise of the new technology is that everyone can be connected to the outside world at all times, and that this is both liberating and empowering to us as individuals. It can seem like an infringement of one's personal freedom to have restrictions of any kind placed on the technology that expedites this, and mobile phone users generally do not take kindly to these. The downside is the effect on others, of users being permanently connected, and the main effect is to reduce the public space available for silence. As libraries prove, a reduction of that space also means a reduction in the space in which concentrated thought can take place, and that surely cannot be in society's long-term interests.

Jean Baudrillard's attraction to the desert, as outlined in his book *America*, also makes a connection between thought and silence, if of a more subversive kind, as befits this famously iconoclastic thinker. The impact of the desert induces a particular frame of mind, an almost Zen-like state where Baudrillard becomes aware of the essential emptiness of things. It is the lack of clutter, the stripped-down quality of the desert that appeals to him, its elemental nature clearing the mind of all extraneous considerations so that deeper thought can take place. The desert reduces existence to its basics, encouraging us to reflect on those basics ourselves. Taken far enough this might even lead to the extinction of thought itself (a Zen desire after all), the process Baudrillard describes as 'the extermination of meaning'.[35] But first it gives us space in which to think by removing all the distractions that we encounter standardly in urban living:

> The grandeur of the deserts derives from their being, in their aridity, the negative of the earth's surface and of our civilized humours. They are places where humours and fluids become rarefied, where the air is so pure that the influence of the stars descends direct from the constellations. And, with the extermination of the desert Indians, an even earlier stage than that of anthropology became visible: a mineralogy, a sidereality, an inhuman facticity, an aridity that drives out the artificial scruples of culture, a silence that exists nowhere else.[36]

Baudrillard's communion with nature in the silence of the desert has an unmistakably mystical ring, and is not all that different to the reaction to silence of the Trappist monk and writer Thomas Merton, whose ideas will be considered in Chapter 4. Like Merton, silence makes Baudrillard ponder the ultimate aspects of existence in a way that he is unable to in other, noisy surroundings. The desert provides the solitude that promotes self-reflection, and self-reflection is something the world can always use more of, I would contend. Merton notes an even more extreme reaction on the part of the early Christian ascetics, of a 'thirst for emptiness, for selflessness, that peopled the deserts of Egypt in the third and fourth centuries'.[37] Baudrillard speaks of there being a 'radical indifference' to the desert that enables us to concentrate our thoughts, even if this only leads to a realisation of how little importance our individual actions have, with nature going on regardless of humanity.[38] Silence is necessary to achieve this epiphany, so once again it complements thought.

One of the best known examples in modern times of a thinker who felt the need to isolate himself in order better to think through the nature of the human condition was Henry D. Thoreau. Famously believing that '[t]he mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation', Thoreau exiled himself for just over two years (1845–47) on the shore of Walden Pond, outside Concord, Massachusetts, living alone a mile away from his nearest neighbour.[39] The fruit of this experiment was his book *Walden* (1854), a chronicle of his life and thoughts there. Thoreau conceived of Walden as 'a little world all to myself', where he could ponder on the mysteries of existence, for the most part free from interruption.[40] He enthuses about the virtues of solitude in a manner that recalls the Trappists:

> I find it wholesome to be alone the greater part of the time. To be in company, even with the best, is soon wearisome and dissipating. I love to be alone. I never found the companion that was so companionable as solitude. We are for the most part more lonely when we go abroad among men than when we stay in our chambers. A man thinking or working is always alone, let him be where he will.[41]

Solitude is seen as a necessary precondition for proper thought and reflection, preferably solitude accompanied by as much silence as possible. Thoreau is very alive to all the natural sounds in the woods around him, and while he does hear the sound of human commerce in passing trains, he is only too happy to keep the busy outside world they conjure up at a distance. This is someone who believes that 'less frequency would suffice for all important and hearty communications', a sentiment which is echoed not just in Huxley but, as we shall discuss in Chapter 4, in the entire Quaker tradition, where, when it comes to talk in general, less is always taken to equal more.[42]

Noise and the Inhuman

In his book *The Inhuman* Lyotard expressed grave doubts about the direction techno-science was heading in, arguing that advances in computer technology in particular represented a threat to our humanity. Lyotard's primary concern was that systems were being developed to take over from the human, and that these appealed to the business world because they were easier to control. Machines lacked the unpredictability of human beings (they did not strike or have off-days, for example), and simply followed program 'orders', delivering precisely what those who devised the programs wanted above all: performative efficiency. Lyotard's overall argument, that techno-science's overriding objective was to create computer systems that could outlast the end of our solar system in a few billion years, intriguing and provocative though it is, will not concern us here. What is important to take from his work is that the inhuman is becoming a significant factor in our lives. Increasingly, we can see this in the way that noise pollution is invading our everyday existence, despite all the best efforts of pressure groups such as the Noise Abatement Society to arrest the trend. Lyotard is warning us to act before it is too late, and with 'the volume knob on the world turned up full blast' it has to be a worry that the situation is fast getting out of hand as regards noise pollution, too.

Machines do not have noise consciousness, but those who operate them do. Working in industry can be a very unpleasant experience

in this respect, as generations of workers have discovered from the days of the Industrial Revolution onwards. Heavy industry in particular represents a severe test for human tolerance. In such situations the individual becomes all but subservient to the machine, and must submit to its operational characteristics, including its noise: production takes precedence. The cyborg concept, where human is combined with machine, has been much touted of late and is generally presented as liberating; a means of extending human power and making us less vulnerable in our person. But generations of industrial workers have in effect been cyborgs, and unwilling cyborgs at that, chained to the demands of their machines and reduced to the condition of being mere 'hands' in the service of a machine-driven culture. Thomas Carlyle was one of the first social commentators to recognise how this introduced the factor of the inhuman into our lives:

> Men are grown mechanical in head and heart, as well as in hand. . . . Their whole efforts, attachments, opinions, turn on mechanism, and are of a mechanical character. . . . This faith in Mechanism, in the all-importance of physical things, is in every age the common refuge of Weakness and blind Discontent; of all who believe, as many will ever do, that man's true good lies without him, not within.[43]

Carlyle's point was that the machine age is destroying our spiritual nature (the 'good within'), and even if we do not share his views as to what that nature is, we can identify with his concern that machines are eroding our humanity. In his time, the new factory system could induce something like a Shock and Awe response in workers, whose lives were largely taken over by the huge, phenomenally noisy machines that powered the Industrial Revolution. Many workers of the period were confronted on a daily basis by the 'sonic bullets' of machine production, which would blight their lives. In the modern era, the inhuman has a special relationship with noise, as Huxley was later to note with some asperity.

Lyotard sees the inhuman in operation all around us, an integral aspect of our everyday experience, requiring us to come up with strategies of resistance to keep it at bay. The villain is essentially the

same as in Huxley: corporate capitalism, or 'techno-science' in Lyotard's formulation, with its lack of respect for the rhythms of human life, of our need for something other than a machine-like existence obeying the dictates of an outside power concerned with efficiency to the exclusion of almost everything else. From Carlyle through Huxley to Lyotard there is a fear of the human dimension to existence being swamped by technology, a fear that becomes more insistent as technology increases in complexity – as it continues to do at a bewildering rate. The scope for the human to be elided is far greater than it ever has been since the Industrial Revolution began. Whether we are the masters or the servants of technology is a moot point: we have certainly become very dependent on computer systems.

Others have been more enthusiastic about the achievements of techno-science, particularly as it has opened up the possibility of developing cyborgs. The conjunction of humankind and machine is an appealing prospect to many cultural commentators. Donna Haraway, for one, finds an aesthetic beauty in the new technology:

> Modern machines are quintessentially micro-electronic devices. . . . Our best machines are made of sunshine; they are light and clean because they are nothing but signals, electromagnetic waves, a section of a spectrum, and these machines are eminently portable, mobile.[44]

In contrast to their nineteenth-century counterparts, such machines are silent, and Haraway is clearly drawn to this aspect. As pictured by Haraway, the new technology is a world away from the Shock and Awe mode of the Industrial Revolution; it sounds seductively attractive, as if it were enhancing rather than, as Lyotard believes, dominating the human. The debate continues, and strong arguments, and feelings, are being expressed on both sides of the divide; but there is no denying that such technology lies behind much of today's noise pollution.

The production of sound bombs, for example, depends on just the sort of 'light and clean' machines Haraway admires – and from our perspective sound bombs are part of the inhuman, intended to punish the state's opponents in a manner that admits of no defence.

The planes that terrorise the Gaza Strip show us how easily the cyborg notion can be turned to destructive account, with the Israeli government playing the 'light and clean' card by claiming that sound bombs are more humane than explosives because they cause no casualties. Palestinian authorities, on the other hand, report numerous miscarriages and heart attacks as a result of these events (28 sound bombs in one week alone during late 2005), and the UN Palestinian refugee agency reports that its clinics in Gaza have seen an influx of under-sixteen year olds 'suffering from symptoms such as anxiety attacks, bedwetting, muscle spasms, temporary loss of hearing and breathing difficulties' in the aftermath of sound bomb raids.[45] Israel has ignored UN pressure over the issue – in fact, it has used sound bombs again in its attacks on Gaza in June 2006 – and its only public apology to date has been to the Israeli people when one of the sound bombs was misdirected and subsequently heard throughout Israel itself, causing considerable commotion there.

The Israelis have introduced yet another 'light and clean' device which can terrorise civilian populations with noise in the form of the unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), mentioned in Chapter 1. These were released in large numbers over the skies of southern Lebanon in the Israeli offensive against Hezbullah in the summer of 2006 in order to track the latter's movements. But they are more than just reconaissance machines, as the *Guardian* correspondent Jonathan Steele has reported:

> They usually fly too high to be spotted, but they make a noise so loud you cannot forget it, like a swarm of wasps on a summer afternoon. Their engines give the impression of being souped up, both as a warning to any Hezbullah rocket-launcher that Big Brother has you in his sights but also as a device to intimidate and madden an entire population – what torturers call 'white noise'.[46]

Noise as a weapon has turned into a standard part of Israeli military campaigning, and they have come to understand the science of it only too well.

Noise as a signifier of ideological power is very much in evidence with the phenomenon of sound bombs and UAVs, as it is in the

Shock and Awe tactics favoured by the US military when it goes to war. To cite a recent high-profile example, in the Iraq invasion of 2003 the population was supposed to be so disordered by the initial attack that resistance would swiftly collapse. The Americans expected this to trigger an early surrender, paving the way for the regime change they were promoting as their main objective in carrying out the enterprise. Although it did not work quite to plan in this instance (Iraqi military resistance went on for some time after the initial offensive, certainly longer than the Americans had envisaged), there is no doubt that the method does sap the resistance of a civilian population in particular, helping to weaken opposition overall. Eventually, this was a factor in Iraq, with the local population recognising the scale of the enemy's military superiority and ultimately succumbing. The doctrine of overwhelming force that lies behind the Shock and Awe approach is calculated to destroy the enemy's will, and noise is central to its execution. In such instances, the more noise the better as far as the aggressor is concerned.

Shock and Awe is designed to achieve an outcome of 'Rapid Dominance', as the authors of a book published by America's National Defense University have outlined:

> The basis for Rapid Dominance rests in the ability to affect the will, perception, and understanding of the adversary through imposing sufficient Shock and Awe to achieve the necessary political, strategic, and operational goals of the conflict or crisis that led to the use of force. War, of course, in the broadest sense has been characterized by Clausewitz to include substantial elements of 'fog, friction, and fear'. In the Clausewitzian view, 'shock and awe' were necessary effects arising from application of military power and were aimed at destroying the will of an adversary to resist. . . . While there are surely humanitarian considerations that cannot or should not be ignored, the ability to Shock and Awe ultimately rests in the ability to frighten, scare, intimidate, and disarm.[47]

They discuss various types of Shock and Awe tactics over the course of military history, from the Romans and ancient Chinese through First World War bombardments and Nazi *blitzkriegs* in the Second World War, and while recognising that it can have its limitations,

nevertheless argue that it is an appropriate method for the US to use in its current role as the world's only superpower and global policeman. The argument is that 'Rapid Dominance' minimises casualties and damage to infrastructure on both sides, so it ought to be the preferred technique of waging war.

Shock and Awe merits the description of inhuman, since its objective is to force us into submission by turning us into something close to gibbering wrecks unable to think or act sensibly. If that is not a loss of our humanity then I do not know what is, and it does not say anything very complimentary about those who inflict it either. George Steiner warns against 'the temptations of the inhuman', and I would say they have been succumbed to in this instance.[48] In the case of a just war the technique of Shock and Awe is perhaps admissible, but few wars are that clear-cut these days (the rights and wrongs of the Iraq episode are still the subject of much heated debate, for example), and anything that reduces our sense of humanity can hardly be considered good for our development. Even if we do concede the justifiability of a 'war against terrorism', such tactics are questionable. The role that noise plays in the process of dehumanisation cannot be ignored, and it makes it all the more evident just how important silence is to us – the more it is overridden, the less chance there is of the better side of our nature being allowed to assert itself. Noise is inherently aggressive, and the louder it is, the more aggressive it becomes. It is no accident that totalitarian regimes are so fond of noisy demonstrations of their military might, or the appropriate martial music to accompany these. To speak up on behalf of silence is to speak out against overweening ideological power.

Conclusion

It should be apparent by now that silence really does matter – to our mental and physical health, our ability to think, our sense of humanity. It should also be apparent that silence is a more vulnerable condition than it ever has been, open to assault from an increasing variety of sources, and that it has to be campaigned for if it is to be protected from further incursion. When it is significantly reduced,

we are placed at risk, whether from heart attacks or severe psychological stress. This means that noise control is not a luxury but a necessity of human existence, and when it is lacking our quality of life suffers accordingly, taking on an edgy, aggressive character that can be very wearing to a significant section of the population. The volume knob has to go down – to zero wherever possible. When noise can so easily be transformed into a weapon, then it must be deemed to have that potential to disturb and disrupt in all its 'civilian' uses too, whether that is the intention or not. With the exception of solitary confinement, silence can never take on that characteristic, and unpleasant though it must be to experience it as a prisoner over any length of time, solitary confinement is a relatively benign treatment compared to sound bombs, sonic bullets and Shock and Awe.

We move on now in Part II to outline where silence matters, starting with an area where it has traditionally been very highly prized and intensively cultivated: religion.

Part II

The Virtues of Silence

4
Where Silence Matters: Religion

Silence has been a critical factor in religious practice through the ages. We have only to think of the Quakers and Trappists to see how it has been used within Christianity as a route to spirituality, but it is also very important in Eastern religions. In the Buddhist tradition, for example, silence is particularly revered. Silence has a distinctly spiritual dimension to most believers across the religious spectrum, often being identified with divinity. The Quaker leader George Fox emphasised silence's ability to change our perception of existence: '[i]t is a strange Life for you to come to be Silent; you must come into a new world.' Cultivating silence becomes the means of entering into a meditative state, a process most religions encourage to intensify individual experience of the spiritual. Silence is also, of course, identified with death – hence, perhaps, the fear so many have of it as a condition (the 'silence of the grave'), and the tension between those responses repays exploration: 'the rest is silence', to quote Hamlet's last line, which can be a source of comfort or of despair.[1] As we shall find in other contexts, silence has the ability to induce extremes of response in individuals. We shall be examining the role that silence has played in devotion in some of the world's major religions, but before delving into history let us look briefly at a work addressing how the issue of religious contemplation appears in general terms in our own time.

Monica Furlong: The Meaning of Contemplation

'How does one live with religious emotion in the twentieth century?' is the question posed by Monica Furlong in her absorbing book *Contemplating Now*.[2] Her answer is, through contemplation, which in the West refers to 'man's struggle to become still enough to reflect the face of God', whereas in the East it constitutes 'the effort (or non-effort) to live fully in the present moment.'[3] It is an important distinction between the two cultural traditions, which will become more apparent in our discussion below, although Furlong is less interested in such differences than in establishing that contemplation is a necessity for humanity in general: 'Without contemplation man ceases to feel himself *rooted*, and without roots there can be no stillness, no security, and no growth.'[4] These are concerns which transcend the religious community.

Contemplation is a matter of solitude and silence, and it is very much against the grain of modern existence, which, particularly in the West, demands activity and 'busyness' from us as a demonstration of our social usefulness. In this context contemplation becomes akin to idleness. Furlong is very critical of this:

> There are two difficulties about activity though. One is that busyness breeds busyness. It is not only that if we are surrounded by busy people then idleness, however fruitful, becomes difficult to maintain. It is that busyness, like a taste for sugar, becomes an addiction.[5]

She goes on to argue that we have lost the sense of the natural rhythms of life, where there is rest as well as work, passivity as well as activity, and that we now find ourselves existing, in a nicely turned phrase, 'in a permanent condition of anxious mistiming.'[6] The art of contemplation can only suffer in such surroundings, and we must rediscover it if we are to restore harmony to our individual lives. And contemplation is very much an individual activity, requiring 'the entry into silence, a journey which for the most part, must be made alone' (Quakerism's communal dimension being an exception to the norm in this regard).[7] This is a journey which is not always easy, as solitude can be an alienating experience in a culture such as

ours, but it is one Furlong insists we must make if we are to maintain any spiritual aspect at all to our existence. These are themes which have echoed throughout the history of the major world religions, as we shall now see.

Silence in the Christian Tradition

Various branches of Christianity have allotted a special role to silence. There is the case of Quakerism, for example, which has made a feature of silent services since its foundation in the seventeenth century, believing silence to be an essential component in creating the appropriate spiritual condition for worship. (It should be pointed out that other Protestant sects of the time, such as the Seekers, also experimented with silent worship, but only in Quakerism did it become fully institutionalised.) There was what amounted to a suspicion of speaking amongst the early Quakers, most especially in a spiritual context. Speaking was a 'carnal' activity that had little place in religious worship, with George Fox declaring himself to be 'afraid of all carnal talk and talkers.'[8] The primary concern of the early Quakers was personal salvation, and on this matter they considered themselves to be totally subject to God's will; committed to wait silently upon his decision as to their fate. The injunction outlined in Ecclesiastes 5:2, 'let your words be few', was taken extremely seriously, and has continued to be so right into our own time. William Penn's words bring out the simplicity of character and personal conduct that silence was supposed to illustrate when he comments of the first Quakers that,

> They recommended silence by their example, having very few words upon all occasions. . . . Nor could they humour the custom of good night, good morrow, good speed; for they knew the night was good, and the day was good, without wishing of either[.] . . . Besides, they were words and wishes, of course, and are usually as little meant, as are love and service in the custom of cap and knee; and superfluity in those, as well as in other things was burdensome to them; and therefore they did not only decline to use them, but found themselves often pressed to reprove the practice.[9]

They may sound like less than engaging companions, but there is no doubting the integrity of the Quaker community.

Even so, as Richard Bauman has observed in his study of early Quakerism, there was a pressing need to engage in debate with other Protestant sects and to spread the word of Quaker belief. This was a period, after all, in which sectarianism was rife and competition for new members fierce. Speaking and silence were in dialectical interaction in Quakerism from the beginning, therefore, but there is no denying the importance accorded the latter, which was the condition Quakers aspired to as the best means of experiencing the 'Inward Light.' The Light constituted the voice of God speaking within the individual, and as Bauman has described it, '[t]he experience of God speaking within was the spiritual core of Quakerism', meaning that 'Quakers elevated speaking and silence to an especially high degree of symbolic centrality and importance' in their theological system.[10] We can certainly speak of there being a manifesto for silence enshrined in the Quaker tradition. 'Silence is wisdom; where speaking is folly, and always safe', as William Penn assures us.[11]

Bauman also points out that the dialectic of speaking and silence had a wider metaphorical significance within early Quaker thought, with speaking identified with all carnal activities. The believer was expected to maintain 'a "silence" of the flesh in all things', refraining from sensual indulgence in a more general sense.[12] Action was supposed to be weighed as carefully as speech, and as sparingly used. We shall be observing an equivalent process at work in the arts, with, for example, John Cage's refusal to score any notes in his musical 'composition' *4′ 33″*; then in Kasimir Malevich's reduction of painting to a white square on a white ground, and Ad Reinhardt's even more radical reduction to black. The aesthetic involved in each is strikingly similar, with a principled refusal to engage in the action expected in the particular circumstances. We might note something similar in Sontag's arguments against interpretation, where we are enjoined to experience rather than to interpret works of art, and to abstain from criticism of them as much as possible.[13] As we shall discuss in Chapter 6, Sontag's arguments are problematic in many ways, but they do have some very provocative things to say about

what we might call 'idle' criticism, as well as asking us to reconsider the very basis for the enterprise itself: a manifesto for critical silence perhaps.

Modern Quakers are as committed to silence as the sect's founders were, but also very aware of how much more difficult a condition it is to achieve in a society such as ours. 'We are conditioned by our age to be noisy', as George H. Gorman has remarked, 'so much so that we are almost afraid to be silent.'[14] It is that conditioning that modern Quakerism has to overcome, although Gorman is in no doubt that if we can do so, we shall recover much of our lost humanity. Silent worship turns into a form of therapy, the believer's route into 'the exploration of the riches of the interior life' where deep, intense and concentrated thought takes place.[15] Another Quaker writer speaks of silent worship as 'a dropping out of time altogether.'[16] Gorman emphasises that this state can also occur outside a strictly religious framework, when, for example, we have an important decision to make about our lives that demands our undivided attention. Silence and thought are inextricably linked for this commentator, and without the former the latter will be at best superficial. Without silence we cannot reach our inner self, and it is from this inner self, Gorman maintains, 'that all creative energy radiates.'[17] Again, the point deserves to be made that this is an observation whose implications go well beyond religion. Silence matters for everyone, being a necessary condition for the development of our character.

Worship for Gorman involves reflection on the many wonders of the natural world and human existence, and can be expressed in circumstances other than the purely religious. Appreciating art, for example, can qualify as worship, with Gorman instancing Vermeer's paintings as having the same kind of profound effect on him that contemplation of the divine does. He observes that concentration on mathematical problems works in the same way for some of his friends, and he is at pains to emphasise the range of non-religious experiences that could come under the heading of worship. (One wonders where music would fit into his scheme, however, since that manifestly breaks the silence, John Cage notwithstanding.) While

any of us can have these experiences individually, they are more intense, Quakers contend, when they happen communally in the context of a meeting. During a Quaker meeting every member of the group engages in the act of 'centring down', 'the manner in which, silently, we make our interior journey to the still centre of our being.'[18] (As we shall find out below, Buddhism deploys a similar technique for meditation.) Any focus of attention at all can be used by the individual; it need not even be specifically religious, it can be any aspect of our lives, either positive or negative, serious or trivial. But the critical point is that everyone realises that all others present are undertaking a similar exercise, and this has a bonding effect on the group as a whole. Silence becomes a shared experience, part of 'the common journey inwards' that the entire meeting is expected to make;[19] a way of opening ourselves to our innermost thoughts, fears and anxieties free from the many diversions of everyday life that otherwise inhibit such a process. '[A]t the very lowest', as Caroline E. Stephen has remarked, a Quaker meeting constitutes 'a witness that worship is something deeper than words.'[20]

When silence takes full effect it creates what is called a 'gathered meeting', where there is a feeling of unity, 'conscious unself-consciousness' as Gorman reports a friend describing it.[21] The seventeenth-century Quaker George Keith felt that those present in such cases 'became all as one body.'[22] Silence alone cannot create this sense of unity, however, and there will be occasions when it does not work. Quakers differentiate between 'living silence' and 'dead silence', and it is the former that every meeting sets out to achieve. This demands considerable concentration and effort on the part of meeting members, yet when this is forthcoming it makes any spoken contribution that may arise – as is allowed for in Quaker practice – all the more powerful.

Breaking the silence assumes considerable significance in Quaker worship, all the more so since, as Gorman emphasises, totally silent meetings can be very fulfilling in their own right if informed by a spirit of living silence that all present clearly feel. Nevertheless, modern Quakerism has less of a prohibition against spoken contributions than was the case in the movement's history; although, to

prevent the situation from getting out of hand, the convention is that no one should make more than one contribution to any meeting. Constant interruptions are not felt to be in the spirit of the sect's belief, and members are expected not to break the silence lightly. George Fox summed up what was required with characteristic directness: 'So if any hath anything upon them to speak, in the life of God stand up, and speak it, if it be but Two or Three words, and sit down.'[23] Samuel Beckett, one feels, would have approved entirely of this demand for brevity and succinctness (most likely he would have appreciated the silence even more). Gorman certainly feels that any trend towards greater use of spoken contribution needs to be carefully monitored, and that what distinguishes Quaker worship more than anything else is, and should continue to be, its strategic use of silence. 'Let your words be few' remains the maxim: this is a church, after all, for which 'God himself is Silence.'[24] In consequence, there can never be enough of the latter: 'the more God is there, the more there is silence.'[25]

The Amish also encourage the cultivation of silence in their lifestyle: they are expected to be modest and quiet in all their doings. One practical way the Amish have found of maintaining quiet throughout their settlements is by banning most modern inventions, such as electricity – thus all electrical goods – and the motor car. The principle of keeping the noisy modern world at bay, increasingly difficult though that is in a highly technologised society such as the West, nevertheless underpins Amish culture. Although they spring from an evangelical tradition (the Anabaptist movement that created such a stir in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries with its radical theological notions), the so-called 'Old Order' Amish prefer to be what they call 'the quiet in the land' nowadays. The Amish maintain a low public profile, remaining outside the official social and political systems in areas such as Pennsylvania, Ohio and Ontario where they have large, long-established communities.

In North America the Amish even market themselves as a tourist attraction on the basis of providing a peaceful, pre-modern lifestyle for outsiders to experience for a while, rather like stepping back in

time to a much slower, quieter world without most of the noisy machinery and equipment that is standard elsewhere. When it comes to pollution, including, crucially from our point of view, noise, the Amish unquestionably are doing their bit for the planet, keeping their impact on the environment to a minimum. Access to silence in such a community is far easier than in the outside world, although it is an extreme method of achieving this state – more extreme than is practical in any general sense.

The Jesuit Order lays a lot of emphasis on the system of spiritual exercises devised by its founder, St Ignatius Loyola, as a method of inculcating humility before God in the believer. These are described as 'any method of examining one's conscience, meditating, contemplating, praying vocally and mentally', to enable one 'to seek and find the divine will in the laying out of one's life to the salvation of one's soul.'[26] The *Exercises* are designed to focus the mind of the believer on such subjects as the suffering of Christ, and adepts are expected to engage in these on a daily basis as they work through a programme of exercises, spending at least an hour on them at a time. To create the right conditions for such intense meditation silence is required:

> as an ordinary rule, the Exercitant will benefit all the more, the more he secludes himself from all friends and acquaintances and from all earthly solicitude, for example, by moving from the house in which he dwelt, and taking another house or room, that there he may abide in all possible privacy[.] . . .[B]eing thus set apart, not having his mind divided about many things, but putting all his care and interest in one thing only, to wit, the serving of his Creator and the benefiting of his own soul, he comes to use his natural faculties more freely in diligently searching for that he so much desires.[27]

As the commentator in this edition of the *Exercises*, Father Joseph Rickaby, glosses it: 'Of all human industries solitude and silence is what tells most for the success of a retreat.'[28] The distractions of our noisy world are impediments to the concentrated thought that religious meditation traditionally requires. Successful meditation

ultimately leads to ' "a time of calm", when the soul is not agitated by diverse spirits, and uses its natural powers freely and calmly.'[29] Calmness and tranquillity prove to be consistent ideals for those engaging in religious meditation, and we shall see them again in Eastern contexts.

Trappism has incorporated silence even more fully into its belief system than Quakerism has, with its monks required to maintain silence throughout the greater part of their lives in order to demonstrate the depth of their respect for God and his works. Merton has written particularly eloquently in his *Journals* of what silence means to the Trappist community, of how it shapes their lives and deepens their character. The assumption behind the Trappist monastic lifestyle is that the adoption of silence in everyday affairs makes the words of the Mass all the more powerful: 'The Canon of the Mass should emerge from that silence with infinite power and significance.'[30] It is another example of breaking the silence, although more formalised than in Quaker worship. For Merton, Mass is the only thing that priests really need to say: 'It is important to speak seven times a day, in praising God. . . . Here we must speak and know what we are saying and realize at least some of its implications.'[31] Silence to the Trappists is only meaningful if it is maintained to magnify the power and effect of the holy Word rather than for any personal concerns of the priest.

Properly observed, therefore, silence becomes a critical element of belief for the Trappist, with an arguably even greater significance than it has for the Quaker. Certainly, for Merton it informs his whole conception of religion, becoming a symbol of his devotion: 'The grace of Easter is a great silence, an immense tranquility and a clean taste in your soul.'[32] Silence becomes the measure of spiritual intensity.

Although he concedes that noise is not sinful in itself, Merton nevertheless argues that it is a sign of what has gone wrong with our world:

> the turmoil and confusion and constant noise of modern society are the expression of the ambiance of its greatest sins – its godlessness, its

> despair. A world of propaganda, of endless argument, vituperation, criticism, or simply of chatter, is a world of atheism.[33]

The arguments are similar to Huxley's, with Merton recommending that Catholics should create a network of houses where there would be space for individual meditative contemplation. Only in escaping from the noisy world into such calm surroundings can we achieve an '[i]nterior silence – of judgments, passions, desires,' enabling us to rise above the challenges of contemporary life.[34] Silence becomes the key to spirituality, something that must actively be sought by all those with any pretence at all to devoutness. Noise is perceived as the enemy: 'it is absurd to talk about interior silence where there is no exterior silence.'[35] A clear connection is being established between silence and thought; without the proper environment reflection cannot take place, with Merton viewing social existence as we experience it today as essentially a huge distraction. The ultimate goal should be to simplify life to the point where such distractions cease and we can focus on what is truly important – our personal spiritual development.

The exterior silence that Trappists crave is to be found in the monastery, and it is there in his own institution, Gethsemani (Kentucky), that Merton is in his element, savouring the easy access to silence that it affords. In such an environment silence gains its greatest significance for Merton, allowing him to concentrate his thought fully on the large-scale problems of existence and his place in the divine scheme of things as a priest:

> On all sides I am confronted by questions that I cannot answer, because the time for answering them has not yet come. Between the silence of God and the silence of my soul, stands the silence of the souls entrusted to me. Immersed in these three silences, I realize that the questions I ask myself about them are perhaps not actual because they are not yet answerable.[36]

As he wanders around his monastery Merton feels nourished by the silence, but also, in John Cage fashion, aware of all the little noises in a night-time building that form a perpetual backdrop even to

Trappist life (wind, loose floorboards, creaking hinges, etc.). This realisation makes him even more aware of areas of the building that are quieter than the rest, as in the empty upper floors where he reports that '[t]he silence astonishes me.'[37]

Merton's respect for silence is so deep that he feels guilt about breaking it by his writing and periodic contact with the general public. 'The very silence is a reproach', he writes of the building that he first entered eleven years earlier, regarding it as a refuge from a godless world, a setting where he could find his true spiritual identity.[38] He is caught between the demands of his private and his public life, while recognising that the latter can only serve to deflect him from his vocation. Merton was not alone in his doubts about the ethics of writing for one in his position as a priest. Although he was encouraged to write about his monastic experiences by his first abbot at Gethsemani in the 1940s (having already been known as a poet),[39] others in the Trappist community were opposed to him publishing these, and in fact the greater part of his private journals did not appear until several years after his death in 1968. Although Merton manages to reconcile himself, with some difficulty, to this apparent contradiction in his life, it is clear that he feels himself to be under a binding obligation to uphold both an interior and an exterior silence wherever possible. For such a committed Trappist, writing and communication must always remain very problematic activities: any breaking of silence at all demands considerable justification and must never be undertaken lightly.

Merton's spiritual vocation is inextricably connected to the concept of silence, and there is more than a suggestion in his writings that he, too, conceives of God as silence: that this would be his ultimate spiritual state. He is one of the silence's greatest advocates, whose writings on the subject transcend the religious realm to speak to a much wider audience. The link between silence and thought comes across particularly strongly in his work, and the non-religious can appreciate that and recognise a kindred spirit. It is also worth pointing out that Merton can detect a socio-political perspective to silence, commenting that, '[t]he Kings and the dictators and the mighty of the world accomplish their works with great noise, with

speeches and drums and loudspeakers and brass and the thunder of bombers. But God works in silence.'[40] The non-religious can readily identify with this critique of the bombast of the ruling class.

Since Merton's day Trappism has taken a less extreme line on silence, modifying the situation that once obtained when, unless in contact with superiors, monks were obliged to use sign language as their primary means of communication. As James A. Jaska and Ernest L. Stech have reported, a new scheme has been instituted since the late 1960s whereby '[b]rief oral communication without asking permission is given everyone.'[41] Most monks have welcomed the change, finding the Trappist lifestyle to be extremely difficult to sustain without such interpersonal communication, and have indicated that the relaxation of the rule means that they find it easier to make the withdrawal into silence required of them. Intuitively, this makes a great deal of sense, since silence can seem more of a personal choice than an imposition under these circumstances. As Jaska and Stech point out, no matter how disposed the individual may be towards silence rather than speech, everyone 'requires a dynamic balance between the two.'[42] And it is just such a dynamic balance between sound and silence that I am arguing for over the course of this book.

Silence in Non-Western Religions

The role played by silence in world religions outside the Western framework, such as Buddhism and Taoism, is also interesting.[43] Silence plays a fascinating role in Buddhism in particular, as we can see when we consider such luminaries of that tradition as Nagarjuna, one of the major figures of the Madhyamika School (active second century AD). Nagarjuna's thought depends heavily on the use of paradox. Things are never either/or in this thinker's work, but always both/and, and he steadfastly refuses to choose between opposing positions in an argument, recommending silence instead when faced by metaphysical problems (which of course anyone thinking or writing about religion is on a regular basis). As an example of the paradoxes he poses for us, we might consider the following:

> All things prevail for him for whom emptiness prevails;
> Nothing whatever prevails for him for whom emptiness prevails.[44]

Emptiness is the condition that Nagarjuna wants us to experience as a way of transcending the self, and thus coming to recognise the interconnectedness between all things, ourselves and the rest of the universe. Having achieved that state of awareness, silence is the appropriate response to adopt towards all metaphysical problems. As one commentator has said of the Madhyamika School, its main distinguishing characteristic is that 'it doesn't try to explain.'[45]

Buddhists also make use of a 'centring down' technique to achieve emptiness and detachment from the world, as a modern manual informs us:

> Initially, in order to establish a foundation of mindfulness, one must concentrate on centring and balancing the mind in impartiality. . . . But this impartiality needs careful checking to make sure it's not just a state of indifference and inertia or absentminded preoccupation. One must be neither scattered nor engrossed in things. Sitting straightbacked in meditation, maintaining mindfulness and centredeness is all that's required.[46]

The admonition recalls the Quaker distinction between living and dead silence. Mere outward appearance of centring down will not suffice. The believer must sincerely mean it; only then will the correct state for meditation be established. Although there are critical differences in what that meditation is designed to achieve – release from suffering in the case of the Buddhists but a greater insensity of faith with Quakers – there is nevertheless a similar sense of needing to keep the world and all its noisy distractions at bay. Silence is a conduit to enlightenment in both cases.

Buddhists break down human life into ten states (or worlds), with hunger/desire, not surprisingly, being the root of many of our problems:

> Hunger is characterised by greed. Desire dominates one's life. Even if a desire is dominated, one is only temporarily appeased before being dominated by another desire. . . . [I]f desire is unchecked by respect and

> wisdom, it becomes selfish greed which leads to destruction, as evidenced by pollution.[47]

Lack of respect for others is certainly one of the main causes of noise pollution, whether it proceeds from the individual or from a corporate institution, with the selfishness that Buddhism as a belief system is designed very specifically to overcome very much to the fore. A polluted environment militates against reaching the state of tranquillity that Buddhists so prize:

> In tranquillity, one controls his instinctive desires with reason. This is the humane, calm and reasonable state of mind in which one is at peace with himself and others. It has such qualities as intelligence, sound judgement, superior wisdom, the ability to distinguish truth from falsehood, and a good temperament. Although tranquillity, also called humanity, is the state which is most natural to human beings, it is not easy to maintain in our turbulent society.[48]

One does not have to be Buddhist to concur; equally, as even believers have pointed out, '[o]ne does not need to be be a Buddhist to profit from Buddhist meditation' either.[49] I have already identified noise pollution with the inhuman and claimed that a defence of silence is a defence of our humanity, so it is heartening to see similar connections being made elsewhere. Centring down is an activity we all need to undertake at various points in our lives, in our own particular ways and for our own particular reasons (not always necessarily religious). Noise pollution is to be considered one of its great enemies.

A sustained argument for the centrality of silence to the Buddhist tradition can be found in Raimundo Panikkar's thought-provoking book *The Silence of God: The Answer of the Buddha*. The book's epigraph very neatly encapsulates the meaning of silence for Buddhists:

> For silence to be a response,
> a silent query must go before.
> But any silent query
> shelters, in silence, the very question.

Now, if there is no query,
there is no response:
there is only a glance,
a smile;
love,
and forgiveness;
all,
nothing,
yes,
no.
Absence.[50]

Again, we have that sense of explanation being pointless when it comes to metaphysical problems, and if silence is an absence, then it is perceived to be a very positive absence that human beings should seek and cherish. No feeling of despair is implied here; rather it is the calmness that results from true enlightenment, where one has realised what can and cannot be achieved by human beings.

Panikkar is exercised by the silence of the Buddha in the face of such pressing issues as the existence (or otherwise) of God. Traditionally, religions are constructed around the notion of divinity and an ultimate reality inhabited by that divinity. The fortunate may even experience that reality after death, as in the Christian notion of heaven, which can be put forward as an incentive to follow the prescriptions of one's religious authorities. Buddhism, however, is not so structured, and for Panikkar this is one of its greatest strengths: 'it seems to me that the ultimate reason for the silence of the Buddha resides precisely in the fact that this ultimate reality *is* not.'[51] In consequence, there is nothing to be said by the Buddha: 'His silence not only clothes the reply, it invades the question. He is not only silent, he reduces to silence.'[52] In fact, 'he eliminates the question', and for a believer like Panikkar that removes all anxiety about our spiritual fate.[53] That becomes the central paradox of Buddhism, that it remains silent about all ultimate things – hence the accusation of atheism so often levelled against it. As Panikkar pithily sums it up: 'The Buddha has no theories.'[54] Again, for Panikkar this is a great

strength, enabling Buddhism to give rise to a wide range of schools: silence in this case equates to cultural flexibility.

We should not interpret the Buddha's silence as atheism in the modern understanding of the term, therefore, but rather the impossibility of reaching conclusions about divinity, its nature and its purposes. The Buddha's message is that 'when all is said and done . . . the so-called ultimate question is unfounded and irrelevant.'[55] We are left with a system which fails to provide the easy solutions generally provided by religions, particularly monotheisms, and which instead asks us to recognise that no answers ever will be forthcoming:

> What the Buddha is communicating, wordlessly, to the one with ears to hear and interpret, is that we must have the daring to enter into silence, that we must be prepared to lose our own life completely, that we must be willing to prescind from any object whatsoever and to slough off the subject.[56]

Specifically, it is 'silence of thought' that is being called for, and that is the primary objective of Buddhism for this thinker.[57] He contrasts the calm that results from this for the Buddhist with the fear of silence that marks so much of life in the modern world. This is the fear that we find in so many of the films of Ingmar Bergman: of there being no God in the traditional understanding of the concept to give meaning to our lives, and of humanity being alone in the universe. Buddhist silence, however, is of a very different nature in that there is no denial as such of God, thus nothing to give rise to such a fear: 'The Buddha is silent on God. Thus he stills our impatience and our curiosity about the "thing" that really terrifies us. God can be no menace, no peril, for us. God is not our enemy.'[58]

Silence looms large in Zen Buddhism, where, as a commentator on the philosophical aspects of that tradition, Dale S. Wright, has pointed out, a sophisticated rhetoric of silence soon evolved:

> Stories about the practice of silence among the great paradigmatic figures of the Zen tradition – the Buddha, Mahakasyapa, Vimalakirti, Bodhidharma – were extremely influential. So important was the absence of discourse in Zen that silence soon became a sign or 'saying' on its own.

> It began to signify something important. Many Zen stories of 'encounter dialogue' describe how a particular meeting between two Zen masters reaches its climax in an expression of silence.[59]

He also notes that when any Zen master responded to a question by silence, that was taken to be deeply meaningful. So integrated into Zen rhetoric was silence that Huang Po, the great master of the ninth-century AD golden age of Zen in China, could insist that '[s]peech and silence are one. there is no distinction between them.'[60] But as with the Quakers, the Zen masters realised that there could be living and dead silence; thus Huang Po's admonition: 'Unless you understand profoundly, it is no use thinking that you can just keep quiet.'[61] Even Wright concedes that it is not always easy to tell the difference between the two kinds, however, especially faced by 'the interpretive "strangeness" of Zen dialogue, and the opaque character of silence.'[62] There is always scope for interpretation when silence is deployed, and it has to be contextualised within the various other rhetorics operating in Zen discourse. Nevertheless, it can be one of the more effective forms, possessing 'the critical power to cut through all "form" and to disrupt all talk that derives from conventional awareness.'[63] It is one of Zen's primary objectives to disrupt our standard patterns of thought, and its teaching deploys several strategies to that end. Properly handled, silence has the ability to create such disruption and radically alter our conception of the world around us. Zen rhetoric in general, as Wright has observed, 'is designed to disorient one's relation to everything.'[64]

Looking at it from a non-Buddhist perspective one could say that the ultimate questions are left open within this system, and that silence is deemed to be the most effective means of keeping them open. There is a conscious avoidance within Buddhism of the theological wrangling that has marred so much of the history of the other major world religions. As a case in point we only have to instance Christianity, where disputes over doctrine have led to social division, torture and various full-scale wars over the course of the centuries. Christian thinkers have been only too ready to engage in metaphysical speculation about the ultimate questions, and to be

highly resistant to interpretations other than their own. Most other monotheisms are guilty of similar failings, and Buddhism's silence on this score has to be seen as one of its most attractive characteristics. There is nothing silent about holy wars.

Silence is revered in Hinduism, where it is identified with the realm of the absolute. In a discussion about mantras, André Padoux has observed that '[s]ilence was always held in higher esteem than uttered word or audible sound' in the Tantric tradition particularly, and that this 'goes back to vedism, where mantras are often used silently.'[65] Mantras, which can take the form of poems, hymns or chants, are central to ritual in Hinduism, so a sense of the absolute, a place of 'utter silence' and 'the highest "transmental" (*unmana*) consciousness' is certainly present there, whether the mantras are being uttered or not.[66]

Hindus do not necessarily believe in a vow of silence, however, emphasising that it is the attitude in one's mind that counts, not mere outward observance. Thus the famous twentieth-century guru Sri Ramana Maharshi's comments:

> A vow is only a vow. It may help meditation to some extent; but what is the use of keeping the mouth shut and letting the mind run riot? If the mind is engaged in meditation, what need is there for speech? Nothing is as good as meditation. What is the use of a vow of silence if one is engrossed in activity?[67]

Despite this admonition, it is still assumed that silence is more powerful than speech in passing on spiritual wisdom: 'Preaching is simple communication of knowledge and can be done in silence too.'[68] True religious sincerity is likely to express itself in the form of silence. As a mystic from yet another religious tradition, the Lebanese Christian poet Khalil Gibran, has observed: 'You talk when you cease to be at peace with your thoughts.'[69]

Going back into ancient Chinese history we can find that Taoism also gave a prominent role to silence. In the words of the *Tao Te Ching* (*c*. 240 BC),

> Those who know do not speak;
> Those who speak do not know.[70]

Then in the work's final chapter we find the sentiments,

> The good man does not prove by argument,
> And he who proves by argument is not good.[71]

The notion of going beyond language to a realm of silence is well entrenched here. Rather as in Nagarjuna and the Madhyamika School, at such points metaphysical problems simply cease to seem relevant and there is no longer a need to choose between competing positions (although it is worth noting that the *Tao Te Ching* had a polemical dimension and was directed against the politically influential 'Realist' movement in Chinese life).[72] Although the reasons for doing so are very different, Wittgenstein later reached a similar conclusion about metaphysics in his *Tractatus*, as we shall discuss in Chapter 5; that there are things we are obliged to pass over in silence.

The so-called 'Quietist' tradition in Chinese thought achieves its fullest expression in Taoism, whose adherents were particularly concerned with what lay beyond language. The historian of Taoism Arthur Waley has described the Quietist ethos as follows:

> The process of Quietism, then, consisted in a travelling back through the successive layers of consciousness to the point where one arrived at Pure Consciousness, where one no longer saw 'things perceived', but 'that whereby we perceive.' For never to have known 'that whereby we know' is to cast away a treasure that is ours. Soon on the 'way back' one comes to the point where language, created to meet the demands of ordinary, upper consciousness, no longer applies. The adept who has reached this point has learnt, as the Quietists expressed it in their own secret language, 'to get into the bird-cage without setting the birds off singing.'[73]

Again we have that sense of the desire to embrace silence as a positive phenomenon that is of greater use to the believer than mere discourse can ever be. As Waley has argued, 'the visions of the

Quietist . . . are accompanied by a sense of finality', of having overcome the need to resolve philosophical dilemmas.[74] Taoists believe in an underlying unity to existence that we have no option but to accept; argument and debate are pointless activities from such a perspective, little more than perversity on the part of the individual. What Quietists strove to achieve was a condition of 'stillness', and this involved a reaction against discourse in general:

> Not only are books the mere discarded husk or shell of wisdom, but words themselves, expressing as they do only such things as belong to the normal state of consciousness, are irrelevant to the deeper experience of Tao, the 'wordless doctrine.'[75]

With that notion of a wordless doctrine, we reach what is arguably the ultimate expression of silence within a spiritual or metaphysical context. Even the *Tao Te Ching* itself does not argue its points, but rather aims, as Waley put it, to 'create in the reader a general attitude favourable to Quietism.'[76] For the Taoist, as George Steiner has observed, the notion of 'silence conveys tranquillity and the intimation of God.'[77] No argument will be as effective as that.

All the religious positions we have considered either explicitly or implicitly advocate the use of silence as a means of achieving a state of tranquillity, believing that to be a necessary prerequisite to the experience of individual enlightenment. In each case the everyday world is held to be a source of pollution – of noise and otherwise – which deflects believers from pursuing their spiritual goals, a significant barrier to concentrating on the things that really matter. I am not suggesting a religious solution to the assault against silence myself, but in that the religions discussed above are concerned to create space for our humanity to develop, it is not unreasonable to enlist their aid in our manifesto for silence. We share a commitment to the restriction of the culture of noise, and pollution in general, and they recognise that an ideological battle is entailed in bringing this about, so common ground does exist.

Max Picard: The Metaphysics of Silence

There is considerable overlap between theology and philosophy in terms of subject matter and concerns (metaphysics looming large in each case), and we shall turn in the next chapter to the latter discipline to discover how silence has been used and interpreted there. Before doing so, however, it is worth exploring the work of the German-Swiss theologian Max Picard, whose classic study *The World of Silence* (1948) offers a bridge between the two disciplines, and in doing so represents one of the more intriguing pieces of metaphysical speculation on the nature of silence. The book takes a very positive view of silence, asking us to consider it anew as a concept. No mere absence, it is conceived of instead as a vital, autonomous force that is our world's natural state of affairs. Picard's is a striking argument which gives silence an identity of its own, rather than just being a sub-set of speech as many theorists would have it, an identity that has something of the sublime about it: 'Silence is not merely negative; it is not the mere absence of speech. It is a positive, a complete world in itself. Silence has greatness simply because it is. It *is*, and that is its greatness, its pure existence.'[78] Silence is the basic reality of existence into which human beings intrude, and in that sense it goes beyond our understanding; it 'cannot be traced back to anything else. . . . There is nothing behind it to which it can be related except the Creator himself.'[79]

Silence's apparent omnipresence notwithstanding, Picard pictures a world in which noise is beginning to swamp our lives, with radio once again identified as the worst culprit: 'Radio is a machine producing absolute verbal noise. The content hardly matters any more.'[80] This is the dark side of 'the medium is the message', expressed well before Marshall McLuhan's theorisation of the broadcast media, and it can spur Picard to melodramatic conclusions: 'Wireless sets', we are informed, 'are like constantly firing automatic pistols shooting at silence.'[81] Given technological innovation in the interim, we can now add a host of other entities which are also shooting at silence, and Picard's warning that '[i]t is as though the last residuum of silence were to be destroyed[.] . . . The great

cities are like enormous reservoirs of noise', rings even more true now than it did in his own day.[82] The 24/7 culture manifestly has no use for silence.

The book can seem like a lament for silence in the face of its systematic erosion in an advanced modern culture. Even so, the author does not completely despair, reminding us of silence's elemental quality, something that cannot be eradicated because it transcends human power. Picard can make humanity seem very inconsequential in comparison to silence: 'sometimes all the noise of the world today seems like the mere buzzing of insects on the broad back of silence.'[83] Silence, ultimately, will prevail, which the more doom-laden predictions of global warming also suggest is a likely scenario for our world – although obviously not with the same sense of vindication or relish that Picard feels.

Picard interestingly prefigures a range of modern debates in his defence of silence. The radical ecology movement, for example, with its Gaia concept, can sound very similar, with its call for a return to a supposed lost state of innocence when we lived in harmony with the planet and were not despoiling it or depleting its resources. Picard's arguments imply this is what he wants too, to return to a state when silence was 'taken for granted, as something as natural as the sky above or the air we breathe.'[84] By losing touch with silence, by trying to drown it in the cacophony of modern civilisation, it is almost as if we have lost touch with being itself (there are definite echoes of Heidegger's theories of being here[85]), and we always need to remember that '[s]ilence was there first, before things.'[86] Silence was also there before humanity, and it will be there after us, certainly in terms of the individual life: 'Man lives between the world of silence from which he comes and the world of the other silence to which he goes – the world of death.'[87] Silence is not an entirely benign phenomenon, therefore; it also represents the darker side of our experience, our fear of extinction. Above all, silence merits our respect; but that is precisely what Picard feels it is not receiving in today's world order where noise is so aggressively promoted. We can only lose if this trend is allowed to continue. 'Happiness and silence belong together', he warns us, 'just as do profit and noise',

showing himself well aware of how the commercial sector has appropriated noise in our culture.[88]

For anyone interested in the concept of silence Picard's is a fascinating and eminently quotable work, full of intriguing aphorisms which invite reflection and discussion. On the critical side, it has to be said that the argument tends towards the high-flown, and often has a New Age feel to it that can becoming grating to those of a sceptical turn of mind. Whether silence really is a living entity of the kind pictured by Picard is open to dispute, although he is not the first to link it to phenomena such as divinity and death – nor, presumably, will he be the last. He clearly cares deeply about silence, however, and the book remains one of the most important and original contributions to the literature of silence, whether one agrees with the metaphysical slant adopted by its author or not.

Picard's work, as I have said, bridges theology and philosophy in its concern to re-establish a fruitful relationship between humankind and silence, even if silence remains a law unto itself. For all Picard's attempts, however, silence remains beyond humankind, something which outstrips our powers – and most probably our understanding too. Philosophers are no less interested than their religious counterparts in what transcends our understanding, the 'unsayable' as it has been dubbed, and have developed various strategies to deal with this which we shall now go on to consider.

5
Where Silence Matters: Philosophy

'What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence:'[1] philosophers have long been fascinated by silence, which can be interpreted, as it is here in Wittgenstein, as the antithesis to logic or argument, or as the principled refusal to enter into debate. This is silence as response, although as we shall go on to discuss, philosophers have been much exercised as well by what silence represents in conceptual terms. Wittgenstein further claims that the point of philosophy is that it 'leaves everything as it is', suggesting yet another passing over in silence.[2] For this philosopher, philosophy has no political role. Philosophical concerns have already been touched on in the context of religion. For Buddhist thinkers like Nagarjuna, as we have found, silence is the only proper reaction to metaphysical questions (which are essentially unresolvable), and there is a prefiguring in his work of later themes in Wittgenstein in this regard. Silence can be perceived, therefore, as a positive phenomenon in philosophical discourse: a deliberately engineered absence putting a particular debate in a new light, and forcing us to reconsider our assumptions and objectives. That would also be the positive interpretation of the use of silence in literature, as in the work of Samuel Beckett, that it opens up a new perspective on the world around us by what it fails to say. The tendency in post-structuralist thought to hunt for gaps (aporia), which are taken to invalidate philosophical arguments, is similarly motivated. In such

gaps, neither language nor reason can help us, which opens up the prospect of silence – but this is silence as a prelude to a new level of understanding.

Philosophy concedes there are things about which we can only remain silent, things that are simply inexplicable, although it has developed various strategies to deal with this state of affairs. Since Wittgenstein especially there has been intense interest in the philosophical community in the realm of the 'unsayable', a recognition that there are limits to thought, rationality, even to the human imagination, which must be respected. But the unsayable is there beforehand in philosophical history. Rather like silence to speech, the unsayable forms the backdrop to the world of philosophical discourse, and also like silence this can be seen in a positive light, giving us a clearer sense of ourselves and what it means to be human. Knowing when philosophy has to remain silent and what that silence represents helps us to focus on where philosophy can make a real contribution to human affairs.

Talking about the Unsayable

Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* is concerned to demarcate philosophy's field of enquiry, identifying what philosophers should concentrate their attentions upon, and what can count as legitimate topics for the discipline:

> The correct method in philosophy would really be the following: to say nothing except what can be said, i.e. propositions of natural science – i.e. something that has nothing to do with philosophy – and then, whenever someone else wanted to say something metaphysical, to demonstrate to him that he had failed to give a meaning to certain signs in his propositions. Although it would not be satisfying to the other person – he would not have the feeling that we were teaching him philosophy – *this* method would be the only strictly correct one.[3]

Metaphysics is separated from philosophy, breaking a long tradition going back to antiquity, although Wittgenstein does not deny that metaphysical issues continue to be of interest to humankind, just

that they have no place within philosophical enquiry. Such issues do not admit of logical solutions ('[t]he world is the totality of facts' for this philosopher[4]), with Wittgenstein asserting that,

> The solution of the problem of life is seen in the vanishing of the problem. (Is not this the reason why those who have found after a long period of doubt that the sense of life became clear to them have been unable to say what constituted that sense?).[5]

Religious theorists often say very similar things, that spirituality cannot as such be described, for example, or epiphanies reduced to everyday language. The intensity of such experiences is taken to transcend expression. The realm of feeling is not governed by logic and has to be understood in a different way; as Wittgenstein insists, these are 'things that cannot be put into words'; instead '[t]hey *make themselves manifest*'.[6] We must pass over such things in silence, but that does not mean they do not continue to exercise us internally. Nor does it mean, as Wittgenstein himself accepts, that those so exercised will be satisfied with such a narrow approach to what *they* still take to be philosophical problems. Philosophers of religion, as a case in point, will hardly be willing to follow Wittgenstein's recommendations and drop metaphysics as an area of professional enquiry.

Wittgenstein helps to initiate what has been called a 'critical turn . . . toward negativity and the "unsayable" ' in recent thought.[7] In their Introduction to a collection of essays on the topic, Sanford Budick and Wolfgang Iser make the point that Wittgenstein's closing remarks in the *Tractatus* do anything but represent the final word about what lies beyond our understanding, arguing instead that,

> far from relieving us of the burdens of the unsayable, Wittgenstein charges us with a double responsibility. . . . Once we have encountered the limits of the sayable, we must acknowledge the existence of 'unsayable things' and, by means of a language somehow formed on being silent, articulate that which cannot be grasped.[8]

Once we recognise that a realm of unsayable exists, we find ourselves talking about it and speculating about it, with all the paradoxes this involves. Wittgenstein's admonition to maintain silence

indeed does not satisfy. We develop, as the title of Budick and Iser's collection puts it, 'languages of the unsayable' to deal with the situation, rather as has been done already with 'negative theology', but whether this brings us any closer to an understanding of what lies beyond speech is another matter: 'one cannot speak for the unsayable', as they warn us.[9] What we end up with is yet another complicated dialectic between speech and silence, recalling that we discovered at work in Quakerism.

Deconstruction and the Unsayable

Much of Jacques Derrida's writings revolve around what cannot be said or expressed (or should not be, because it is making claims that cannot be substantiated). His essay in the Budick–Iser collection, *Languages of the Unsayable*, 'How to Avoid Speaking: Denials', is a case in point. There, we find Derrida wrestling at some length with the problem of how he can speak about negative theology, a topic with a mystery at its heart: a divinity lying beyond human comprehension that can be defined only by what it is not (an approach much used in medieval philosophy). The sheer elusiveness of the subject of enquiry demands an unconventional approach: 'To avoid speaking, to delay the moment when one will have to say something and perhaps acknowledge, surrender, impart a secret, one amplifies the digressions.'[10] Derrida's philosophical method, deconstruction, is very much a matter of amplifying digressions to demonstrate that one can never reach a final understanding of any topic; that meaning in any definitive sense always evades us. Deconstruction consistently shows us how language inevitably must fail us on this score, and Derrida delights in pointing out the many gaps that exist in our discourse – gaps that we cannot prevent occurring no matter how hard we may strive.

Derrida feels obliged to engage with the problem of negative theology because many commentators see correspondences between it and deconstruction; claiming of his work that, as Derrida paraphrases it, 'You prefer to negate; you affirm nothing; you are fundamentally a nihilist, or even an obscurantist; neither knowledge nor

even theology will progress in this way'.[11] This is a criticism Derrida wants to reject, although many will feel that his arguments only succeed in muddying the waters. Deconstruction remains just as elusive to most readers, but its technique of amplifying digressions has a useful philosophical purpose nevertheless in demonstrating just how fluid meaning can be in all our discourses. Viewed from this perspective, deconstruction is a practical illustration of how meaning shifts and of how there is always something missing from our statements ('full presence' as Derrida puts it). What we want to say is, quite literally for a deconstructionist, unsayable: there are always gaps in our language use that no rational argument can resolve. Presumably there is little we can do but pass over these in silence too. Derrida succeeds in showing us the limits of rational argument in this respect, which might be why deconstruction is sometimes described as an anti-philosophy, concerned to point out what philosophy cannot do rather than what it can. (That is, of course, a traditional pastime of sceptics, and Derrida clearly merits that description.)

Derrida is another thinker to raise doubts about the value, or even the possibility, of criticism and critical theories. Like Sontag he sees such theories as forcing the artwork to say what the theory wants it to; in effect, of knowing beforehand what an analysis of the work will find. If you start with a belief in the primacy of class struggle, for example, as Marxists do, then that is what the artwork will be made to reveal, no matter how much ingenuity it might take on the part of the analyst to prove the point. Everything becomes grist to the mill: the theory cannot be shown to have gaps in its application and must always produce the goods. Equally, if you start with an assumption that there is a 'deep structure' to all artworks, indeed to all cultural phenomena – as structuralism, a particular target of Derrida, does – then you will invariably find it there. As Derrida rather witheringly puts it in one of his most famous attacks on structuralism in the essay 'Force and Signification':

> Thus the notion of an Idea or 'interior design' as simply anterior to a work which would supposedly be the expression of it, is a prejudice: a

> prejudice of the traditional criticism called *idealist*.. . . The structure thus was a receptive one, waiting, like a girl in love, ready for its future meaning to marry and fecundate it.[12]

In other words, structuralists assume there is a deep structure present in every artwork, almost like a natural law, waiting to be identified by the perceptive critic, with the writer becoming a mere vessel for a mysterious outside force working through him or her. (Language speaks through us, for the hard-core structuralist.) For Derrida, this is tantamount to denying there is any such thing as creativity, and the major point about writing in this thinker's view is that it is a journey into the unknown, the creation of a new state of affairs: that is its principal justification. It could never be as predictable an exercise as structuralists seem to imply it is by their analyses; you never know where you are going to end up, never mind how your words will be interpreted.

The structuralist ethos also means that the critic is taking on a very elevated role in describing what works of art mean, becoming an indispensable link between the creator and the consumer. Derrida, on the other hand, claims that language is so imprecise, or resonant with echoes of other contexts, that meaning can never be pinned down. The latter is always in a state of flux, being interpreted and reinterpreted by every reader of fiction, for example, such that new meanings are constantly being created – a process with no apparent end. This makes Derrida very sceptical about criticism, which in his eyes can never have any pretensions towards being definitive, no matter how much the critic may protest.

Nevertheless, Derrida does produce his own version of criticism, although his efforts in this direction make extensive – to some, deeply irritating – use of amplifying digressions, to demonstrate just how difficult it is to say anything meaningful about works of art. Thus, in *The Truth in Painting*, we find him taking a simple observation, by a hypothetical acquaintance, 'I am interested in the idiom in painting', and obscuring it by a barrage of preliminary questions:

> Does he mean that he is interested in the idiom 'in painting', in the idiom itself, for its own sake, 'in painting' (an expression that is in itself strongly

> idiomatic; but what is an idiom?)? That he is interested in the idiomatic expression itself, in the words 'in painting'? Interested in words in painting or in the words 'in painting'? Or in the words ' "in painting" '? That he is interested in the idiom in painting, i.e., in what pertains to an idiom, the idiomatic trait or style (that which is singular, proper, inimitable) in the domain of painting, or else – another possible translation – in the singularity or the irreducible specificity of pictorial art, of that 'language' which painting is supposed to be, etc.?[13]

The hypothetical acquaintance would more than likely be reduced to silence by Derrida's response, which in a more general sense is the latter's objective: to deflect critical analysis, in our normal understanding of the term, by showing how language prevents us from saying anything precise by multiplying digressions as it goes. Even the simplest statement is not immune from the process Derrida identifies, so that we are never really able to interpret works of art, except in the most personal and momentary fashion. Deconstruction is the enemy of generalisation. Sontag wants us to avoid interpretation; Derrida, on the other hand, demonstrates its impossibility.

If you are persuaded by Derrida's arguments, then critical silence seems to be the logical outcome. Better to refrain from criticism altogether than to engage in what is ultimately a pointless exercise, that is the conclusion we are being urged to reach.[14]

Lyotard and the Unrepresentable

Jean-François Lyotard is also very concerned with what lies beyond language and understanding, dubbing this the unrepresentable. He considers it the duty of thinkers and creative artists to make us aware that the unrepresentable exists, while refraining from trying to represent it as such. One of his criticisms of modernism as an artistic movement is that it attempts to do just that: represent the unrepresentable, even if this is only in the sense of evincing a nostalgia for an assumed lost unity in human existence (a unity that never existed in Lyotard's opinion). Lyotard insists that we recognise limitations to our thought and imagination. The realm of the sublime that lies

beyond human comprehension always has to be borne in mind, even if we can never represent it (we shall return to the subject of the sublime in Chapter 8). This is something else that we are obliged to pass over in silence, although with Lyotard there is not the sense that there is in Wittgenstein that there can be a 'vanishing of the problem'. Lyotard remains very exercised by the sublime, with the need to 'acknowledge the existence of "unsayable things" ', as Budick and Iser have it, and that is what he looks for in art in particular. He finds this in the work of, amongst others, Marcel Duchamp.[15]

Lyotard's arguments against what he dubs 'development' are also interesting in this context, since they call for a wholesale reconsideration of the value we attribute to technological progress. Although not specifically allying himself with the ecological movement, Lyotard's outlook, as presented in his book *The Inhuman*, is broadly consonant with their concerns. Development is assumed by its proponents, the techno-scientific establishment, always to be in humanity's best interests, and it pursues its aims regardless of the environmental impact (which, as we have observed, can also include very significant noise pollution). For Lyotard, development is the ideological paradigm of our time, and it has become its own justification. He argues that this will lead to an inhuman society, where human beings become ever more subservient to technology – perhaps to the point where humanity is superseded by machine culture and finds itself marginalised in the world. *The Inhuman* is a plea for development to be reined in, or at the very least to be more carefully monitored than it tends to be at present, and for the human scale to be returned to the forefront of our culture: in effect, for another principled refusal (the anti-globalisation movement has been asking for much the same of late). The arguments for development are simply to be elided, because the negative side-effects of the project far outweigh the benefits claimed by its advocates.

Kant and the Noumenal

We can go further back in philosophical history to another famous example of outlining a theory of the unsayable, in the work of

Immanuel Kant. Kant distinguished between the realm of the knowable (everyday empirical reality) and of the unknowable (the noumenal). We can have knowledge only of the empirical world around us, but not of the noumenal, which lies beyond the reach of the senses, although we can speculate about the latter. The noumenal is the domain of things-in-themselves, rather than things as they appear to us through the workings of our senses, and by definition it has to lie beyond our understanding. We can only understand what our senses reveal to us, although we can theorise about a world beyond that, as Kant proceeded to do in his major philosophical treatise, the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781, 1787).

Kant also theorised about a realm of the sublime, for which our concepts completely break down. We can have no understanding of what infinity means, for example, because it transcends our imaginative power, being literally inconceivable in its greatness or incomparable with anything that we can know or experience directly:

> If . . . we call anything not alone great, but, without qualification, absolutely, and in every respect (beyond all comparison) great, that is to say, sublime, we soon perceive that for this it is not permissible to seek an appropriate standard outside itself, but merely in itself. It is a greatness comparable to itself alone.[16]

The sublime was to become a very popular notion amongst aesthetic theorists and creative artists in Kant's day, with the Romantic movement in particular being very taken by it, mainly through the work of Edmund Burke. In fact, the sublime becomes a paradigm instance of the unsayable (as it will also be for postmodernists like Lyotard),[17] involving phenomena such as the supernatural and the divine – topics much of interest to creative artists, as we might well imagine. When we go on to consider the role played by silence in literature in Chapter 8, we shall be looking at how the sublime fits into that tradition, particularly in the work of the Gothic novelists Ann Radcliffe, Charlotte Dacre, James Hogg, etc.

Phenomenology and the Bracketing of Arguments

Another way of passing over philosophical problems in silence is given to us by the phenomenological tradition, the technique known as bracketing. The method was devised by Edmund Husserl as a means of breaking the deadlock in arguments about finding a foundation, or starting point, for philosophical thought, without having to get caught up in an infinite regress (for there to be an origin there has to be the origin of an origin, and so on). Husserl's solution was self-consciously to opt out of the debate, invoking '*a certain refraining from judgment*' rather than becoming embroiled in the various arguments the debate itself had inspired.[18] (Wittgenstein was even more direct in dealing with this problem, simply asserting that philosophy 'cannot give any foundation' to discourses, giving us yet another topic on which to be silent.)[19] Our 'natural attitude', as Husserl put it, is to accept the existence of the world around us; there is a '*general positing*' of that world on our part.[20] While we can choose to call the existence of that world into question (as René Descartes initially did in his philosophical enquiries), that was for Husserl a special kind of doubt: '*a certain annulment of positing*'.[21] He went on to say that when we entertain this possibility,

> *We do not give up the positing we effected, we do not in any respect alter our conviction* which remains in itself as it is as long as we do not introduce new judgment motives; precisely this is what we do not do. Nevertheless the positing undergoes a modification: while it in itself remains what it is, *we, so to speak, 'put it out of action,' we 'exclude it,' we 'parenthesize it.'* It is still there, like the parenthesized in the parentheses, like the excluded outside the context of inclusion.[22]

There is, in effect, a suspension of the problem.

Some critics have argued that bracketing is a form of philosophical cheating, since it simply evades complex problems rather than addressing them head on; that it is just too convenient a tactic.[23] Yet we can detect interesting links with religious thought in the technique. Nagarjuna's silence in the face of metaphysical problems is not all that dissimilar a reaction in its calculated refusal to choose

between competing positions. In each case there is a recognition that a final explanation probably never can be reached and that it is unhelpful to become bogged down in the debates surrounding the issue. Silence helps to free us from a particular intellectual impasse, although what that means differs between Nagarjuna and Husserl. For the latter it opens the door to yet more philosophical speculation, for the former it opens to its end.

Scepticism

The tradition of scepticism in Western philosophy from the Greeks onwards also encourages a form of silence with respect to our beliefs. The principle in this case is that we should suspend judgement on such matters, since they can never be proved conclusively. Sceptics are concerned above all to challenge dogmatism, which they point out is more an act of faith than of reason; taking something to be true – the existence of God, for example – which we can never know with certainty. All philosophical theories depend on some such assumption, of a principle being self-evidently true, for their starting-point, and sceptics have chipped away at these over the course of philosophy's history.[24] Scepticism itself has to face up to the problem, summed up in the observation that if all truths are relative, so must be the truth that truth is relative, but it has constituted a valuable internal critique of philosophy down the years, a corrective to some of the more grandiose claims made by the founders of philosophical systems.

What sceptics are saying is that there are issues on which it would be better to remain silent, especially when it comes to matters of belief. These involve assumptions that go beyond proof and in real terms can never be any more than conjectural ('sick men's dreams', in the typically uncompromising opinion of that arch-sceptic David Hume).[25] We may well choose to bracket such issues as phenomenologists do, but that does not resolve them; indeed, to a sceptic they are irresolvable and a constant impediment to philosophical discourse. Potentially, most philosophical theorising would have a question mark over it, and in extreme cases scepticism might appear

to be signalling the end of philosophy altogether. Without proper foundations it could seem impossible to say anything very much with confidence. While acknowledging the power of many sceptical arguments, most philosophers find ways of continuing debate none the less, but scepticism can be a very useful tool in countering the more dogmatic forms of religious belief, such as fundamentalism, that scourge of the current world political order. To reduce dogmatists to silence is the moving spirit behind the sceptical enterprise, and we would all benefit were that to happen. The effect of scepticism overall is to make us much more careful about what we say, as well as about our grounds for argument in general, and those are laudable aims in all areas of life, not just in philosophy.

Silence and Being

All the arguments we have been considering about the unsayable and the unrepresentable presuppose that silence is an entity, endowed with its own properties. We have seen that Picard took this line, conceiving of silence as something fundamental that pre-dated humankind and would outlast it, even though we as a species are abusing it. A more recent exploration of the nature of silence and its relationship to Being can be found in Bernard P. Dauenhauer's *Silence, the Phenomenon and its Ontological Significance*. For Dauenhauer, human discourse is inconceivable without silence, which involves an 'active performance' on our part.[26] There is an essential link between silence and what Dauenhauer calls 'utterances', which can cover a very wide range: 'An utterance is any performance employing systematically related signs, sounds, gestures, or marks having recognizable meanings to express thoughts, feelings, states of affairs, etc. In short, every self-initiated deployment of any sort of language is counted here as an utterance.'[27] But, critically, silence is not derivative from speech or human discourse (as so many philosophers have maintained), it has an identity of its own. In fact, Dauenhauer sees discourse as emerging out of silence: 'It is silence which prepares the way for discourse to appear and allots it room in which to appear.'[28] This is a philosopher for whom, it would seem, in the beginning was silence and then came the word.

Human discourse is crucially dependent on two types of silence: intervening and fore-and-after. Intervening silence is what appears between words, whether spoken or written, and has a structuring role, punctuating, but also pacing, all our utterances (including music, for example). Fore-and-after silence is what frames a complete utterance; the silence before and after the utterance is made. The active performance aspect is particularly evident in the after element: 'One incorporates or digests the just concluded utterance, in silence, into the complex web of his experience of previous and other possible utterances.'[29] This is another example of silence acting as a medium for thought and reflection, but we have to recognise that a whole package is involved: fore-silence, utterance containing intervening silence, after-silence. Utterance cannot function except within the combination of silences. This process takes place against a background of yet another form of silence, 'deep silence';[30] which prevails in, for example, liturgical contexts, such as Quaker worship. In each case the silence is a performance, and the performance is open to interpretation. The sheer diversity silence is capable of becomes apparent, with Dauenhauer arguing that 'each level and shape of discourse acquires and retains its identity only by virtue of the specific sorts of silence with which it is conjoined'.[31]

Dauenhauer makes some large claims for silence, arguing that 'it holds sway over the whole range of a person's performances', in effect throwing them into relief against that background such that we can see they have meaning and significance in their own right.[32] It is through our interaction with silence and discourse, but primarily the former, that we come to realise the nature of Being and humankind's place in it; to make sense of our world, even if this can only ever be partial (the world and Being continuing to unfold around us). As in Picard, silence is no mere adjunct to human existence, but an independent power to be reckoned with. The more we understand about silence, the more we shall understand about ourselves. Unlike Picard, however, Dauenhauer does not go into the issue of noise and its conflict with silence, and it is only when we do so that we can appreciate how vulnerable silence can be.

Silence in Non-Western Philosophy

While it is difficult to generalise about non-Western philosophy, since much of it is entwined with religious systems, some points nevertheless can be made. We have seen how, in Buddhism, Taoism and Hinduism, silence came to be identified with divinity, and also how it was often put forward as the appropriate response to the metaphysical problems generated by religion. The divine is the realm of the unsayable in these traditions, and brings human reason up against its limits, which is much the conclusion reached by those dealing with the unsayable in Western philosophy in recent years. The revival of interest in the sublime by postmodern theorists proceeds from a very similar conception of reason, for example, although such theorists do want to worry away at the problem more than their Eastern counterparts tend to.

Scepticism about doctrinal matters exists in non-Western religious systems as well, inspired by a philosophical outlook. For the first few centuries of Islam we can find doubts being raised about the claims of the prophet and the Qur'an, and dissenting voices can be noted in the history of Hinduism and Buddhism too (although given the latter's paucity of hard doctrine this is always more diffuse, and less threatening to the system of belief in general).[33] In every case the target is dogmatism, which is always offensive to the sceptical temperament, no matter what the cultural tradition may be. Again, those dogmatists are being enjoined to silence, on the grounds that their beliefs cannot be substantiated. Proselytisation simply cannot be defended.

Conclusion

The dialogue with the unsayable ensures a significant role for silence in the philosophical enterprise. It is against that silence that philosophy comes to define itself, and, as with religion, it is over metaphysical matters that silence really comes into its own as a concept. With philosophers, however, the objective is not to achieve a state of silence for its own sake, but to work out what philosophy can and

cannot do; what are its legitimate areas of enquiry and what must be avoided as beyond reason's scope. This is so even for sceptics, the most nitpicking of philosophy's many schools. Silence becomes part of philosophy's rhetoric; a technique for clarifying just what the problem is, rather than a condition of higher consciousness or bliss as it is for the religious. It is the role that speech theorists mark out for silence within discourse, and we shall follow up those ideas in Chapter 9.

Creative artists have demonstrated no less an interest in silence and its metaphysical implications, leading various thinkers to put forward an aesthetics of silence to explain the various functions silence performs within the artistic realm. Some key examples of such theories form our next topic.

6
The Aesthetics of Silence

Silence has such a wide range of applications in the arts that it invites classification and codification.

A particularly influential advocate of an aesthetics of silence is the critic Susan Sontag, who also develops what I have called 'a manifesto for critical silence' in her essay 'Against Interpretation'. Sontag's often highly provocative thoughts on silence deserve to be reassessed, as do those of another powerful advocate of an aesthetics of silence, the composer John Cage. Cage is much more than just a composer; some see him as a thinker above all else, with musical composition just an element in this, and his thoughts on silence have a much wider philosophical resonance that repay scrutiny.

Sontag and Critical Silence

'Against Interpretation' puts forward some trenchant anti-critical arguments, with Sontag arguing that interpretation gets in the way of our enjoyment of works of art by interposing a critical judgement between us and the work in question. This judgement is based on the notion, deeply mistaken as far as Sontag is concerned, that the most important thing about a work of art is its content:

> it is still assumed that a work of art *is* its content. Or, as it's usually put today, that a work of art by definition *says* something. ('What X is

saying is . . .,' 'What X is trying to say is . . .', 'What X said is . . .,' etc., etc.)[1]

It is because content is accorded this level of importance that the need for interpretation arises; 'the perennial, never consummated project of *interpretation*' that Sontag goes on to make clear she heartily despises.[2] Works of art, she claims, should be left alone, rather than analysed in terms of their content. The latter process 'tames the work of art . . . makes art manageable, conformable', thus robbing art of its power to affect us emotionally.[3] It is that emotional power that Sontag is most interested in; essentially that is the core of the aesthetic experience for this thinker.

Sontag is particularly harsh on the use of aesthetic theories, which she argues impose a scheme on artworks, making them say what theorists want them to say in order to validate their own particular theory. Such theorists look for hidden meanings in artworks, claiming that although they appear to be saying one thing, they are in fact saying something altogether different – something consonant with the theory in which they happen to believe. Particular cases in point are Freudian or Marxist interpretations, which start with preconceived ideas – the power of the subconscious, or the primacy of class struggle in human history, for example – and then process the artwork through these until they reach what they really want, 'the true meaning – the *latent content* – beneath'.[4] It could be argued that such an approach renders the artwork subservient to the theory, turning the former into merely an illustration of the latter. Artworks are reduced to the status of historical artefacts, of the same status as documents and objects from previous eras. This is essentially what we found Derrida complaining about, particularly in relation to structuralism, leading him to advocate the cause of critical silence.

Feminist theorists engage in a similar exercise, treating works as sites of exploration for their beliefs, and judging them positively or negatively in terms of how they fit those beliefs. For Sontag, to act in this way is to do violence to the artwork, and she reveals herself to be deeply suspicious of the entire critical enterprise. Sontag speaks for a school of thought, with its origins in Romanticism, which

considers silence to be the appropriate attitude to adopt towards a work of art, because art is of a higher order of creation, transcending everyday concerns. Art takes on something of a divine character from this perspective, lying beyond mere explanation which can never do justice to its power. Criticism cannot aspire to the artistic level of imagination for someone like Sontag, who claims that '[w]e must learn to *see* more, to *hear* more, to *feel* more', rather than to understand more.[5] Critical interpretation for her, in a phrase particularly wounding to the professional critic (and academics in the humanities in general, come to that), is 'the revenge of the intellect upon the world'.[6] Again, there is a distinct bias towards the emotions, with thought being treated as something suspect.

Sontag believes criticism should be reduced to issues of form only, and does her best to marginalise artistic content and undermine the project of critical interpretation. She is undoubtedly overzealous in her arguments on this score. Human beings are naturally interpretively inclined creatures, disposed to look for patterns everywhere and to search for meaning and significance in terms of a larger scheme, whether that be socio-political or metaphysical. Other modern theorists, like Roland Barthes, have also emphasised the key role of the consumer in creating the work of art, arguing that such a work does not properly exist until its audience starts to interpret it through its own concerns: 'Classic criticism has never paid any attention to the reader; for it, the writer is the only person in literature. . . . [W]e know that to give writing its future, it is necessary to overthrow the myth: the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author.'[7] The notion that we can dispense with interpretation entirely is extreme, especially when it comes to literary activity. This is the weakest link in this argument (it is hard to see how we can reduce words to form only), although Sontag does have a point to make concerning professional criticism, which sometimes can be overzealous itself in forcing artworks to conform to theoretical norms. Modern criticism has made extensive use of critical theories, and there may be an argument here about a profusion of critical noise drowning out art, giving us a surfeit of idle talk about the subject – worse yet, idle talk claiming to have the final answer about

what the artwork is *really* saying. Critics perhaps need to remember the Quaker maxim of 'let your words be few' when they do engage in interpretation.

Sontag: An Aesthetics of Silence

In an essay of the same name, Sontag outlines an 'aesthetics of silence' in modern art and thought, whereby artists and thinkers engage in 'exemplary renunciations of a vocation'.[8] As cases in point, she instances Arthur Rimbaud, Ludwig Wittgenstein and Marcel Duchamp, all of whom opted out of their chosen professions and followed other lines of work or activity for long periods (gun-running, hospital portering and chess, respectively). Sontag contends there is something noble, indeed liberating, in decisions of this kind, at least if they are made by obvious geniuses:

> to be a victim of the craving for silence is to be . . . superior to everyone else. It suggests that the artist has had the wit to ask more questions than other people, and that he possesses stronger nerves and higher standards of excellence.[9]

Clearly, it is silence as a response that we are dealing with in the case of Rimbaud, Wittgenstein and Duchamp.

Sontag emphasises the dialectical quality of silence: the fact that it only has meaning within a context that contains standard discourse: 'Silence never ceases to imply its opposite and to depend on its presence. . . .. Silence remains, inescapably, a form of speech.'[10] All silences have to be broken at some point, even totally silent Quaker meetings stop after their allotted span of an hour and normal life resumes. The silence within the meeting gains its powerful effect through comparison to the noisy world on either side, by dint of being a temporary relief from that insistently encroaching world. Sontag is sceptical of all attempts to renounce art completely on a similar basis, arguing that the silence being sought for is only meaningful when compared to continuing artistic activity elsewhere. Ideas like silence and emptiness are, she contends, 'boundary notions', which have a rhetorical function.[11] Deployed self-consciously within art, they become ways of

making the audience perceive the artistic context in question in a different way; they 'sketch out new prescriptions for looking, hearing, etc.' (This will certainly apply when we consider the ideas of John Cage below).[12] The sheer reduction of detail within artworks, 'impoverished art' as Sontag describes it (citing figures like Beckett as an example of how this works in practice), helps us better to understand what actually is there, she suggests.[13]

Since Sontag wrote this essay a new movement, minimalism, has come into being, which trades on precisely that notion. Impoverishment here is taken to concentrate the audience's attention, as in the repeated notes and rhythmic patterns of the music of the early Steve Reich or Philip Glass, where minute changes of emphasis can have a disproportionate emotional power because of the spareness of the context; Reich's percussion work *Drumming* (1971) is a particularly telling example. Breaking a monotonous pattern can have much the same charge as breaking the silence in Quaker worship.

Sontag regards silence as one way of dealing with a problem that all creative artists now have to face: the sheer quantity of art that exists, accumulated from earlier eras. Under those circumstances it can be hard to find one's own voice: 'It's scarcely possible for the artist to write a word (or render an image or make a gesture) that doesn't remind him of something already achieved'.[14] Silence is one reaction to that compromised state. For such artists silence can appear to be liberating, although Sontag has some doubts about this:

> Silence is a strategy for the transvaluation of art, art itself being the herald of an anticipated radical transvaluation of human values. But the success of this strategy must mean its eventual abandonment, or at least its significant modification.[15]

Which is to say that the gesture of giving up art can mean something only if art itself still exists and is still being practised. Silence's value is always comparative.

Sontag notes several uses for silence in our personal lives: to signify the renunciation or completion of thought, for example, or to create space for thought to take place. In a world that is saturated by language, silence can be a positive response. She echoes Huxley in

her dislike of idle talk, asserting that this leads to 'a devaluation of language', and arguing that 'as the prestige of language falls, silence rises'.[16] Art's role is to encourage the creation of as much silence as possible, in the hope that language can regain some of the power it has lost in a media-dominated world. The point is to overcome the 'false (language-clogged) consciousness' that we have developed.[17] Sontag believes we are afraid of silence in much the same manner that we are afraid of the void: language becomes a means of filling up space so that the void is kept at bay. Art that is 'busy' performs a similar function, trying to distract us from our fears of being exposed to silence or emptiness. In Sontag's view, however, it is time to cultivate silence if we are to rescue language from the massive devaluation it has suffered in our culture.[18]

For all her advocacy of silence, Sontag nevertheless identifies some dangers in its use in modern art. She asserts that silence takes two forms in contemporary artistic practice: 'loud and soft'.[19] The former involves an apocalyptic outlook, conceiving art, and possibly our entire culture, to have become exhausted, beyond repair; the latter is more a case of remaining reticent about such problems, although ultimately it just as pessimistic about our prospects as are the loud voices. Her own solution to the problem of where silence fits into artistic practice is to recommend the adoption of irony: 'it could be argued that silence is likely to remain a viable notion for modern art and consciousness only if deployed with a considerable, near systematic irony'.[20] In other words, art should have 'a certain playful quality' that prevents it from becoming portentous and further alienating its audience (as much modern art unquestionably contrived to do over the course of the twentieth century).[21] How far into the future such an attitude can be maintained is, she admits, an open question; but for the time being silence has an extremely important cultural role to play in this thinker's opinion.

Sontag's argument is provocative, and I would contest many of the points she makes. I am not convinced that language is quite as devalued as she claims, for example, and every new generation finds new means of expression that help to revitalise language use, although there is no denying that advertising and political discourse

can have a distorting effect on language and meaning, as she rightly claims. If one wanted to defend Steiner's criticism of the 'retreat from the word' in modern art that would be one of the most productive lines of argument to pursue: every generation does not feel itself as much a prisoner of past practice as Sontag is suggesting. Steiner implies that a retreat from the word is an act of bad faith, and that is an assessment which should at least be considered. If we accept that the artist has an important social role to play, is this best served by a retreat from the word? Or does this just confuse to the general public? Sontag perhaps underestimates how often the latter is the effect of deliberate silence on the author's part. How well the public can be made to understand the aesthetics of silence is another issue which needs to be addressed.

There is also an elitist aspect to much of Sontag's analysis, which is largely weighted towards high art and the concerns and decisions of 'geniuses'. But her analysis is also very perceptive in the way it identifies a positive role for silence within our culture, and establishes the need for serious debate over an aesthetics of silence. The implications of such an aesthetics go well beyond the realm of the arts. Silence is seen to be a necessary complement to discourse in general, with a distinctively therapeutic effect that is worth cultivating for the social good. We have to recognise that this works both ways of course, and that what we should strive for is a balance between noise and silence. It is the threat to that balance from the world of noise that Sontag is engaged by, and that is why she becomes such an interesting source for the thesis propounded in this book, despite the weak points in her argument. Given the current ascendancy enjoyed by the aesthetics of noise, Sontag's campaign for silence well deserves updating. A retreat from the word may be socially and politically contentious, but a retreat from noise certainly is not.

Cage and the Aesthetics of Silence

John Cage also has some very provocative things to say about silence, and an aesthetics of silence certainly can be extracted from

his works. Silence is an abiding concern of this artist, it is even the title of one of his volumes of writings, *Silence: Lectures and Writings*.[22] Cage's ideas on silence are tied up with his belief in Zen Buddhism, and he discounts the idea of his music having an objective, a specific message to impart to its audience. There is, for instance, his text written for a programme booklet for a performance of the Living Theatre in New York, which includes the lines: 'nothing is accomplished by writing a piece of music, nothing is accomplished by hearing a piece of music, nothing is accomplished by playing a piece of music'.[23] There are clear echoes here of such thinkers as Nagarjuna, with Cage revealing himself to be, in the words of one commentator, an artist with a 'consistent commitment to a Zen music of purposelessness and absence of thought'.[24] This will not be to everyone's taste, but he remains an intriguing figure whose ideas merit exploration.

Cage's *Lecture on Nothing* is an excellent illustration of both his Zen principles and his conception of silence:

> I am here, and there is nothing to say. If among you are those who wish to get somewhere, let them leave at any moment. What we require is silence; but what silence requires is that I go on talking. . . . But now there are silences and the words help make the silence. I have nothing to say and I am saying it and that is poetry as I need it. This space of time is organized. We need not fear these silences – we may love them.[25]

The lecture is organised like a musical composition – 'This is a composed talk'[26] – with large spaces between many of the words and punctuation marks (not reproduced here), which presumably signal the interaction of silence and noise. The lecture ends with the typically Zen sentiment: 'All I know about method is that when I am not working I sometimes think I know something, but when I am working, it is quite clear that I know nothing.'[27] (Just to mystify the audience further, Cage had prepared six answers for the first six questions in the discussion scheduled to follow the lecture, which he gave regardless of what questions were asked, the first being, 'That is a very good question. I should not want to spoil it with an answer.'[28] He notes drily that the second time the lecture was

delivered the audience worked out what was happening after just two questions, and let the discussion peter out.)

Cage also wrote a *Lecture on Something*, which, as we might expect by now, contains much the same sentiments as the *Lecture on Nothing*: 'This is a talk about something and naturally also a talk about nothing.'[29] From a Buddhist perspective the opposite always applies. Cage goes on to insist that 'no silence exists that is not pregnant with sound', reinforcing Sontag's point that '[s]ilence remains, inescapably, a form of speech'.[30] In each case it is the interdependence of silence and noise that is being emphasised. Yet for all his obsession with silence, Cage does not believe it exists in any absolute sense. 'Wherever we are, what we hear is mostly noise. When we ignore it, it disturbs us. When we listen to it, we find it fascinating.'[31] As Cage discovered in Harvard University's anechoic studio, even when we do our best to eradicate all extraneous sources of noise, we are left with the noise of our own heartbeats and pulses. It would be more correct to say that, for Cage, silence is the condition where there is no organised noise, although the decibel level would need to be taken into account in such cases. A heart beating in an anechoic room is hardly the same thing as standing in the middle of a raging storm with the wind howling round you.

Whether *all* noise is as fascinating as Cage suggests is another question. It depends on the context, and, crucially, whether it is organised or not. A storm can be very fascinating indeed, but an all-night party next door when you're trying to sleep rarely counts as such. Cage isn't as specific as he might be about this kind of distinction, but his comments go some way towards explaining what motivated him to write *4′ 33″*, a work which we shall discuss again in chapter 7 when we consider silence in the arts in general. The rationale behind Cage's aesthetics of silence, paradoxically, is to make us more sensitive to noise – the noise that is all around us in the world at every moment of our lives. The subtlety of Cage's thinking comes through when we compare him to Daniel N. Maltz, who, in a discussion on the role of silence in religious worship, asserts, 'silence is absolute while noisiness is relative. There's only one kind of silence but many kinds and degrees of noise.'[32] What Cage makes us realise,

on the contrary, is that there are indeed many kinds and degrees of silence, and that silence itself is highly relative. Silence as condition and silence as response, for example, always need to be distinguished from each other.

Conclusion

The point of the aesthetics of silence developed by both Sontag and Cage is to make us aware of the wider context in which silence exists. Each thinker emphasises the symbiotic relationship between silence and its opposite (speech, noise, sound, however we want to characterise it), and each seeks to keep the two in fruitful interplay. Even if there is agreement that absolute silence is an impossible condition, and that noise in some form will always be present to our consciousness, silence continues to be, at the very least, a useful term within artistic discourse – a 'boundary notion', in Sontag's phrase. It may be a less precise notion than we might have thought initially, somewhat fuzzy around the edges perhaps, but it is an invaluable resource for creative artist and critic alike. Next, we will consider how the notion of silence has become such a source of inspiration across the artistic community, and the various kinds and degrees of it that we can find being deployed there. The sheer fascination the concept holds for creative artists soon becomes apparent.

7
Where Silence Matters: The Arts

Silence plays a critical role in such arts as music, drama and film, as both structural device and source of themes. Thus, in Ingmar Bergman's film *The Seventh Seal*, Death is a largely silent figure who pointedly fails to respond to the hero's pleas for spiritual succour. Silence has traditionally been associated with divinity, but here it is a more problematical state which may indicate God is no longer taking an interest in mankind – or, even more alarmingly, perhaps does not exist at all. Structurally and thematically silence is a critical motif in this instance. The silence of the artist, his or her refusal to practise their craft as they have been trained to do, also calls for exploration to determine what such retreats, to use Steiner's terminology, signify. John Cage's infamous work for piano, *4′ 33″*, for example, involves a retreat from composition (there are no notes on the page for the soloist to play), forcing us as listeners to reconsider the act of artistic creativity as well as the relationship between sound and silence. Similarly, Samuel Beckett's characterless and plotless play *Breath* (see Chapter 8) constitutes a retreat from the word that asks us to re-examine not just the nature of theatre but the human condition itself. In such cases as these silence is clearly designed to have an effect on the audience; an absence that invites reflection and interpretation. Critical silence at the level of the individual is harder to achieve than Sontag believes or wishes, and paradoxically enough there are few things more calculated to prompt the

interpretive faculty into action than the presence of silence in an artistic context. Most of us will want to make this mean something – conceptually, thematically or symbolically.

There is a wide range of analogues of silence to be found in the art world – blank canvasses, black canvasses, etc. – and the aesthetic behind these various retreats deserves to be probed. What does it mean to refuse to compose in this area? Can there be art without artistic 'labour' being expended? Marcel Duchamp, amongst others, poses interesting questions in this regard, as we shall consider later. The issue of amplification asks to be addressed too, since its use in music has proved to be one of the major sources of noise pollution in the last few decades – rock and pop concerts, for example, especially when they occur in outdoor venues, as is increasingly the case during the summer. This is the other end of the spectrum from Cage's experiments and may seem like an attempt to abolish silence altogether. In that sense, it has to be viewed with considerable suspicion by all supporters of silence. Yet amplification can also be used very creatively in rock and jazz, which sets up another interesting confrontation between the politics of noise and the politics of silence.

Music and Silence

Silence is an integral component of musical composition. Cage's *4′ 33″* focuses our attention on this by presenting us with what initially appears to be an entirely silent 'composition'. On closer examination, however, *4′ 33″* emphasises both silence's critical role in the compositional process and its complexity as an aesthetic phenomenon. Although it is assumed to be a piece about silence, it is also, and perhaps even more, a piece about the nature of sound. *4′ 33″* reveals the all-pervasive quality of noise in our lives, and arguably no other composer has been as successful at making us realise this as Cage has: noise is always there in some form or other. Cage is exploring the interaction of the organised and the disorganised, but rather unusually it is silence alone that represents the organised element. The composer is in charge of the latter, but not of the background

noise: he can script the one, but not the other. As one commentator has remarked of Cage's handling of silence:

> He used it not simply as a gap in the continuity or a pause to lend emphasis to sounds, but in much the same way that contemporary sculptors were using open space, or 'negative volume' – as a element of composition in itself.[1]

Crucially for Cage, the use of silence introduces the notion of chance, since he is not in control of the context – and Cage lays great emphasis on the role of chance in our lives in general.

It is fair to say that a work like *4′ 33″* is more interesting from a conceptual point of view than as a musical experience, and it needs to be considered within the context of Cage's overall artistic aesthetic, which transcends the merely musical. Indeed, the German composer Arnold Schoenberg, founder of the controversial twelve-tone system of musical composition, who taught Cage briefly in the 1940s, referred to him as an 'inventor' rather than a composer. Cage's belief in Zen is to the fore in *4′ 33″*, giving us a work that says both nothing and something in its apparent purposelessness. Silence and chance are an ideal combination for Cage in this respect.

John Taverner is another modern composer with some very thought-provoking ideas about the role of silence in musical composition, expressed particularly in a series of interviews. Asked about the significance of silence in his music by his interviewer Brian Keeble, Taverner replied that there are two types of silence to be found there, one literal, the other more metaphysical. The literal refers to pauses and Taverner regards these as a standard structural element in his composition: 'Everything I write, in fact, has literal silence. The music just stops. I usually specify for how many seconds the silence should last last.'[2] As in the case of speech, silence is seen to be an integral part of musical language, to be deployed by the composer for rhetorical effect – either to create a sensation of release or to build up tension. We get the impression here, too, as we do in Max Picard, of silence being the norm, the constant backdrop against which all

human activity takes place – silence as a primeval entity we are situated within as human beings.

The other form of silence is more intriguing, with Taverner explicitly identifying it with spirituality:

> Then there is another kind of silence, which I connect to ikons. If you look at the very great ikons of the Byzantine period, you see angels transfixed as they gaze upon God. I've often thought: is it possible to produce that kind of ecstatic frozen petrified silence in music? I've certainly tried to do it in various pieces. This kind of silence one could almost take even further and say it was frozen or uncreated Eros, because it comes in the form of longing[.] . . . [I]t is the longing for God.[3]

Taverner's music is very much spiritually oriented, and he has embraced Orthodox Christianity, which has had a powerful impact on his life and work – hence the 'ikon' reference. Compositions like the choral piece *The Lamb* (1982) do communicate that 'frozen petrified' effect he is striving to achieve, and it has found a wide audience that identifies with its spiritual, and somewhat other-worldly, quality.

Given the spiritual significance he attaches to silence, it is not surprising that Taverner regards it as underpinning his art:

> [W]hen heard correctly I would say that even when music is sounding there is, or there should be, an implicit silence – certainly in my music. If there is no implicit silence, somehow the music is not doing what I want it to do.[4]

For someone like Taverner, silence is everywhere because God is everywhere. All human activities are taken to grow out of that divine silence. He can even find that spiritual dimension in the highly abstract music of Anton Webern, famous for his extremely terse compositions in the twelve-tone idiom: 'When I listen to his music I always sense what is beyond the notes. His silence seems to acknowledge another dimension so that there is a wonderful transparency in his music which somehow allows God to enter.'[5] The sheer brevity of Webern's works, some only a few seconds long, encourages such an interpretation, and they can give the impression

of having been sculpted with some difficulty out of a pervasive silence, however one conceives of the latter.

Amplification first came to prominence musically in the jazz world, particularly in relation to the guitar. Charlie Christian is credited with being the pioneer, bringing the electric guitar into the jazz mainstream in the 1940s when he was a member of the famous Benny Goodman band. Before that, the guitar had featured mainly as a somewhat anonymous member of the rhythm section in the big bands that were so popular at that time (although it was more prominent in blues music with its sparser instrumental framework, often comprising voice and guitar only). With Christian's lead, the guitar soon turned into a major solo instrument in its own right, and has continued to be so to the present day, although jazz guitarists in general tend to use a significantly lower level of amplification than their rock counterparts, being more concerned to retain a degree of subtlety in their playing: (Christian's sound has been described by one jazz historian as 'round and soft', for example.)[6] Volume is invariably the enemy of subtlety.

Another jazz instrument to have benefited from electrification has been the vibraphone, with Milt Jackson – mainly known for his work as a member of the Modern Jazz Quartet – one of its most accomplished exponents. Jackson developed a unique sound by slowing down the motor that drove the instrument, producing a more resonant, echoey tone. Again, however, the level of amplification is relatively low, with subtlety being a prized part of the player's repertoire.

Most instruments are amenable to being electrified, and various experiments have been made with brass and wind, such as trumpets and saxophones, over recent jazz history (the eccentric Rufus Harley even experimented with electric bagpipes at one point in his career). It is probably only with keyboard instruments (piano, organ), however, that these have become part of the standard jazz line-up alongside the guitar and vibraphone: amplification tends to have a deadening effect on brass and wind instruments, narrowing their expressive range considerably: a rather dull buzzy noise is often the

result. Jazz music is still mainly acoustic, although it does make use of microphones to reach larger audiences in concert halls and festivals. Yet it is unquestionably in rock music that amplification has had the greatest impact, with the guitar being very much to the fore. In effect, volume takes on an ideological role there, an expression of group identity and difference – and a particularly aggressive expression that is concerned to parade its power, in all senses of the term, publicly. Silence is certainly not part of the rock lexicon.

Silence in Art

Kasimir Malevich's *White Square on a White Ground* – part of a series called *White on White* (1918) – helped to establish what subsequently has become known as 'monochrome' painting. Its effect has reverberated throughout the art world since, creating what is in effect a sub-genre within painting, perhaps even a new aesthetic that might be dubbed, following Steiner, a retreat from composition.[7] The ground, after all, is merely the stage at which the canvas has been made ready to paint on, usually by means of white oil paint. After that, composition begins. Although that does occur in Malevich, the white square being added, it is done in such a way as to disguise the process and subvert the audience's expectations.

Malevich's stated goal in the Suprematist art movement that he founded was, as he proclaimed in his essay 'From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism' (1916), to 'free all our art from vulgar subject-matter' in order to achieve 'the pure art of painting'.[8] It is not too fanciful to identify that sense of purity in *White Square* as a painterly equivalent to silence, the aim being to remove all extraneous distractions to contemplation. For Malevich, this principled retreat from the portrayal of objects was a liberating experience for both artist and audience:

> Any painting surface is more alive than any face from which a pair of eyes and a grin jut out. . . . You may delight in the composition of a painting, but surely composition is the sentence of death to a figure condemned by the artist to an eternal pose.[9]

Composition is presented as a restriction on the imagination, with Malevich striving for a more intuitive approach to painting. *White Square on a White Ground* is a deliberate attempt to undermine the artistic establishment from an artist who could proudly assert that Suprematists '*have spat on the altar of art*'.[10] Whether or not one agrees with Malevich's polemic it is clear that we are being asked to reassess our approach to art, and indeed to aesthetic experience in general.

The painter who is often taken to be the first full-scale monochromist is Malevich's Russian contemporary Alexander Rodchenko, one of the leading figures of the Constructivist movement, who produced a series of paintings entitled *Pure Red*, *Pure Yellow* and *Pure Blue* in 1921. Constructivism sought to make art more scientific, in the belief that 'function, construction, technology, mathematics – these are the brothers of the art of our age'.[11] Monochromism was taken to exhibit all these concerns, and to set an example for artists of the future: 'It is expedient to paint all existing level surfaces in one colour without representing on them any form whatsoever, the level surface being itself a form.'[12] Rodchenko described his triptych as 'the last painting', and subsequently renounced painting for photography and design. Although he was to resume painting in the mid-1930s (most likely for politically expedient reasons), his sentiments at the time of the triptych are uncompromising about traditional artforms: 'When I look at the multitude of pictures I painted in the past I sometimes wonder what to do with them. . . . They are as unnecessary as a church building. No good for anything on earth.'[13] With ruthless logic, Rodchenko moves from composition to monochrome to silence.

Unsurprisingly, Rodchenko and his Constructivist colleagues later fell foul of the Soviet authorities when socialist realism became the official art style in the Soviet Union in the 1930s under Stalin's regime. What was wanted by the political establishment by this stage of communist development was heroic scenes of Soviet life rather than experiments in function, construction, technology and mathematics, and the Constructivist, hence also monochrome, tradition soon came to an end there, science being eclipsed by a very conventional realism driven by explicitly political motives.

Outside the Soviet Union the situation was different, however, and monochrome painting continued to flourish, particularly in America, in the work of Robert Rauschenberg, who in the 1950s produced several all-white and all-black paintings. The white paintings helped inspire Cage to write *4′ 33″*, so we can see some interesting crossover occurring between the arts at this point. Cage was to write admiringly of the paintings that they constituted 'airports for the lights, shadows, and particles'.[14] Robert Ryman is another artist who has exhibited all-white paintings, and Ad Reinhardt all-black. In each case the critical response has been to raise the issue of silence, of what the artist is choosing not to do, although that silence has been interpreted in a variety of ways. It has been said of Ryman, for example, that his concern is with light rather than subject-matter in the traditional understanding of the term:

> Light is ultimately the medium by which Ryman animates his paintings and endows them with incomparable radiance. In the sensitive harmony of tonal values, each pictorial element plays its own part, determined by its light-reflective quality. Like no other painter before him, Ryman uses light itself as material and turns its subtle scale of refraction into form.[15]

Using light as material is suggestive of the use of silence in music (as Cage had also implied), since it is the context in which artistic creation takes place rather than the subject matter itself. As Christel Sauer has remarked, Ryman is an artist whose 'conception of painting is . . . far removed from any aspect of content or subject matter', and that does recall Malevich's aesthetic.[16]

Ryman has used white extensively over a period of decades, although not always plain white. Sometimes the canvasses have a textured aspect that adds a degree of complexity to the basic idea. Sometimes, too, the colour can be off-white, which can give a sense of variation in the context of an exhibition of the artist's work. His *Phoenix Sequence, 1–8* (1978–9), for example, offsets the purity of the off-white surface with white fasteners on occasion (black on others for greater contrast), and summons up similar responses to Malevich's work in consequence.[17]

Arguably the most eloquent advocate of the monochrome ethos, however, is Ad Reinhardt, who, rather neatly for the subject of this study, turns out to have been a friend of Thomas Merton.[18] This artist wrote extensively on the aesthetic of monochrome paintings throughout his career, producing a series of these in various colours. It is for his black paintings, however, that he is probably best known, and he is now considered a major figure in the history of American art, largely on the basis of these. When the Museum of Modern Art in New York bought one of his black paintings in 1963, Reinhardt provided the following explanation of his objective in turning to black:

> As the most extreme, ultimate, climactic reaction to, and negation of, the (cubist, Mondrian, Malevich, Albers, Diller) tradition of abstract art, and previous paintings of horizontal bands, vertical stripes, blobs, scumblings, bravura, brushwork, impressions, impastos, sensations, impulses, pleasures, pains, ideas, imaginings, imagings, imaginations, visions, shapes, colors, composings, representings, mixtures, corruptions, exploitations, combinings, vulgarizations, popularizations, integrations, accidents, actions, texturings, spontaneities, ready-mades, stylizations, mannerisms, irrationalities, unawarenesses, extra- and unaesthetic qualities, meanings, forms of any traditions of pure, or impure, abstract-art traditions, my own and every one elses's.[19]

It is a comprehensive list, representing a rejection of just about everything that art has been associated with over the ages. The black becomes very symbolic, as if Reinhardt were trying to remove all trace of composition from the world, although he distances himself from the Malevichian method of doing so by citing the different connotations that black and white have in our culture:

> I suppose it began with the Bible, in which black is usually evil and sinful and feminine. I think a whole set of impositions have affected our attitudes towards white and black – the cowboy with the white hat and white horse, and the villain with the black gloves. And then the use of black all the way through the Bible, through Chaucer, Milton, Shakespeare, and a few others.[20]

While acknowledging such connotations, and recognising that his audience most likely will be conditioned to respond to black paintings through these, Reinhardt wants to emphasise the anti-compositional aspect of his own use of black: 'It's the negativeness of black, or darkness particularly, which interests me.'[21] He even rejects shiny black since the surface then reflects what is happening in the room, lending a compositional quality to the work despite the artist's intentions (exactly what Ryman wanted to happen with his white paintings, thus demonstrating the aesthetic range possible in monochrome). Reinhardt prefers matte black, so, we are forced to confront the negativeness in its starkest form. Only then can we achieve the detachment that he feels is appropriate to the artistic experience.

Drawing on Clive Bell, Reinhardt argues that artists should be striving to communicate the 'aesthetic emotion' that lies behind art, '[a]nd probably you could only define that negatively'.[22] It is a notion with echoes of negative theology, and it takes us once again into the realm of the unsayable: 'Darkness is pure non-being', in Reinhardt's cryptic formulation, but of course that is something we could never experience as such.[23] Colour and composition encourage interpretation, whereas Reinhardt is striving to move beyond that – much in the way of Sontag, in fact, with the blackness designed to offer as little scope to critics as possible (even if this does underestimate the ingenuity of the critical fraternity, which will rarely be defeated that easily).

The goal for Reinhardt is an art purified of all extraneous influences, 'art-as-art', as he calls it.[24] He speaks of wanting to make art 'purer and emptier', which certainly suggests an artistic equivalent to silence.[25] From that perspective, monochrome painting comes to be the ultimate form of artistic expression:

> The one work for a fine artist, the one painting, is the painting of the one-size canvas – the single scheme, one formal device, one color-monochrome, one linear division in each direction, one symmetry, one texture, one free-hand brushing, one rhythm, one working everything into one dissolution and one indivisibility, each painting into one overall uniformity and

> non-irregularity. No lines or imaginings, no shapes or composings . . . nothing that is not of the essence.[26]

The black paintings are a perfect example of this aesthetic creed, with nothing to deflect the viewer's attention from the purity of the conception – no 'noise', as it were, to get in the way. Reinhardt calls on his fellow artists to turn their backs on everything they have been taught, with the first four of his '39 Art Planks: Programs for "Program" Painting' recommending:

1. The re-obliteration of the horizontal band.
2. The re-voidance of the vertical stripe.
3. The re-debarment of line and edge, rough and clean.
4. The re-disappearance of contrast and color.[27]

Not much is left *but* monochrome painting after such a programme – particularly black monochrome, since even white is regarded as an unnecessary distraction by this artist. Reinhardt followed his own prescriptions to the extent that he produced nothing but black paintings in his last decade.

Reinhardt can sound quite elitist on occasion, very much in the tradition of high modernism with its often blatant lack of concern for the audience. Art should be 'more absolute and more exclusive' he remarks at one point, and his aesthetic has dated since his impassioned mid-twentieth-century defence of abstract art (although even the latter eventually proved too compositional for him, as his checklist above reveals).[28] The advent of postmodernism has led to a reassessment of abstraction, which is no longer held to represent the pinnacle of artistic achievement, as well as of the notion that art is a quintessentially elitist activity which we should find difficult and even alienating. As even one of Reinhardt's defenders feels moved to admit, 'his paintings are among the last indigestible manifestations of the traditional avant-garde', rendering him 'a virtually inaccessible artist' as far as the wider public is concerned.[29] Nevertheless, Reinhardt's black paintings do succeed in conjuring up a painterly analogue to silence, in some ways even more profound than Malevich's retreat into white where composition is still

at least residually in evidence, and he provides some thought-provoking justifications for his rejection of all traditional artistic forms and the compositional imperative generating them.

The common theme that runs through the monochrome tradition is a return to purity in art, with all the artists we have considered above wanting to consign composition to history. Donald Kuspit points out how Wassily Kandinsky's championship of abstract art in *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (1912) had equated abstraction with spirituality, and that meant in turn maintaining 'complete silence about the world'.[30] Reinhardt represents the logical extension of this idealisation of silence with his move to black, but the lack of distraction in any of the monochrome paintings, whatever the colour used, is capable of creating an effect of silence. We are aware of what has not been done by the artist as much as what has, and of the emptiness that precedes the appearance of the work of art. Although it is easy to mock this style of painting in the manner of Jasper Fforde's ultra-minimalist blank wall plus picture hook (see note 7), we could say that monochrome paintings are capable of exerting a calming effect on the viewer that recalls the experience of silence. This is particularly true of the white paintings, with Reinhardt's work, for all his claims to the contrary, perhaps conjuring up the more sinister side of silence – the void that so many of us fear.

A similar aesthetic might be noted at work in Marcel Duchamp's controversial *Fountain* (1917), which also features a retreat from composition in its 'ready-made' status (although it is worth noting that Reinhardt included ready-mades in the litany of artistic practices his black-painting aesthetic was designed to overcome). The artist's only involvement in this instance is to title the piece, originally a urinal, and present it for exhibition in a traditional gallery setting. There is no traditional artistic 'labour' taking place, thus subverting audience expectations. Duchamp carried his own retreat to its logical conclusion by ultimately giving up art entirely for chess in later life. Whether such silence is as powerful as *White Square*, Reinhardt's black *oeuvre* or *Fountain* itself is another issue – at some point the artist drops out of the public consciousness surely (no

balance is being struck between silence and artistic language in such cases). But one can see an aesthetic at play behind such extended retreats none the less: the refusal to exercise one's artistic abilities sends out a message to both the art world and the general public. Something is being said about artistic activity by not being said: at the very least we wonder why the artist has chosen to remain silent rather than to add his contribution to the body of art in the world. We assume a reason behind the decision. Whatever the artist does or does not do offers itself up for interpretation, especially when you reach a stage of fame such as Duchamp enjoyed. It is as if the silence is magnified by the reputation of the artist.

Silence has even cropped up as a theme in video art, as in Gillian Wearing's Turner prize-winning *Sixty Minute Silence* (1996), where a group dressed in police uniform was filmed posing for an hour, while trying to maintain the stillness and silence of a conventional portrait. Predictably, it was difficult to hold the pose for that length of time without any movement at all; as one critic has remarked, 'the video becomes an endurance test, for the spectator as much as for the participant'.[31] Apparently, at the end of the hour's filming one of the participants let out a loud cry in relief. One could argue that, like Cage, it is the incidental movement and noise that occur that become the point of the piece. Once again we are made aware of the all-pervasiveness of noise – plus, in this case, movement – in everyday life. Although again, like Cage, we might wonder whether the work would bear repeated performance.

Film and Silence

As we have noted with *The Seventh Seal*, silence can be a source of themes and a structuring device for the filmmaker. We shall go on to discuss Bergman in more detail below, but first we might briefly consider the case of silent film. Although film was a silent medium for several decades, this was because of technical limitations rather than an aesthetic choice on the part of the filmmaker. (After sound came in some filmmakers, like Charlie Chaplin, did try to retain the silent

ethos for aesthetic reasons, but this has never been more than a minority pursuit.[32]) Silent film is something of a misnomer anyway, since its makers strove to overcome the lack of sound through sub-titles, and cinema-owners through the use of live musical accompaniment (from piano through to orchestra in the larger venues). Such films do not therefore represent a retreat from words or music, just a different way of presenting the elements, and the experience of watching them is not necessarily very different from watching films today. Since sound became available, most filmmakers have opted for a musical background, so that there is very little silence as such in most films. There are exceptions, where silence is deliberately deployed – Bergman being a prominent example – but film is generally a multi-media experience, and no Hollywood blockbuster is complete without its elaborate musical soundtrack to underscore the action. The notion of film as Shock and Awe comes to mind with the latter.

The Seventh Seal is structured around a dialogue between the knight Antonius Block, just returned from a crusade to the Holy Land, and Death, with Death accepting the hero's challenge to play a game of chess for his life: 'The condition is that I may live as long as I hold out against you. If I win, you will release me. Is it agreed?'.[33] Death consents, and so the game begins. In one scene Death takes the place of the priest in a confessional box, and maintains silence in the face of some of Block's most anguished questions about his troubled faith, which is no longer sustaining him spiritually. When Death does deign to reply it is only to raise further doubts in the knight's mind:

> KNIGHT: I want knowledge, not faith, not suppositions, but knowledge. I want God to stretch out his hand toward me, reveal Himself and speak to me.
>
> DEATH: But he remains silent.
>
> KNIGHT: I call out to him in the dark but no one seems to be there.
>
> DEATH: Perhaps no one is there.[34]

Death is a brooding presence throughout the film, giving away little of himself or his plans, taunting Block rather than providing him with the answers he seeks: 'Don't you ever stop asking questions?'[35]

The knight cannot stop and is clearly in a state of spiritual distress, but no matter how desperate his entreaties to God are, no response at all is forthcoming:

> KNIGHT: From our darkness, we call out to Thee, Lord. Have mercy on us because we are small and frightened and ignorant. . . . God, You who are somewhere, who *must* be somewhere, have mercy upon us.[36]

One reading of the film is that it represents the estrangement of God and man, where the latter has to confront the frightening 'silence of God';[37] that is, the other side of silence compared to its revered status in the religions we dealt with in Chapter 4. The ending implies there is nothing but death, with that figure leading the knight and several of his acquaintances off in 'a solemn dance towards the dark lands'.[38] God remains stubbornly silent – or perhaps does not exist at all, which is the real fear underneath Bergman's early *oeuvre*. As so often with religion there is wide scope for interpretation where silence is concerned, with the anxiety and psychological insecurity that mark out Bergman's world standing in sharp contrast to the tranquillity that Buddhists can find in such a situation. If divine indifference is the best one can hope for, then the future can seem bleak indeed.

The title itself refers to the Book of Revelation: 'And when he had opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven about half an hour.' The critic Birgitta Steene has suggested that the film 'can be regarded as a visualization of that half hour during which man may prepare himself for the ultimate truth' (the film opens with the sound of a church choir, which is suddenly cut off to plunge us into silence), but whether that means anything more than the silence of death is a moot point.[39] When Block's squire Jons faces death, he brings out the ambiguity of the situation with his final phrase: 'I shall be silent, but under protest.'[40] This hardly sounds like someone expecting to meet his God (in fact Jons has been a notably sceptical voice throughout the film).

Silence has a critical role to play in many other Bergman films – one critic speaks of the feeling of 'deadly silence' in *The Hour of the Wolf* (1968), for example[41] – and it is interesting to note his response

to an interviewer who asked why he didn't become a writer rather than a filmmaker: 'When I was a child, I suffered from an almost complete lack of words. My education was very rigid; my father was a priest. As a result, I lived in a private world of my own dreams. I played with my puppet theatre.'[42] Bergman is implying that he has a special affinity with silence, and there is also an identification being made between silence and religion from an early stage in his life. He even made a film called *The Silence* (1963), whose original title was *God's Silence*, so this is clearly a subject that is close to his heart.

In *The Silence* a group of three travellers, two sisters and the young son of one of them, arrive in an unnamed central European country where they do not speak the language, cutting them off from communication with the locals. There is effectively a silence between them and the rest of the world (Bergman stated in an interview that he had sought 'to eliminate language' in the film[43]). As its original title suggests, this can be read as another example of God's silence towards humanity. The silence of this particular world is repeatedly emphasised by the filmmaker. In the opening shot the train the three characters are travelling on comes to a halt, and as the script describes it: 'There is no station, no signal, no one is walking about or meeting anyone. The plains are utterly still, unmoving.'[44] In the next scene, the boy, Johan, is looking out of their hotel window at the street below where two newspaper vendors are touting for custom in a bleak cityscape: 'These are the only sounds that disturb the oppressive silence' the script rather ominously records, going on to describe how,

> Down in the canyon of the street swarms of people move swiftly and silently. No honking horns, no clatter of heels or sudden laughter, no music out of the grotto of the bar. Only two hoarse voices at the corner of the street, one shrill, one shrieking; the other hoarse, penetrating.[45]

It is a powerful image of alienation, with the oppressive silence signalling a divide between the characters and others, and, by extension, from any real understanding of their place in the scheme of things. That oppressiveness is very characteristic of the use of silence in Bergman's films, where it rarely suggests a sense of peace or

divinity. Rather it conjures up a disturbing sense of the void, as if there really was no point to human existence: the obverse to the meaning of silence for the deeply religious. Another response to the latter fear that has been suggested by Norman O. Brown is more radical: 'Admit the void; accept loss forever.'[46] This returns us to the realm of metaphysics, and invites us to start re-examining silence in the manner of Picard; not as a threat, but as an entity in its own right (silence as primeval) that we simply have to come to terms with eventually.

We turn our attention next to literature, an artform where silence is particularly well represented across the range of concept, theme and symbol.

8
Where Silence Matters: Literature

Silence is a theme that runs through literary history, in poetry, novels and drama. We have already noted how in Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* the text itself goes silent – black pages, blank space, asterisks – when topics such as death come on the scene; that is, topics that go beyond rational understanding. Sterne's is a particularly inventive use of silence which we shall be analysing in more detail below, but the concept was also an integral part of the artistic manifesto outlined in James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, 'silence, exile, and cunning', where the creative artist was urged to follow his calling and maintain a position above mere politics.[1] Yet another form of refusal is to be noted. Silence also plays a central role in Joyce's writing method. His use of stream of consciousness in *Ulysses*, for example, can be viewed as an attempt to open up that part of ourselves that we normally keep silent, our inner thoughts; becoming a revelation of the unsaid in consequence.[2] The same can be asserted of all other authors who use the technique, such as Virginia Woolf, where we similarly find ourselves being given access to the inner life of individuals. Here, the politics of silence meets Freudian theory in an intriguing dialectical contest. We have also briefly considered how silence has fascinated poets, with many identifying silence with divinity, as in the case of Gerard Manley Hopkins. Ihab Hassan will argue that a turn to silence signals a shift from modernism to postmodernism in literature. Once

again, it is clear that silence can be both a source of inspiration to the creative artist and a structuring device, far more than a retreat from the word for retreat's own sake.

Poetry and Silence

Hopkins makes a clear connection between silence and divinity in his early poem *The Habit of Perfection* (1866), when he calls on '[e]lected silence' to be the basis of his spiritual training (Hopkins converted to Catholicism and joined the Jesuit Order in 1868):

> Shape nothing, lips; be lovely-dumb:
> It is the shut, the curfew sent
> From there where all surrenders come
> Which only makes you eloquent.[3]

The route to spiritual perfection is to be through denial of the senses, with the body strictly disciplined. Just as it is not necessary to speak, so we should not allow ourselves to be distracted by the visual or by our appetites:

> Be shellèd, eyes with double dark
> And find the uncreated light;
> This ruck and reel which you remark
> Coils, keeps, and teases simple sight.
>
> Palate, the hutch of tasty lust,
> Desire not to be rinsed with wine:
> The can must be so sweet, the crust
> So fresh that comes in fasts divine![4]

The individual must humble himself before God and concentrate his attention only on spiritual matters – nothing else is of any importance. Through silence and denial he will reach the proper condition for meditation and worship, in the manner recommended by the spiritual exercises of the Jesuit Order.[5]

If Hopkins calls on the believer to be silent to show his humility in *The Habit of Perfection*, he can also demonstrate an anxiety about

God's silence elsewhere in his work. In *Nondum* (1866) we find him beseeching God for a sign of his continued interest in humankind:

> GOD, though to Thee our psalm we raise
> No answering voice comes from the skies;
> To Thee the trembling sinner prays
> But no forgiving voice replies;
> Our prayer seems lost in desert ways,
> Our hymn in the vast silence dies.[6]

There is an edge of desperation to Hopkins' reflections in this poem, as if he fears God has deserted humanity for our many sins against him; not the least being our inability to worship him correctly:

> And Thou art silent, while Thy world
> Contends about its many creeds
> And hosts confront with flags unfurled
> And zeal is flushed and pity bleeds
> And truth is heard, with tears impearled,
> A moaning voice among the reeds.[7]

God's silence, it would seem, can be interpreted in radically different ways, with the quiet confidence of *The Habit of Perfection* contrasting sharply with the anxiety that radiates from *Nondum*. Silence always has that disturbingly ambivalent quality within a spiritual framework, and Hopkins' impassioned request in the poem's last stanza, 'Speak! whisper to my watching heart / One word', sums that up perfectly.[8] The link between silence and divinity is by no means a straightforward one. It requires considerable faith to find that silence comforting.

Rainer Maria Rilke is another poet to link silence and the divine, particularly in his three-part sequence *The Book of Hours*. In the first part, *The Book of the Monastic Life*, we find the following plea by the narrator:

> If only stillness reigned, pure, elemental.
> If silence fell on all that's accidental
> and casual and the neighbour's laugh were quiet,

if my own senses with their noisy riot
did not so much disturb my concentration –

Then in one thousandfold excogitation
right to your topmost verge I'd come to guess you
and (just the lasting of one smile) possess,
and out to all things living would largess you
like gratefulness.[9]

The *Book* consists of the reflections of a monk on the nature of his relationship with God: 'Round God, the old tower, my gyres I perform / and I've gyred there centuries long.'[10] It is in the nature of that relationship, as Merton was to discover in his turn, to induce solitary and silent contemplation of God's mysteries:

I've many brethren in the life of prayer
in Southern cloisters where the laurel grows.
They give Madonnas such a human air,
I often dream of youthful Titians there,
through whom their God as fervour flows.

How, though, into my self I keep inclining!
My God is dark and like a deep-extended
cluster of hundred roots still springs are laving.[11]

God can only be truly found, therefore, when the individual overcomes the 'noisy riot' of his senses, finding the 'interior silence' that Merton later postulated as the believer's true goal, a space in which God can be appreciated away from the distractions of the exterior world.

For Rilke's monk God is an essentially silent presence to be acknowledged throughout his life by prayer and meditation: 'God speaks to man but once, just before he makes him, / then silently out of the night he takes him'.[12] It is through silence and quiet that we become most aware of God and his works, and where he must be sought, as the poet insists in the second book of the sequence, *The Book of Pilgrimage*:

By day you're just a dimly founded
rumour upon the lips of men:

the silence after clocks have sounded
that slowly closes up again.

The more day's ever-faintlier fending
gestures let evening overwhelm,
the more, God, you exist. Your realm
like smoke from every roof's ascending.[13]

Again, there is the sense of having to escape from the 'noisy riot' of everyday life fully to commune with God. As we have seen, it is at such points that believers like Merton find the most enlightenment (and Hopkins, too, with his enthusiasm for bodily denial).

We have touched briefly on Keats' musings on silence in *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, suggesting how this concept could affect the Romantic imagination, but arguably the most sustained engagement with silence in Romantic poetry comes in William Wordsworth's work. In *The Prelude* (1805, 1850), for example, the communion with nature described in the poem's early stages makes much of the stillness and silence of the landscape, and how this provides the ideal context for the young poet to think and reflect on the life before him:

Whereat, being not unwilling now to give
A respite to this passion, I paced on
Gently, with careless steps, and came erelong,
To a geen shady place, where down I sat
Beneath a tree, slackening my thoughts by choice
And settling into gentler happiness.
'Twas autumn, and a calm and placid day
With warmth, as much as needed from a sun
Two hours declined towards the west, a day
With silver clouds and sunshine on the grass,
And, in the sheltered grove where I was couched,
A perfect stillness. On the ground I lay
Passing through many thoughts, yet mainly such
As to myself pertained.[14]

He goes on to speak of being 'lost / Entirely), seeing nought, nought hearing' in this empty landscape, where the stillness and silence refresh him, and throughout his life nature provides that refuge, where he can escape into his own thoughts.[15] From nature the poet,

> . . . receives
> That energy by which he seeks the truth
> (Is roused, aspires, grasps, struggles, wishes, craves),
> From her, that happy stillness of the mind
> Which fits him to receive it when unsought.[16]

The relationship with nature is a deeply personal one which requires the presence of no other human beings. Nor does it always require extensive description:

> So, like a peasant, I pursued my road
> Beneath the evening sun, nor had one wish
> Again to bend the sabbath of that time
> To a servile yoke. What need of many words?[17]

As in Merton there is a sense of someone entering into silence in order to discover their identity, of silence as personally nourishing and necessary to one's self-development. One critic has spoken of the poet being 'overwhelmed into silence' by a nature that is the opposite of the noisy world where he must spend so much of his life.[18] The many solitary figures that people the landscape of Wordsworth's poems seem to have as little need of words in their relationship to nature, and silent, solitary existence is a persistent image in his work. Another critic asserts that, in *The Prelude,* we 'observe an isolated, if not literally exiled, poet', and although there is a negative side to such a condition, it is clear that Wordsworth felt it was a crucial part of his experience.[19]

Silence looms even more insistently over *Intimations of Immortality,* where it is an image of the fate that awaits us all as our life unfolds, as well as of the power that transcends us:

> But for those first affections,
> Those shadowy recollections,

Which, be they what they may,
Are yet the fountain light of all our day,
Are yet a master-light of all our seeing;
Uphold us, cherish, and have power to make
Our noisy years seem moments in the being
Of the eternal Silence: truths that wake,
To perish never:
Which neither listlessness, nor mad endeavour,
Nor Man nor Boy,
Nor all that is at enmity with joy,
Can utterly abolish or destroy![20]

Once again there is the contrast between our noisy existence and the silence where thought, reflection and memory take place – the silence, too, where the soul resides. Without that silence it would seem that our lives have little meaning.

The Novel and Silence

Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* conducts an extremely interesting dialogue with silence, continually taking us to the point where language loses its power to communicate and other methods must be employed (by both the author and his characters). When Uncle Toby's servant draws a diagram in the sand to declare the joys of bachelorhood – 'Whilst a man is free – cried the Corporal, giving a flourish with his stick thus –' – we recognise that we have reached the boundaries of language, as does Uncle Toby himself: 'A thousand of my father's most subtle syllogisms could not have said more for celibacy.'[21] What is not said becomes more important than what is in such exchanges, which occur regularly throughout Tristram's narrative.

Sterne has an impressive array of graphic devices to illustrate the failings of language and the existence of a realm of the unsayable that all of us must acknowledge.[22] Arguably the most famous of these is the black page that announces Parson Yorick's death, preceded by the lines 'Alas, poor YORICK!'[23] Faced with the brute fact

of mortality, words are effectively rendered superfluous: death is not a rational matter; rather, it is the end of discourse. There is a humorous side to such moves on the part of the author, and Sterne does play up to this in the gently mocking tone of his meditations on Yorick's grave: 'Ten times a day has *Yorick's* ghost the consolation to hear his monumental inscription read over with such a variety of plaintive tones, as denote a general pity and esteem for him.'[24] But it is, if you will excuse the pun, very much a case of black humour: death is simply an abyss which cannot be described (rather like a black hole, nothing escapes from it).

There are also marbled pages to represent the complexities of the narrative structure, and indeed our inability to make much sense of the world around us (we remain similarly in a haze); blank chapters after the chapter number is given; then strings of asterisks to mark what must not be said if propriety is to be maintained, as in the case of Uncle Toby's conversations with the Widow Wadman about the exact nature of his war wound. We realise that Toby will remain silent about the latter, a wound to the groin hardly being a matter for open discussion in polite society, and that all his promises to the Widow Wadman to reveal all – 'You shall see the very place, Madam'[25] – represent a deflection from any real explanation. By remaining silent at such points (since the place turns out to be the replica of the battlefield on which Toby sustained the injury), the author merely encourages the reader's imagination to go into overdrive, thus proving himself very aware of the aesthetic value of silence. Strategically deployed silence draws the reader into the production of the narrative.

Sterne's use of sentiment provides an undercurrent throughout the narrative as to the limitations of language. Sentiment is an emotional response to the problems of existence, a gut-level reaction which works on the basis of shared fellow feeling. It needs no language to express itself, and in fact language is incapable of communicating what sentiment does so successfully at several critical junctures of the story, as when bad news interrupts, as it so frequently does in Tristram's world. Sentiment is something in which the characters can take refuge, recognising that language is yet again

inadequate to dealing with emotional crisis. There are also several exchanges between Tristram's father, Walter, and his Uncle Toby, that are conducted at a non-verbal level – ironically enough, given his father's propensity for long-winded explanation. (Walter proves to be a walking parody of rationalism, carrying it to ridiculous extremes on any number of occasions, most often to hilarious effect.) Sentiment is very much to the fore at such points, with the characters understanding each other emotionally, often in the midst of distressing situations, without the need for verbal expression. Silence can indeed speak volumes when there is an emotional crisis in *Tristram Shandy*. Ihab Hassan sees this a critical function of silence in the literary realm in general, its ability to represent conditions such as 'void, madness, outrage, ecstasy, mystic trance'.[26] Emotional intensity of this kind resists capture by language.

Although Sterne's narrative pushes at the boundaries of language, its various silences make sense only within a context *of* language. As we discussed earlier, Sontag makes similar observations, insisting that silence is a rhetorical figure deployed to effect within language and gaining its power from language. What is not said in *Tristram Shandy* takes on the significance that it does as a gap in verbal discourse, drawing attention to itself in the process: silence is always *significant* silence in *Tristram Shandy*. Sometimes the unsaid invites the reader to fill in his or her own words and thoughts (as with Trim's squiggle in the sand and Uncle Toby's reaction to it); sometimes it signals a trauma that renders language temporarily incapable, where words just feel irrelevant. But language is always the backdrop against which these silences achieve meaning, as linguisticians have been careful to emphasise. Sterne succeeds quite brilliantly in demonstrating just how meaningful silence can be, however, especially when it comes to the realm of feelings, and there is a sophisticated rhetoric of silence at work in the text. Silence is certainly not a homogeneous entity here; it invites, and receives, a wide range of interpretations.

We might usefully consider how J. Vernon Jensen's theory of the five main functions of silence in the communicative process applies to *Tristram Shandy*. Sentiment generally signals a bond being

established between the characters in the narrative, giving us several examples of the linkage function at work – as in the case of Walter and Toby. The revelation function is in play when Trim draws his figure in the sand, as it is also in Toby's response; whereas its negative aspect is to the fore when we find ourselves presented with blank pages or strings of asterisks, with the author deliberately withholding information from the reader. The 'silence' that the text assumes when confronting the fact of Yorick's death conveys at least the hope of healing in that we must accustom ourselves over time to the finality of Yorick's silence. For all his loquacity, Walter is also capable of a judgemental silence when circumstances conspire against him, as he feels all too often they do. Silence figures in a variety of ways in *Tristram Shandy*, therefore, with the author showing himself well aware of the wide repertoire it offers him, particularly with regard to the communication of emotional states. Such subtle use of silence engages the reader's imagination, making her complicit in the construction of the text's meaning and thus reinforcing *Tristram Shandy's* status as a 'writerly' work.[27]

Silence is not an absence in Sterne, but a different kind of presence that characters are able to appreciate and understand through the medium of feeling and emotion. That is the way I would like to see it conceived of in general terms: not as a lack, but as a positive and desirable experience in its own right. This is to be contrasted with such linguistic theorists as Daniel N. Maltz, whose line is that 'whatever noisiness is seen to entail, silence is a lack of it'.[28] Silence as a choice is what I am campaigning for, but of course there has to be both the means and the context freely to make that choice. Even if it is a retreat, it is a deliberately selected one and has to be intrepreted on that level.

The Sublime: The Unsayable and the Unrepresentable

The concept of the sublime is an attempt to come to terms with all that lies beyond human experience, the mysterious forces such as the supernatural and the divine that transcend our understanding. Mere human beings are rendered silent before such phenomena,

effectively cowed into submission by their power, as the theorist Edmund Burke outlined:

> Now, though in a just idea of the Deity, perhaps none of his attributes are predominant, yet to our imagination, his power is by far the most striking. . . . [W]hilst we contemplate so vast an object, under the arm, as it were, of almighty power, and invested upon every side with omnipresence, we shrink into the minuteness of our own nature, and are, in a manner, annihilated before him. And though a consideration of his other attributes may relieve in some measure our apprehensions; yet no conviction of the justice with which it is exercised, nor the mercy with which it is tempered, can wholly remove the terror that naturally arises from a force which nothing can withstand. If we rejoice, we rejoice with trembling[.][29]

There can be no negotiations between such powers and the human, which is reduced to a terrified silence by such an experience: Shock and Awe as organised by the supernatural dimension. It is the more sinister side of silence with which Burke is concerned, and he regards it as a condition to be feared: 'All *general* privations are great, because they are terrible; *Vacuity*, *Darkness*, *Solitude*, and *Silence*.'[30]

The sublime is both the unsayable and the unrepresentable, and it is in that latter guise particularly that it has come to interest postmodern theorists, who have revived the concept as a way of challenging the cult of rationality in modern society. For Lyotard, for example, the existence of the sublime should make us realise that our powers are limited, and that none of our theories can be comprehensive. There will always be something which eludes our understanding and mocks our pretensions to be able to control our destiny; something that is unrepresentable by us:

> The relation of thinking to its object breaks down. In sublime feeling, nature no longer 'speaks' to thought through the 'coded writing' of its form. . . . [T]hinking grasped by the sublime feeling is faced, 'in' nature, with quantities capable of suggesting a magnitude or a force that exceeds its powers of presentation.[31]

These are themes which feature strongly in the Gothic novel, which flourished from the mid-eighteenth century into the early nineteenth.

In Ann Radcliffe's novels the sublime is unmistakably located in nature, a brooding presence that takes little heed of human affairs and whose scale is designed to make sensitive individuals realise just how inconsequential they are in the overall scheme of things. In Lyotard's terms of reference, nature's 'meaning' is indecipherable by humankind.

Radcliffe's heroines are repeatedly overawed by the power of nature, as manifested in phenomena such as sudden storms, raging rivers and waterfalls, and magnificent mountain peaks: the 'landscape sublime' as it has been dubbed. The following example from *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794) is entirely characteristic:

> At length, the travellers began to ascend among the Apennines. The immense pine-forests, which, at that period, overhung these mountains, and between which the road wound, excluded all view but of the cliffs aspiring above, except that, now and then, an opening through the dark woods allowed the eye a momentary glimpse of the country below. The gloom of these shades, their solitary silence, except when the breeze swept over their summits, the tremendous precipices of the mountains, that came partially to the eye, each assisted to raise the solemnity of Emily's feelings into awe; she saw only images of gloomy grandeur, or of dreadful sublimity, around her.[32]

The sublime remains silent as far as heroines like Emily are concerned: a force beyond human experience and comprehension with which they can never have any real dialogue, a power unto itself. They oscillate back and forward between feelings of awe and dread about nature throughout their adventures, and although it can sometimes present a kinder face to them, its brooding power is always there just beneath the surface ready to assert itself – a storm can sweep over the mountains at any time and engulf the vulnerable individual. What the sublime can do in a positive sense is to put human power into perspective, demonstrating how puny it is in comparison to nature in all its majesty. Characters like Emily eventually take comfort in the recognition that the natural sublime far outstrips the power available to any villainous male character, such as Emily's particular opponent, her guardian Montoni, with his

plans to sell her off in marriage to the highest bidder to replenish his own depleted finances.

When dialogue with the sublime does occur in other Gothic novels it is always to the individual's disadvantage, and indicates that the sublime, in whatever form it may take, is impervious to human feelings; that it is merely using the unfortunate individual as a pawn. Thus in Charlotte Dacre's *Zofloya, or the Moor* (1806), the heroine is targeted by an agent of the devil in the form of the Moorish servant, Zofloya, on the basis of her conspicuous moral laxity. She is then led progressively deeper into a life of sin, with Zofloya cleverly encouraging her darker desires for power over others, until she is claimed by the devil as one of his own:

> Few ventured far as thou hast ventured in the alarming paths of sin – thy loose and evil thoughts first pointed thee out to my keen, my searching view, and attracted me towards thee, in the eager hope of prey! . . . I found thee, oh! of most exquisite willingness, and yielding readily to all my temptations![33]

Communing with the supernatural sublime carries extreme penalties, and it is best to leave it silent, otherwise it is all too likely to silence us – as is Victoria's horrific fate in being thrown to her death by the devil from a mountain precipice.[34]

In James Hogg's decidely eerie narrative *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824), the protagonist James Wringhim's relationship with his apparent *alter ego* Gil-Martin, a *doppelgänger* figure largely silent and invisible to others, leads on to the commission of several murders by Wringhim and his eventual suicide in a desperate attempt to escape the reality of his crimes: 'But, ah! who is yon that I see approaching furiously – his stern face blackened with horrid despair! My hour is at hand. – Almighty God, what is this that I am about to do! The hour of repentance is past, and now my fate is inevitable. – *Amen, for ever!*'[35] It is left open by the author whether Gil-Martin is a projection of Wringhim's darker side, that side of ourselves we keep silent and hidden from others (later to be exploited so famously by Robert Louis Stevenson in the *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*),[36] or a diabolical force in his own right;

but once again it is clear that there are forces we should not disturb but should allow to remain silent. The sublime should be left alone; it can only end badly for mere humans if it is not.

Stream of Consciousness: Depicting the Silent World

The stream of consciousness technique, found in James Joyce and Virginia Woolf amongst several others, was particularly cultivated by modernist authors, who used it as a way of challenging the traditional structural pattern associated with the novel. Stream of consciousness leads to a much looser, episodic kind of narrative structure than the linear form that realists had favoured over the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, based as it is on our thought patterns, which tend to work on an associative principle, Sterne having been a pioneer of this method in *Tristram Shandy*. Rather than being linear and rational in operation, thought tends to jump around in a more erratic fashion, often going off at a tangent from the main point at issue and making unpredictable connections drawing on our individual store of memories. Left to our own devices, we all have 'grasshopper' minds, as the popular phrase has it.

Stream of consciousness is an intriguing method of writing because it enables us to peer inside the mind of characters, into what is effectively a silent world as far as the rest of humanity is concerned. Thought is a silent activity, and the characters of *Ulysses* or *Mrs Dalloway*, for example, are made to reveal all their inner secrets to the reader while managing to keep them hidden from the other inhabitants of their fictional world. Neither Leopold nor Molly Bloom know what the other is thinking, and quite probably would be shocked if they did – hence the silence that each maintains about their individual stream of consciousness with all its secrets and uncensored thoughts. That is, of course, a practice all of us engage in during our everyday life – even while in the company of others, who cannot penetrate behind our silent demeanour to what is going on within our minds. This is the part of ourselves that we do not voice, our concealed identity, some would say our true identity. Nor

can they penetrate to the thoughts that lie behind our speech, as the following exchange from *Mrs. Dalloway* brings out:

> 'And how are you?', said Peter Walsh, positively trembling; taking both her hands; kissing both her hands. She's grown older, he thought, sitting down. I shan't tell her anything about it, he thought, for she's grown older. She's looking at me, he thought, a sudden embarrassment coming over him, though he had kissed her hands. . . . Exactly the same, thought Clarissa; the same queer look; the same check suit; a little out of the straight his face is, a little thinner, dryer, perhaps, but he looks awfully well, and just the same. 'How heavenly it is to see you again!' she exclaimed. . . . 'And what's all this?, he said, tilting his pen-knife towards her green dress. He's very well dressed, thought Clarissa; yet he always criticizes *me*.[37]

Clarissa and Peter are old friends, and can guess, sometimes correctly, at each other's thoughts, but they can never know with certainty what is running through the other's mind: that particular stream of consciousness remains resolutely private if the individual chooses to keep it that way.

Our innermost thoughts, and the often tortuous processes that lie behind them, were precisely the concern of Sigmund Freud, whose work can be seen as an attempt to open up this silent world within all of us to public scrutiny; 'the man who first made the unconscious mind real to us', as one of his most distinguished translators, James Strachey, has put it.[38] It is the task of the psychoanalyst to bring repressed ideas to the surface such that they can be addressed by the patient:

> If what was repressed is brought back again into conscious mental activity – a process which presupposes the overcoming of considerable resistances – the resulting psychical conflict, which the patient had tried to avoid, can, under the physician's guidance, reach a better outcome than was offered by repression.[39]

These repressed thoughts can be brought under our conscious control and cease to have the adverse effect on us they had when hidden away in the unconscious. If this process is not gone through,

then the repressed thoughts will find some means of expression, but most likely of a kind that creates problems for the individual in question – perhaps in the form of anti-social behaviour, for example.

Although revealing this hidden world can be done in a general sense, indicating the unconscious source of many of our thoughts and the actions that follow on from these, there is still no way that anyone can know the content of the thoughts in our head if we choose to keep silent about them, as in the case of the Blooms or Mrs Dalloway and Peter Walsh. Silence is a critical part of our character in this respect, intimately connected to our inner conception of ourselves; our private version of the unsayable. Behind that silence lies the deeper silence of the unconscious, as Norman O. Brown has noted: 'To reconnect consciousness with the unconscious, to make consciousness symbolical, is to reconnect words with silence; to let the silence in. If consciousness is all words and no silence, the unconscious remains unconscious.'[40] Silence, Brown is suggesting, reveals more about us and our deepest drives than our ability to manipulate language ever will, and we should cultivate it.

The Drama of Silence

Samuel Beckett's work makes extensive use of silence, as Ihab Hassan amongst others has documented. Beckett himself refers admiringly to the 'unfathomable abysses of silence' conjured up by Beethoven in his Seventh Symphony, and indicates that he wants to achieve a similar effect in his own work.[41] This is a playwright for whom, as a recent critical study has it, the archetypal situation is the 'empty figure on an empty stage'.[42] Similarly, Hassan speaks of the 'contractive art' of Beckett, whom he regards as 'the author who wants to seal the lips of the Muse'.[43] He depicts Beckett and Henry Miller as purveyors of an 'anti-literature', which constitutes their response to the problems of their time and culture.[44] Anti-literature moves ever closer to silence about those problems, which only throws them into sharper relief. This is particularly so in Beckett, who 'leaves us with a world so depleted of life that nothing short of a cataclysm can renew it; we are close to the absence of outrage'.[45]

This refusal to engage with the world is what infuriates a critic like Georg Lukács, for whom authors such as Beckett are simply preaching despair, as if there were no way of improving our condition – which of course for a committed Marxist like Lukács there always is.[46] Silence in this case is taken to equal surrender to the capitalist system that oppresses us, and for Lukács Beckett is one of the worst offenders. (Modernism in general is not to Lukács's taste, it has to be said, and he has no great liking for Joyce either.)

For Hassan, it is Miller's 'refusal "to evaluate" ' that constitutes his contribution to anti-literature, whereas Beckett carries the notion of silence to its logical conclusion, as we shall see when we turn to his dramatic works.[47] Eventually, we run out of language altogether in Beckett. In each author, however, the silence makes us aware of what is not being said; of the lack of social or political engagement. In consequence, they come to express 'a judgment on ourselves in a time of outrage and apocalypse'.[48] Silence becomes a damning comment.

In *Krapp's Last Tape* (1958), the protagonist's ramblings are broken only by the recording of himself from the past on the reels of tape he has collected, as if there was almost nothing left worth saying any more. There are only the dead words of the past to remind the character of a time when he felt language did have some force and meaning. But the banality of Krapp's thirty-year-old tape suggests even that was an illusion. The repeated lines 'Past midnight. Never knew such silence. The earth might be uninhabited' communicate a sense of a terrifying void, which is further enhanced by the closing stage direction: 'KRAPP *motionless staring before him. The tape runs on in silence*'.[49] *Waiting for Godot* (1952) is also liberally sprinkled with 'silences', particularly towards its end, as in the following exchange:

VIADIMIR: What does he do, Mr. Godot [*Silence.*] Do you hear me?
BOY: Yes, sir.
VIADIMIR: Well?
BOY: He does nothing, sir.
[*Silence.*]
VIADIMIR: How is your brother?

BOY: He's sick, sir.
VIADIMIR: Perhaps it was he came yesterday.
BOY: I don't know, sir.
[*Silence.*]
VIADIMIR: [*Softly.*] Has he a beard, Mr. Godot?
BOY: Yes, sir.
VIADIMIR: Fair or . . . [*He hesitates*] . . . or black?
BOY: I think it's white, sir.
[*Silence.*]
VIADIMIR: Christ have mercy on us!
[*Silence.*][50]

The silences become ever more ominous at the end of a play consisting solely of fruitless waiting, with Beckett's 'contractive art' much in evidence in the plot, action and narrative.

The apotheosis of silence in Beckett, however, is surely his play *Breath*, which contains no characters or plot – and narrative of only the most fleeting form.[51] This very short – less than a minute – piece consists of silence, two brief cries, and a rising and dimming of the stage lights. The entire work, plus stage directions and lighting and sound instructions, fills only one printed page, with the main text as follows:

CURTAIN

1. Faint light on stage filled with miscellaneous rubbish. Hold about five seconds.
2. Faint brief cry and immediately inspiration and slow increase of light together reaching maximum together in about ten seconds. Silence and hold about five seconds.
3. Expiration and slow decrease of light together reaching minimum together (light as in 1) in about ten seconds and immediately cry as before. Silence and hold about five seconds.

CURTAIN.[52]

This is theatre reduced about as far as it can be – theatrical minimalism in action, with the audience hardly given time to register what is happening before the event itself is over. Beckett is all but inviting

us to construct our own narrative out of the barest of details, less the standard props of plotting and characterisation that we so much depend upon in the conventional setting, and it is up to us as observers to decide what, if anything, lies behind the playwright's silence.

It is a tantalising piece, which undeniably represents a 'retreat from the word' (the cries being the merest echo of language), but whereas Steiner or Lukács could only be critical of this move as a dereliction of the artist's duty to his public, from Sontag's perspective it could be regarded as a trenchant comment on the 'false (language-clogged) consciousness' of our culture. Beckett is refusing to add to this, and to retreat from the word is a positive decision as far as Sontag is concerned, one that asks the audience to question its cultural values. What more effective way could there be of drawing attention to the devaluation of language than by declining to use it in the theatre, an art-form that is constructed on the notion of speech, and particularly dialogue? Silence there can hardly go unnoticed, and Beckett makes a significant contribution to the aesthetics of silence by placing it, as it were, centre stage, thus all but demanding that we examine it minutely. In his view, what Beckett is seeking to escape from is the 'terrible materiality of the word surface', and *Breath*, with its disembodied cries, manifestly can be said to achieve this.[53]

Beckett wrote other silent dramatic pieces, if less minimalist than *Breath* in that they do at least feature actors, *Act Without Words I* and *Act Without Words II*, described by the author as being mimes for one and two players respectively.[54] Other than the presence of the actors on stage, there are sound effects (a periodic whistle from the wings and above stage in *Act I*, for example), but once again a notable 'retreat from the word' and its 'terrible materiality' on the author's part. Mime has had a long and distinguished history as an artform and deserves to be treated on its own merits rather than as a mere retreat from the word – there is no lack of expression in it, after all, it possesses its own grammar and rhetoric. But for a playwright like Beckett to adapt mime for theatrical purposes is to ask for a different response to silence; to regard it as a deliberate comment on

the shortcomings of language and communication. We simply do not expect the word to be absent in such contexts, and we start to question why language has apparently become too 'exhausted', as the novelist John Barth has suggested, to be deployed on the stage. As Barth put it, Beckett by late career 'has become virtually mute', for him 'to cease to create altogether would be fairly meaningful: his crowning work, his "last word" '.[55]

The 'literature of exhaustion' was Barth's phrase for the state he felt literary activity had come to find itself in at the tail end of modernism as an aesthetic. Writing in 1967, he argued that there was a distinct sense that authors simply had nothing new left to say (and modernism had made a fetish of the new and original), and that there was what he called 'the used-upness of certain forms or exhaustion of certain possibilities' to contend with instead throughout the creative arts.[56] Barth's answer, often regarded as one of the starting points for literary postmodernism, was to go back to basics: to rediscover the use of narrative, plot and characterisation as pre-modernist authors of fiction had understood them, and unashamedly to reproduce them. Creative artists like Beckett had, Barth warned, painted themselves into 'a convenient corner' where they no longer had to engage personally with the problems of the world (Lukács was making a similar point in *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism* about the whole modernist literary establishment).[57] There was an innate pessimism about this state of affairs that Barth himself did not share, and he was urging authors to re-establish contact with their wider audience rather than just register despair about the impossibility of the human condition. His call, eventually, was for what he called a 'literature of replenishment', which for Barth meant the postmodern.[58] There was to be a conscious dialogue with the past, rather than a rejection of it.

For all his critical, even mocking, tone, Barth nevertheless does not underestimate the artistic struggle that Beckett has had to undergo in his passage from 'marvellously constructed English sentences through terser and terser French ones to the unsyntactical, unpunctuated prose of *Comment C'est* and "ultimately" to wordless

mimes'.[59] Beckett's honesty in facing up to the 'used-upness' of his time is never in doubt, and he leaves behind a valuable record of that time in the progressive retreat from expression he makes in works such as *Breath* and *Act Without Words*. Putting the most positive spin on what Barth says, we recognise that we can tell as much about mid- to late twentieth-century Western culture by Beckett's eventual move into silence as we can by more detailed explorations offered by his contemporaries. The desperation felt by many intellectuals of the day registers very strongly.

Perhaps, too, Beckett's 'solution' is one shared by many others in the later twentieth century, and not just some fanciful artistic conceit that he is peddling. W. G. Sebald's reflections on the fishermen on a remote Norfolk beach might suggest as such. Watching these lone figures sitting in their thrown-together shelters, pointedly ignoring each other just a few yards away, Sebald concludes that,

> I do not believe that these men sit by the sea all day and all night so as not to miss the time when the whiting pass, the flounder rise or the cod come in to shallower waters, as they claim. They just want to be in a place where they have the world behind them, and before them nothing but emptiness.[60]

There is a clear impression of used-upness being communicated here; of ordinary individuals who have concluded that there is nothing of worth left to say to others, nothing particular left to do. It is a retreat from normal social existence as meaningful in its way as the retreat from the word of authors like Beckett – and as much as anything else it is a retreat into personal silence. The setting on the beach, with Sebald's bleak accompanying photograph, very much warrants the description of Beckettian.

Barth's exasperation is that of a writer given to extravagant linguistic and narrative flights of fancy, as in his acknowledged masterpiece *The Sot-Weed Factor* (1960)[61], but Beckett's response is one that has a moving dignity to it, even if we realise that at some point the retreat has to be reversed. *Breath*, like Cage's *4′ 33″*, offers no real scope for aesthetic development – imitation, yes, but that would soon pall on the audience. Silence is an entirely defensible response

for the creative artist to offer the public (as Sebald's fishermen suggest, one that is mirrored in everyday life too), although it always has to be placed within a wider context of standard artistic discourse. It is yet another instance of that balance we have been making a case for throughout this book.

For all the critical role that silence has to play in Beckett, arguably no dramatist of our time has been more concerned with silence than Harold Pinter, whose plays are saturated with the phenomenon. As Pinter himself once remarked in a speech,

> There are two silences. One when no word is spoken. The other when perhaps a torrent of language is being employed. This speech is speaking of a language locked beneath it. That is its continual reference. *The speech we hear is an indication of that we don't hear. It is a necessary avoidance, a sly, anguished or mocking smokescreen which keeps the other in its place*.[62]

There is, as John Russell Brown has put it, 'a scepticism about language of unusual tenacity' in Pinter.[63] Here is a dramatist for whom speech is a form of 'social combat'.[64] Under the surface of both the silence and the speech there is all too often emotional turmoil.

Pinter's plays exude a strong sense of both types of silence, and they tend to oscillate between these two poles, from the long, pregnant pauses of the early short revue sketches, such as *Request Stop* or *Last to Go*, to the 'torrents of language' unleashed by the main characters of *The Caretaker* or *The Birthday Party*. *Last to Go* is less than four pages long, but contains twenty-one marked pauses which intensify the air of surface aimlessness in the piece – the dialogue between the two characters, a coffee-stall holder and a newspaper seller, is of the utmost banality, with its repeated references to the last newspaper sold that night, while hinting, as Pinter suggests above, at a deeper desperation that is being masked by the words.[65] Equally, in *The Caretaker* the action is regularly punctuated by pauses and marked silences, periodically interrupted by extended monologues from the main characters which often go off at a tangent to whatever the current subject of discussion happens to be.

The opening stage directions use silence again as a way of building up the tension:

> MICK *is alone in the room, sitting on the bed. He wears a leather jacket.*
> *Silence.*
> *He slowly looks about the room looking at each object in turn. He looks up at the ceiling, and stares at the bucket. Ceasing, he sits quite still, expressionless, looking out front.*
> *Silence for thirty seconds.*
> *A door bangs. Muffled voices are heard.*
> MICK *turns his head. He stands, moves silently to the door, goes out, and closes the door quietly.*
> *Silence.*[66]

Then the play's other two characters, Aston and Davies, are heard outside and come into the room to join Mick, but the audience's curiosity already has been aroused and a feeling of unease has crept in. The play ends in a 'Long silence' too:[67] silence, as it were, having the last word.

The interplay of silence and speech in Pinter is carefully calculated and skilfully manipulated. As one critic, Katherine J. Worth, has put it: ' "Quietness" is a key word for Pinter. His most characteristic effect is one of violence exploding with alarming unexpectedness into an almost equally alarming quietness.'[68] The verbal violence is all the more striking for those lapses into silence, having increased shock value in consequence. Pinter orchestrates his work much in the manner of a musician, to the extent that John Russell Brown has suggested that 'he may seem more interested in theatre language than theatre speech'.[69] There is no denying that he is centrally concerned with the dynamics of language use, and that silence looms symbolically large in his worldview, to the extent that, as Russell Brown has reported, he thinks of his early plays as being marred by 'glibness or too many words'.[70] The desire to contract is there in Pinter too. It is interesting to note that when Pinter appeared as an actor in *Krapp's Last Tape* in London in 2006, what critics agreed came across most strongly in his performance was the intensity of the silence, with Pinter clearly finding an affinity with Beckett's world.

Silent Books

In discussing Beckett's progressive movement away from language, Barth also makes a passing reference to Elbert Hubbard, an American author and publisher who founded an arts colony in East Aurora, New York, the Roycrofters (named after the Roycroft Printing Shop he founded there in 1895). A fairly eccentric individual who became a cult figure in his lifetime, Hubbard was a leading light in the American Arts and Crafts movement, modelling himself on William Morris, whom he had met while visiting England. A prolific author and editor, Hubbard in 1905 published a work entitled *Essay on Silence*, which, with remorseless logic, consisted of blank pages (with the exception of its dedication, 'To F. S. Rowley, with love and blessing, Elbert Hubbard').[71] The suggestion is that the work was intended humorously, especially since Hubbard was not known for his silence on other matters, being estimated to have written over seven million words in his lifetime in his many books and edited magazines. 'Epigrams dripped from his pen like water from a leaky tap', as one commentator has remarked.[72] Hubbard carried the joke on into his periodical *The Philistine*, where he said of *Essay on Silence* that it 'has been translated into fifty-seven languages and dialects', and that '[s]uch is the felicity of the language in the original that it loses nothing in translation'.[73] Nevertheless, all joking aside, *Essay on Silence* takes its place in an avant-garde tradition that leads us to such figures as Cage and Beckett, and it has continued to intrigue the artistic community over the years. (One might even take Hubbard to task and say that any translation would *not* mean the same thing, since attitudes to silence differ amongst various cultures – as we know they do in Eastern and Western religions, for example. But it is probably best not to become too serious on the topic.)

Essay on Silence even appears on a current publisher's list, the Cranberry Press, described as follows: 'An unexpurgated edition of Hubbard's classic essay as first published by the Roycrofters in 1905. With original cover design by Dard Hunter. 45 pages, un-numbered, softcover, 6" × 8.5".' The fact that when one visits the book on the publisher's website it flashes 'Out-of-Print' at you under the book's

entry (whether from excess or lack of demand one can but speculate) only adds to the humour, or alternatively the logic, of the situation. Being unable to access a book on silence seems only too appropriate, the publisher's silence matching the author's – and in this case, just to complete the set, the prospective reader's too.

Other 'silent books' have appeared since Hubbard, such as *The Nothing Book* (anonymous), which appeared in an American edition in 1974 and then a British one in 1976.[74] The book's only text came on the dustjacket, and explained the project as follows:

> When asked what five books he would take with him to a desert island, George Bernard Shaw replied that he would take five blank books. THE NOTHING BOOK is a blank book. We have bound together 192 sheets of fine paper. The possibilities are endless. Write your own novel, compile a personal cookbook, draw pictures, make lists, keep records, collect autographs, write poetry, plan vacations, start a diary or scrapbook, design clothes, invent needlework or knitting patterns, doodle, compose songs, jot down important dates, keep a guest book, press flowers, gather favourite quotes, accumulate (or invent) funny stories, use your imagination and do your own thing. THE NOTHING BOOK is your book, it is meant to be whatever you want it to be.[75]

For having your horizons opened up in this way, you were charged £1.75 for the Omnibus edition. Silence, it seems, can be commercial, and just to prove the point, John D. Barrow notes that the publishers of *The Nothing Book* were sued, unsuccessfully as it turned out, for copyright infringement by another author.[76] As with Hubbard, the intent is humorous, but with just enough of a rationale to make the audience think about the concepts of nothing and silence. If Cage can be taken seriously, one might wonder why projects like this shouldn't be too.

Silence and the Postmodern

Returning briefly to Hassan, he claims a particularly important role for silence in the development of postmodern literature, speaking of there being 'two accents of silence' that recur there: 'the negative

echo of language, autodestructive, demonic, nihilist; (b) its positive stillness, self-transcendent, sacramental, plenary'.[77] Whereas Barth argued that the use of silence in the arts was ultimately self-defeating (and Lukács, politically questionable), Hassan took a much more positive line, praising its metaphysical implications:

> We are compelled at last to discover in the tradition of silence, in some imaginary realm where Sade, Jarry, Tzara, Breton, Hemingway, Kafka, Sartre, Camus, Sarraute, Robbe-Grillet, Genet, and Beckett meet in common awe of human destiny, a meaning larger than criticism can yield. A part of us – at least a part – wants to join them in anticipating a reality which may become all together ours.[78]

This tradition of silence represents a response to 'a radical crisis of art, language, and culture' that has been developing over the course of the twentieth century, and Hassan sounds much in agreement with Sontag in regarding it as a justifiable reaction for creative artists to adopt.[79] It is through an author's use of silence that we can come to recognise the development of postmodernism, Hassan tracing it back into the modernist movement. Far from being a dead end, as Barth considered it (in effect, the dead end of modernism), 'the language of silence' signalled for Hassan the arrival of a new cultural sensibility and was to be applauded for doing so.[80] Beckett and Miller were taken to be paradigm figures in this respect, with their silence signalling the development of an anti-literature that forced us to reconsider our cultural plight. The question they brought to mind was: why this silence? This was a literature very sensitive indeed to cultural shifts, rather than one on the point of exhaustion (although the objections of such as Lukács are always worth bearing in mind). Silence was held to mark a transition from one worldview to another, almost as if the artists were drawing breath before moving off in a new direction. That new direction was the postmodern, where, as Barth himself proved, it became possible for authors to 're-invent' literature and to reverse what Hassan called 'the entropy of language'.[81] In certain literary circles silence had gained the upper hand; now it was time to reassert the case for language, to renew the dialectic.

Conclusion

It is clear that authors over the years have been intrigued by the notion of silence, and they have interpreted it in a wide variety of ways. It is that flexibility that most appeals to authors, who can use silence to represent all those mysterious things that lie beyond human comprehension – the realm of the unsayable that so taxes philosophers as well. Silence can be a powerful comment on the human condition, signalling despair, resignation or wonder. It can also be a means of involving the reader more closely in the working of the narrative, bringing the reader's imagination more fully into play to fill in gaps strategically left by the author. When it comes to drama, silence becomes an extremely powerful structural device, enabling playwrights to build up, or release, tension no less effectively than composers do. Silence is part of literary rhetoric, and as we shall discover in the next chapter, the rhetorical range of silence is wide indeed, with linguistics theorists increasingly concerned to map out the complex functions of silence within speech discourse. All of us prove to be highly skilled in both the deployment and the interpretation of silence within our everyday language dealings, proving that silence is no esoteric concern but a standard element of our social interaction. How that interaction works in practice we shall consider next.

9
Where Silence Matters: Language and Speech

Susan's Sontag's observation that silence is always a form of speech is taken for granted in the field of linguistics where silence is now treated as an integral part of verbal discourse. Various studies have been undertaken on the role of silence within communication, and we will engage with some recent examples, particularly Adam Jaworski's *The Power of Silence*, and Deborah Tannen and Muriel Saville-Troike's essay collection, *Perspectives on Silence*. For these theorists silence is unquestionably a linguistic phenomenon, which, in Jaworski's words, 'cuts across different levels of linguistic usage bearing relevance to the social, political, and emotional aspects governing the lives of individuals and whole communities'.[1] Jaworski goes on to argue that the success of interpersonal communication is crucially dependent on our strategic use and analysis of silence within speech. In the existentialist philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty's somewhat poetical formulation, 'we should be sensitive to the thread of silence from which the tissue of speech is woven'.[2] There is a tendency in Western society, as the educational theorist Huey-li Li has pointed out, 'to devalue silence and privilege speech', and we ought to resist this.[3] What is unsaid can be just as important as what is said – a point that came across in *Tristram Shandy*, with the author's subtle manipulation of various gaphic devices to capture the effect of silence on the page.

This is not to say that miscommunication cannot occur with silence, and Jaworski provides appropriate examples, but that merely proves how much of a linguistic phenomenon silence is, as open to misinterpretation as any word or phrase ever is. Silence is interpreted within a linguistic framework, and where there is interpretation there can always be misinterpretation, as all of us know from our experience of everyday conversation. Even if speech is valued more than silence in the West, the latter is nevertheless a critical part of the communicative process and is intuitively recognised as such by speakers, who can become very skilled in decoding instances of silence within conversation. There is also the very interesting point made by Jaworski that, '[i]t is easier to undo silence than it is to undo words';[4] which is to say that with silence one's options always remain open. Silence does not commit one to the degree that speech does, and it can play an important part in our repertoire of discourse techniques in consequence; something to be kept in reserve for awkward situations.

Jaworski outlines the relationship between silence and speech in some detail, contrasting the two main approaches to this topic, the essentialist and non-essentialist. In the former the claim is that we can define concepts like silence quite tightly; in the latter, that we cannot, although we can examine how a concept such as silence actually works in practice. Jaworski is a non-essentialist, and his concern is with how silence actually operates within discourse. He prefers to talk in terms of our everyday understanding of speech and silence rather than to agonise over giving each a precise technical definition, arguing that this would be limiting and overmechanical. For some of the essentialist theorists Jaworski considers, silence and speech are polar opposites. 'Silence is silence and completely different from any kind of language', as S. N. Ganguly has argued at the more extreme end of the essentialist spectrum; going on to add that, '[s]ilence is the limit of our world of description or language; and a *limit* can never be part of the world of which it is a limit'.[5] This is a position that Jaworski rejects, insisting on the symbiotic connection between speech and silence, where silence is always part of a linguistic context: 'silence and speech do

not stand in total opposition to each other, but form a continuum of forms ranging from the most prototypical instances of silence to the most prototypical instances of speech'.[6] Silence is to be studied instead from a 'sociopragmatic' point of view, as 'a tool of communicative expression'.[7] Overall, what Jaworski insists on is that we approach silence and speech not as binary opposites, but rather 'as complementary' concepts.[8]

Jaworski does exclude some forms of silence from his programme of study, such as muteness, which he considers to be outside his framework (I will follow his practice here). He also insists that an actual communicative process must be seen to be taking place rather than just some accidental relationship: strangers passing each other on the street without comment will not count, for example. If that communicative process is occurring, however, silence is seen to have a wide range of functions, and in fact Jaworski regards it as being more positive than speech in many instances. Silence, he argues, 'can sometimes signal that the channel of communication remains open, or that one has no intention of closing it, while speech would precisely have the effect of overtly terminating the possibility of further communication between the participants'.[9] One example he gives is when friends are parting, as before a long journey. Such scenes are often full of silences as if to keep the actual moment of parting at bay, all those involved recognising that nothing very meaningful can be said until the time for the final goodbye. Similarly, in quarrels a withdrawal into silence by one of the participants can prevent the situation from escalating to a point of irreconcilability, keeping open the option of a return to debate when tempers have cooled: a form of what has been called 'conflict management'.[10] Silence can also be a weapon in such cases as the latter of course, a studied refusal to answer one's opponent, thus aggravating his or her temper even further ('dumb insolence' as it has been called, and a punishable offence as such in military circles). Nevertheless, Jaworski feels this tactic, 'the opting-out choice' as M. P. Bonikowska has dubbed it, still keeps the lines of communication open for future use, thus maintaining a positive value for silence.[11] The old adage 'least said, soonest mended' really does apply in such situations.

Jaworski also notes that silence within discourse can be interpreted very differently around the world, with some cultures being more disposed towards it than others, and less prone to 'small talk' to reduce incidences of silence. It seems to be the norm in Finland to remain silent during meals for example, while Western Apaches in America and the Cuna tribe in Panama traditionally greet strangers with silence, without intending this to signal either threat or suspicion on their part.[12] In other societies, the failure to engage in 'small talk' in such situations would be thought impolite (certainly in the UK and mainstream American society), so we have to recognise that this is a culturally relative concept.While this can lead to misunderstandings when cultures meet, it is clear that silence is a critical element of discourse everywhere, and that each culture has developed its own informal rules as to how it operates. Rather in the way that the psychoanalytical theorist Jacques Lacan insisted that the unconscious was structured like a language (and thus could be decoded), so we could say that silence is too.

Jaworski also has some interesting things to say about the politics of silence and the 'silence of politics', where 'silence has been used as a tool of sociopolitical oppression and/or control'.[13] He also explores what B. Brummet has called 'political strategic silence', where political leaders (or parties) deliberately refuse to comment on a situation when expected to do so by the public, in order to achieve a particular objective.[14] Silence in such cases – as in a political crisis, for example – is very meaningful indeed: what is not said will be pored over by political commentators to determine its significance, and most definitely will receive that treatment from one's adversaries. Its impact may be positive or negative, regarded as a sign of strength or of weakness, depending on the commentators' speculations and the public response. The air of mystery that such a use of silence creates will not be allowed to go uninterpreted; its strategic quality actively invites this.

Not all silence in politics is strategic in this positive sense, however, and often it is evasive in intention. Political figures questioned about problems that they cannot solve, or which put their government, party or country in a bad light, can simply refrain from

answering awkward questions by using language to obscure the issue at hand as much as they can manage – and professional politicians can become very skilled at this practice. Most of us will be able to think of examples of this from our own political systems, when politicians gave answers that were at best oblique to the questions being asked, trying as deftly as possible to change the subject or lose their questioner in a stream of often irrelevant verbiage (remember Pinter's observation that, '[t]here are two silences. One when no word is spoken. The other when perhaps a torrent of language is being employed'). The issue itself remains unaddressed in a deliberate tactical move on the part of the respondent, but again, commentators will recognise the silence and proceed to interpret it, generally to the politician's disadvantage in such cases. At least in a democracy, silence as evasion is rarely a very successful strategy to adopt – not for any great length of time anyway.[15]

In a more sinister vein, however, Jaworski points out how silence often has been used as a means of maintaining unjust political power: 'Silence and silencing measures have been used by political dictators and dictatorships to exert control over dominated groups in various parts of the world and at different periods in history.'[16] Examples are not hard to come by, with most totalitarian regimes refusing to allow opposition forces any voice at all in the national political setup. The myth is fostered in such instances that no opposition actually exists, which is very much to the advantage of the ruling elite in maintaining its hold over the populace. All one-party states are past masters at the art of silencing opponents, with communism leading the way over the course of the twentieth century, and fundamentalist religious states carrying the practice on into the twenty-first century. Islamic fundamentalism does not admit internal dialogue about its system of belief within the Islamic world and demands total silence on all matters theological: the truth is known and no debate is necessary to determine it, one only needs to consult the Koran, which is taken to be the fount of all wisdom. Since Islam has a strong political dimension, its preference being for a theocracy where religion dictates all aspects of personal and social conduct, this invariably means that political opposition is suppressed. Silence

is imposed quite ruthlessly in such instances in the cause of theological purity.[17]

It is not only in totalitarian states that we find this form of the politics of silence in operation, however, as David Caute pointed out in *The Espionage of the Saints*, which went on to 'describe the punitive measures taken against citizens who, in the year 1984, committed word-crime'.[18] Caute was dealing in this instance with the British civil servants Sarah Tisdall and Clive Ponting, and the Zimbabwean writer Dambudzo Marechera, all of whom found themselves charged by their respective authorities for revealing what were taken to be government secrets whereas the individuals in question regarded them as matters it was in the public interest to know. The irony of this happening in that particular year was emphasised by Caute, who was deeply critical of the authorities' handling of such cases, and of the power imbalance it revealed between vulnerable individuals and the state. It was only too easy for the latter to silence the former, and Caute felt this reflected very badly on a democratic society.[19]

All political systems also have groups within them that for a variety of reasons are silenced in the public arena. Various ethnic minorities suffer such a fate, and one has only to think of the Romany community to see an example of a group that suffers discrimination throughout Europe, because of their refusal to conform to the majority lifestyle. If they resist absorption into national cultures then the Roma find themselves faced with numerous, bureaucratically administered restrictions which in a real sense do not recognise the validity of their separate existence. They become a classic case of what Lyotard has called the *differend* in action:[20] a group which cannot make itself heard because of the domination of another more powerful group which sets the ground rules for how political discourse is to be conducted, as well as the framework where this must occur. For Lyotard there are, as the subtitle of his major work on the topic puts it, 'phrases in dispute', but only one is being heard.

Then there is the larger-scale issue of Judaism to consider. Over the course of European history the Jewish people have been systematically ghettoised and excluded from political representation, with

the Holocaust as an example of a concerted attempt to silence them once and for all. Ethnic cleansing, an insistent feature of the recent geopolitical landscape (as in the former Yugoslavia), might be regarded as a less extreme manifestation of the latter practice.[21] Feminist theorists would argue that women have been silenced over most of humankind's history by the forces of patriarchy, and that they are only just beginning to break through this oppression and make themselves heard – but generally only in the West, significantly enough. The Third World can still be very traditional in its view of gender roles. In most Islamic countries, as a case in point, women are still expected to be silent (even the traditional clothing encourages this) and are accorded little or no role within the political process. Given the religious dimension to the latter, this is a very complex debate culturally, but from a Western perspective it is a prime example of socio-political silencing that no amount of special pleading can excuse. To quote one recent study on the subject of female silence, such women are put in a position where they 'experience themselves as mindless and voiceless and subject to the whims of external authority'.[22]

All attempts by the Israeli state to silence the Palestinian people are equally reprehensible, and it has to be said that organised religion historically has been one of the worst culprits when it comes to preventing opposition from having a voice. Monotheisms have proved only too ready to adopt the silencing tactic, given a worldview that stigmatises all those outside one's own religion – in effect, non-persons unless, in the case of Christianity and Islam, they convert to the supposed true faith. Holy wars represent this outlook taken to its logical conclusion: one's enemies must be silenced totally, being deemed to have no real right to exist at all, an affront to one's God.

Clearly, the above is not the kind of silence we wish to promote, and the point needs to be made again that silence, in whatever form it takes, has to be a freely chosen option, not something imposed on us by parties with special interests to protect. If there is a right to silence, as enshrined in many Western legal systems, then there must also be a right to speech, with balance being the critical issue. We

might see the cases just mentioned as political equivalents of solitary confinement, and they are just as morally indefensible. They are distortions of the speech–silence relationship in ordinary discourse, and precisely what Lyotard sought to address with his notion of a 'philosophical politics'.[23] According to Lyotard, it was the role of the socially conscious philosopher to help silenced groups find a way to articulate their socio-political grievances, thus giving them a basis from which to overcome their oppression. Otherwise they remained caught within the discourse of the dominant group in their society, which effectively refused to recognise the existence of their grievances, explaining them away by their own version of the politics of silence: a classic case of 'out of sight, out of mind'. Again, ethnic cleansing is an effective, though deeply cynical, method of realising this state of affairs – and a depressingly regular practice around the world. Lyotard was an advocate of balance in this regard, demanding that silenced groups, as the Jews traditionally had been in Western society, be given equal space to speak within the political process.[24] Silencing can only be defined as a quintessentially anti-democratic practice.

Silencing the media is another cynical ploy that governments resort to when they have something to hide. Totalitarian states are renowned for this ploy (China infamously even censors the Internet), but it can be found in action elsewhere too. Israel keeps a tight control over news coverage from the Occupied Territories, and more or less everywhere in the world military installations are subject to media blackouts. National security can always be invoked as an excuse for doing so, and that is usually enough to silence most critical voices. Conspiracy theorists would have us believe the practice is even more widespread than we might think – the basis for such television series as *The X-Files* and *Invasion*, in both of which the government is depicted as withholding evidence of alien penetration of our society. But there is more than enough evidence in the public domain to indicate that media silencing is a deliberate policy of most governments to make it unnecessary to go down the conspiracy road to prove the point. Censorship of some sort exists everywhere, and we are all subject to a degree of silencing, some of

it relatively benign, some less so. The power of silence in such instances is negative, designed to suppress dialogue and debate rather than to add another dimension to it, as Jaworski's analysis presented it as being in the communicative process. Some censorship can be defended, but the issue of silencing in general is fraught with ideological tension.

Jaworski's is an interesting study and he also goes outside the context of linguistic theory briefly to consider what he calls 'extensions of silence' in other areas, such as the arts (painting drawing the most attention). His argument is that rules similar to those in speech apply: that silence is to be treated as part of a communicative process in each case, and that it gains its meaning from being so framed (as can be said for 'the tradition of silence' in twentieth-century literature identified by Hassan). He admits that in researching the topic itself he became infected with the 'silent disease', discovering it to be a more and more common feature of human communication, and expresses the hope 'that the disease is going to spread'.[25] What he means by this is that he wants silence to be more widely studied, whereas I am calling for it to become more widely available as a condition. Our bias may differ, but I certainly want to see the silence disease spreading as much as Jaworski does.

The editors of *Perspectives of Silence* note that silence is generally thought of as 'the ground against which the figure of talk is perceived', but they wish to reverse this state of affairs in order to demonstrate the 'richness' of silence 'as a research site' in its own right.[26] Their collection certainly does that, ranging across linguistic, psychological, ethnographic and cross-cultural perspectives to conclude that silence has many 'forms and functions', such as 'pausing in cognitive processes'; 'impression formation'; 'communicative style' in given cultures; 'the nonverbal activity which structures interaction'; 'communicative device in interaction'; 'obstructor or facilitator of divine inspiration'; 'means of emotion management and display'.[27] Silence comes across as a critical aspect of world culture, particularly in terms of its role in the communicative process (the central concern of the book itself). What becomes very apparent

over the course of the collection, as it does in Jaworski's work, is that silence has a broad spectrum of uses and responses, and that a fully 'integrated theory of communication' is unthinkable without a place in it for silence.[28] We cannot really understand 'the whole communication system', as Muriel Saville-Troike puts it, without taking into account the way that 'silence serves variously as prime, substitute, and surrogate, as well as frame, cue, and background' within that system.[29]

Saville-Troike herself draws up a grid for classifying types of silence within a very wide range of contexts, such as institutions (temples, libraries, and monasteries, etc.), groups (legislative bodies, committees, audiences, classes, etc.) and speech situations (including such private activities as praying and fantasising). Her list is preliminary and open to further elaboration, but once again the effect is to make us realise that communication could hardly work without the regular and systematic deployment of silence, whose uses seem to expand as we reflect on the communicative process in general cultural terms. No one could fail to be impressed by the extent to which silence is integrated into our cultural processes, and the conclusion that naturally follows from such enquiries is that any reduction in silence would be to our general cultural impoverishment. That, of course, is what my argument in this book is designed to prove: that silence is not a luxury but a necessity in our daily lives, and that we can neither think nor communicate properly without it.

Conclusion: Campaigning for Silence

Our journey through silence's history as concept, theme and symbol has established what an important role it plays in our culture. It has revealed also the need to create space for it in response to the assault against silence that is such a pervasive feature of contemporary existence; in other words, of the need to develop a positive politics of silence which will confront the commercially-driven politics of noise which threatens to introduce some form of Shock and Awe into almost all areas of our lives, scarring the environment badly in the process. Accommodation must be reached between the two positions, because on current projections both the population and free market capitalism will continue to grow and with that the scope for even more extensive noise pollution across the planet – just wait until commercially run UAVs start clogging up the airspace above 24/7 cities. This cannot be allowed to go unchecked; the virtues of silence must be campaigned for, and passionately so. It has to be made clear just how much is at stake culturally in the conflict between noise and silence. To reiterate the point made in Chapter 3, a defence of silence is a defence of the human. It is also plainly a defence of an increasingly beleaguered environment.

Silence, Noise and Education

In many ways noise still *is* the forgotten pollutant: that would have to be one of the major conclusions of our survey. It has a much lower public profile than the other forms, which are more likely to command the headlines in any environmental debate. That is a state of affairs which should be re-addressed, especially since noise pollution is a problem that is steadily worsening, with no apparent end in sight to the ability of technology to create bigger and better sources of noise production – sound bombs, sonic bullets, just name your requirements and techno-science will do its very best to deliver. No end in sight either to the corporate world's appetite for such products in their insatiable search for ways to market their wares.

There is an educational aspect to be explored here: noise consciousness is something which can, and should, be taught. If the public can be educated about the other forms of pollution and their detrimental effect on the quality of life, then surely noise pollution should be included in the package too. Noise pollution is an environmental factor of considerable importance in people's lives, intruding on all of us, and we should be reminded of this regularly. It would not be unreasonable to teach noise consciousness at school, as part of a general campaign of environmental awareness designed to develop good habits in the individual. Minimising the noise impact we have on the world around us would certainly be in society's wider interests, and it is worth emphasising the benefits that would follow. We can build on something that already happens informally. As Muriel Saville-Troike has pointed out, children are taught from an early age 'when not to talk', adding that 'socializing young children to the use of silence may be considered part of the transmission of world view'.[1] That worldview can be made to incorporate an expanded notion of silence. It is not as if noise pollution is a victimless crime: as our survey has revealed, it is a health issue, both physical and psychological, of some considerable concern – hearing loss, tinnitus, stress and heart attacks all following in noise's wake. All of those whose health is so affected, whether by means of

the marketing cynicism of the corporate sector or through the sheer thoughtlessness of their fellow human beings, deserve better.

There is a very significant point to be made about social relations in any such educational campaign. Creating noise is an inherently aggressive act that all too often signals a desire for domination over the other, and that is surely worth discouraging as a character trait from an early stage of everyone's development. Anyone who introduces loud noise into a public space is effectively invading it, appropriating it for their personal purposes and refusing to recognise the rights of others, including the right to be left to their own devices. The balance of power is changed immediately in such situations, others are being imposed on and placed on the defensive with regard to the aggressor – an effect readily understood by the theorists and practitioners of Shock and Awe, who know well that those who control the noise hold the advantage. Those rights should not have to be asserted by way of complaint, which inevitably creates conflict; respect for them ought to be internalised within all of us, and that will require education – all the more so in a society like ours, where self-interest is promoted as the driving force of our economic system. In a culture which rewards self-assertiveness, the basis for success in the West's highly competitive marketplace, concern for the psychological requirements of others is not going to be a particularly high priority. That has to be revisited.

The public should be made aware of the importance of silence in our lives, of the critical role it plays in fostering thinking and creativity as well as in maintaining our physical and psychological well-being – not to mention our financial well-being, as environmental noise permeates our neighbourhoods ever further. The more it is eroded, the more difficult it is to access silence in our public and private places because of the reach of unjustified unnatural noise, and the less human our culture becomes. Do we really want to slide into a 24-hour construction society around the globe, where the natural rhythms of human existence are trampled over by corporate interests? The quality of life can only plummet if that particular assault against silence is to become more widespread. Once again it is not a question of halting such progress. Even if we wanted to do

so, it is too locked into our current worldview for that to happen, but rather of establishing a balance, between noise and silence in this instance. To repeat a point made earlier, silence should not be regarded as a luxury but as a necessity of civilised life. As Thomas Merton reminds us, without an exterior silence there can be no interior silence – and all of us need that internal silence on occasion to refresh and revive ourselves, not just those of a religious bent. We are neither 24-hour beings nor machines. Merton advocated quiet houses for lay Catholics to retreat to for contemplation: we could well campaign at the local level for more concerted efforts to reduce noise in the community, so that contemplation is possible in our own homes and public spaces such as parks. At both the local and national level noise reduction should be made a political issue, as smoking so successfully has been. If there can be no-smoking areas, then there can be no-noise areas too.

It has to be recognised, however, that in a mega-city such as Shanghai, and all its other global counterparts, silence can only ever be a relative term – John Cage's observation that there is always noise emanating from somewhere applies unilaterally in such settings. If construction projects close down overnight, they are still a source of noise, even if it is only the sound of the wind blowing through the plastic sheeting that litters such sites. Yet it is still worth promoting the cause of silence, still worth trying to preserve a space for it even in such adverse circumstances, still worth keeping it in the forefront of the public consciousness as the alternative to an existence with the volume knob turned up full blast. Relative silence is clearly preferable to 24-hour construction. Again, we must not allow ourselves to become bogged down in a semantic debate: ultimately it is the volume that counts, especially in the evening and the early morning when our natural rhythms are at their most sensitive to disturbance.

Balancing Noise and Silence

So we conclude our manifesto for silence with an appeal for the balance of noise and silence to be respected and maintained at all

times, and for the politics and culture of noise to be kept under careful scrutiny. If silence is a boundary notion, then we should be marking out the boundary. To lose silence, to lose the ability to access silence when we require it for thought, reflection and inner regeneration, would be to lose an important part of our humanity. We have to ensure this does not happen, and that silence continues to play the critical role in so many areas of our lives that it has done traditionally. 24-hour societies come at a cost, and one of the most prominent is increased noise. Increased noise makes sleep difficult, and that is detrimental to our physical and psychological health, as medical science is only too ready to provide documentary evidence for.[2] If it is problematic in a hospital setting, as the Mayo Clinic's study clearly demonstrated, then it has a far greater capacity to be so in the wider world we inhabit, where there are far more sources of noise, – and far less predictable ones at that, existing as they do outside of institutional routine.

The whole issue of noise as a marketing technique, which is such a critical factor of the 24-hour ethic, also asks to be re-examined, and New York City's lead in monitoring this aspect of urban life more closely than it has been in the past is well worth adopting elsewhere. New York has not become a haven of peace and quiet since those controls were introduced, but that could hardly be expected, even by the most committed advocate of silence. The agony of Lowry's great giants continues. What is significant in this case is the recognition that *something* has to be done even in a mega-city, and that it is no longer good enough to be reactive only on this issue: that is why the problem has become so acute, because silence simply had not been taken into account. In that respect Mayor Bloomberg's initiative is highly symbolic and very much to be applauded. It is also very much a corrective to the moves that have been made by the political masters in Shanghai. Those two examples indicate that noise really is, as I claimed in the Introduction, an ideological battleground on a global scale, and that we cannot be neutral about the outcome – not if we want to sleep, think, reflect or preserve our health (we might even say our collective sanity). It is a conflict which will engage us more and more as globalisation spreads, and those of us supporting

silence have to be prepared for this. Globalisation means more noise, more noise means more noise pollution, and more noise pollution means a more hostile environment that will test us all severely.

Noise is an inescapable consequence of a 24-hour society, therefore, and part of a general trend towards cultural homogenisation that is fostered above all by the business world for whom this is the route to greater profits. A mass market with the same predictable desires is by far the easiest to cater for. To call for noise and silence to be in balance is yet another plea on behalf of difference in our culture, rather than for one in which the volume knob is permanently set at maximum, thus flattening out all experience. The current triumph of the free market being expressed through globalisation is the enemy of difference. At its most zealous it wants 24-hour access to the same goods and services everywhere, and will make use of whatever stimulation is necessary to increase our consumption. Increased consumption merely increases the sources of noise, and we end up in a vicious cycle which is extremely difficult to break. As I have insisted throughout this book it is not in our best interests for noise to become our destiny, and we should actively be resisting those forces which are striving to make it so, turning urban life into a constant trial for those with any sensitivity at all to their environment. Silence takes on a subversive quality as a result and opting for it a refusal to be driven purely by the profit motive, or to live a life of perpetual sensual bombardment aimed at eradicating our individuality in the name of passive consumption.

It is imperative to keep dwelling on silence's positive qualities as well; how it enhances and deepens thought, for example, or provides a means of exploring our spiritual nature or just our personal identity. It is imperative, too, that we overcome our fear of silence, and recognise it as an important, indeed essential, part of our experience that we should welcome. Silence matters, and there should be more of it. Trappism may carry this desire to an extreme, but all of us require Trappist experiences at some point or other in our lives. There has to be desert as well as 24/7 cities to cover the range of human psychological needs. What this means, as I have been arguing all along, is that we must have the ability to access silence,

and not to find the opportunities for doing so steadily eroding as, sadly, they currently are. Noise must never be allowed to overwhelm silence. I may not want to go as far as Max Picard and conceive of silence as an entity in its own right with its own agenda, but I do want to see it as a condition worth protecting and preserving. We certainly have the ability to destroy silence, and do so only too readily – and too casually. Our environment would be all the better were we to curb this ability as much as possible, and I trust this book has demonstrated both how and why that should be done. It really is time to speak up for silence and against the politics and culture of noise, and I will end my manifesto in that unashamedly campaigning spirit.

Notes

Introduction: The Virtues of Silence: The Politics of Silence

1 For a survey of this literature, see 'Studies of Sleep Disturbance', in Karl D. Kryter, *The Handbook of Hearing and the Effects of Noise: Physiology, Psychology and Public Health*, San Diego, CA and London: Academic Press, 1994, pp. 483–508.

2 Chris McGreal, 'Palestinians Hit by Sonic Boom Air Raids', *Guardian*, 3 November 2005, p. 3.

3 Oliver Wendell Holmes, *The Music Grinders*, in *The Complete Poetical Works of Oliver Wendell Holmes*, London: George C. Harrap, 1895, line 58, p. 13. The poem is a complaint against street musicians, and although cast in a humorous vein, nevertheless has a serious point to make about unwanted intrusion, as the following stanzas (ll. 49–60) make clear:

> You think they are crusaders sent,
> From some infernal clime,
> To pluck the eyes of Sentiment,
> And dock the tail of Rhyme,
> To crack the voice of Melody,
> And break the legs of Time.
>
> But hark! the air again is still,
> The music all is ground,
> And silence, like a poultice comes

To heal the blows of sound;
It cannot be, – it is, it is, –
A hat is going round!

4 Aldous Huxley, *The Perennial Philosophy*, London: Chatto, 1946, p. 249.
5 Ibid.
6 Jean Baudrillard, *America*, trans. Chris Turner, London and New York: Verso, 1988, p. 6.
7 Jamie Wilson, 'Beleaguered Bush Steps up PR Blitz with Live Address', *Guardian*, 19 December 2005, p. 3.
8 George H. Gorman, *The Amazing Fact of Quaker Worship*, London: Quaker Home Service, 1973, pp. 1–2.
9 Ibid., pp. 10, 11.
10 The full name of the Trappist Order is the Cistercians of the More Strict Observance. They were originally a reform movement within the Cistercian Order whose ideas spread, particularly during the seventeenth century.
11 Thomas Merton, *Entering the Silence: Becoming a Monk and Writer. The Journals of Thomas Merton*, vols. I–II, ed. Jonathan Montaldo, New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996, II, pp. 395, 396.
12 Ibid., p. 396.
13 Quoted in Gorman, *Amazing Fact*, p. 19.
14 Quoted in Susan Sontag, *Styles of Radical Will*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1969, p. 10.
15 Peter and Linda Murray, *A Dictionary of Art and Artists*, 3rd edition, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972, p. 256.
16 Adam Jaworski, *The Power of Silence: Social and Pragmatic Perspectives*, Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1993, p. 141.
17 Gerard Manley Hopkins, *The Habit of Perfection*, ll. 1–4, in *The Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, 4th edition, eds W. H. Gardner and N. H. MacKenzie, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970, p. 31.
18 John Keats, *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, ll. 11–14, in *The Complete Poems*, 3rd edition, ed. John Barnard, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1988, pp. 344–6.
19 Ingmar Bergman, *Four Screenplays of Ingmar Bergman*, trans. Lars Malstrom and David Kushner, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1960, pp. 111–12.

20 Arthur Gibson, *The Silence of God: Creative Response to the Films of Ingmar Bergman*, New York, Evanston, IL and London: Harper & Row, 1969, p. 24.
21 Laurence Sterne, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*, ed. Ian Campbell Ross, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983, pp. 27–8.
22 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. D. F. Pears and B. F. McGuinness, London and Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul, revised edition, 1974, p. 74.
23 A. A. Rooney, *Word for Word*, New York: Berkley Books, 1987, pp. 172–4.
24 J. Vernon Jensen, 'Communicative Functions of Silence', *ETC*, 30 (1973), pp. 249–57.
25 While I concur with much of what he is saying, there is something of a New Age feel to a very recent work in the field, John Lane's *The Spirit of Silence: Making Space for Creativity* (Totnes, Devon: Green Books, 2006), particularly in the author's expressed desire to turn the clock back on 'modernism'. I do not wish to sound too critical, however, as Lane does touch on several of the topics covered in this book (if generally more briefly), and I would agree with him that silence is an essential ingredient in 'making space for creativity'.
26 http://noiseabatementsociety.com.
27 Karl D. Kryter, *The Effects of Noise on Man*, 2nd edition, Orlando, FL: Academic Press, 1985, p. 1.
28 There is even a designated International Noise Awareness Day (the fourth Wednesday of every April), which requests that all of us maintain silence from 2.15 to 2.16 p.m., but it has yet to make much impact on the public consciousness.
29 Kryter, *Handbook of Hearing*, p. 2.

1 The Science and Technology of Silence

1 Karl D. Kryter, *The Effects of Noise on Man*, 2nd edition, Orlando, FL: Academic Press, 1985, p. 7.
2 Ayan Panja, *An Essential Medical Miscellany*, London: Royal Society of Medicine Press, 2005, p. 113.
3 Karl D. Kryter, The *Handbook of Hearing and the Effect of Noise: Physiology, Psychology and Public Health*, San Diego, CA and London: Academic Press, 1994, p. 491.

4 Ibid., p. 492.
5 Kryter, *Effects of Noise*, pp. 112–13.
6 Ibid.
7 Ibid., p. 2. Hertz is defined as: 'The number of times per second the air pressure increases above, then decreases below, and then returns to normal pressure . . . [also referred to as *cycles per second* (cps)]' (square brackets in original).
8 Calvin Tomkins, *The Bride and the Bachelors: The Heretical Courtship in Modern Art*, London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1965, p. 118. The room was in the physics laboratory at Harvard University.
9 Thomas Merton, *The Journals of Thomas Merton*, II, ed. Jonathan Montaldo, New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996, p. 440.
10 Quoted in Patrick McGrath, 'New York Trilogy', *Guardian*, Review Section, 29 July 2006, p. 3.
11 *The Science Show*, Transcript, 15 May 2004, ABC Radio National Home, http://www.abc.net.au/rn/science/ss/stories/s1106697.htm.
12 Mick Hamer, 'Downtown Uproar', *New Scientist*, 5 August 2006, pp. 34–6.
13 Ibid., p. 34.
14 Ibid., p. 36.
15 Brian Howe, quoted in ibid.
16 Ibid.
17 The response to the 'Downtown Uproar' article in *New Scientist* included a letter drawing attention to a similar phenomenon with windmills, whose operation brought about a noise which in the nineteenth century was referred to as 'blowing the horn'. The cure is simpler to achieve than in the case of skyscrapers, however, and the problem itself is on nothing like the same scale. David Bent, 'Whistling Windmills', *New Scientist*, 26 August 2006, p. 23.
18 Kryter, *Handbook of Hearing*, p. 53.
19 Ibid., p. 483.
20 Ibid., p. 611.
21 John Hind, 'Chronic Transonics: Getting in a Bother about Metal Birds that Hover', *Observer Magazine*, 27 August 2006, p. 7.
22 Jonathan Steele, 'Arab Despots, not Israel, Are Now under a Greater Threat', *Guardian*, 4 August 2006, p. 29.

23 Alok Jha, 'On the Horizon . . . Pilotless Planes as Fishermen's and Firefighters' Friends', *Guardian*, 30 August 2006, p. 12.
24 Kryter, *Handbook of Hearing*, p. 611.
25 'Noise, Noise Everywhere', *New Scientist*, 26 August 2006, p. 7.

2 Marketing Noise

1 Peter Pae, 'Weapon Sends Message That's Loud and Clear', http://www.noiseabatementsociety.com, 25 June 2002 (originally published as 'Directed Sound Device Focuses Sound in One Place', *Los Angeles Times*, 23 June 2002).
2 Ibid.
3 Ibid.
4 Ibid. Even in its natural form the sound of a baby crying weighs in at a hefty 110 decibels, higher than a tractor (90) or home lawnmower (100), and just below a pneumatic drill (120), which requires ear protectors (see Ayan Panja, *Essential Medical Miscellany*, London: Royal Society of Medicine Press, 2005, p. 113).
5 Pae, 'Weapon Sends Message'.
6 Ibid.
7 Ibid.
8 The *Guardian*'s rock critic, for example, has complained that 'rock and pop music has never been more in thrall to corporate sponsorship or more willing to license music to advertisers, has never seemed more unrepentantly venal than it does today' (Alexis Petridis, 'In Pursuit of Outlaw Cool', *Guardian*, 30 August 2006, p. 26).
9 'Prejudice apart, the game of push-pin is of equal value with the arts and sciences of music and poetry. If the game of push-pin furnish more pleasure, it is more valuable than either. Everybody can play at push-pin: poetry and music are relished only by a few' (Jeremy Bentham, *The Rationale for Reward* [1825], in *The Works of Jeremy Bentham*, vols. I–XI, New York: Russell and Russell, 1962, II, pp. 189–266 (p. 253)).
10 See John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism* [1861], ed. Mary Warnock, London: Fontana, 1962.

3 The Assault against Silence and Why Silence Matters

1 Most rock fans regard this effect as part of the package and fail to take it seriously: 'We floated home not particularly caring if our ears would ever stop ringing', as two travel writers reporting on a music festival in Chicago noted after a night spent at a rock gig in a crowded bar (Laura Barton and Amy Fleming, 'In Lolla Land', *Guardian*, Travel Section, 29 July, 2006, p. 3).
2 Vivienne Michael, Chief Executive of Deafness Research UK, quoted in Lucy Atkins, 'Ten Tips to Save (or Prolong) Your Life', *Guardian*, G2 Section, 13 July 2006, p. 7.
3 See Jean-François Lyotard, *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby, Oxford: Blackwell, 1991.
4 See Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Brian Massumi, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984.
5 Aldous Huxley, *The Perennial Philosophy*, London: Chatto & Windus, 1946, p. 249.
6 Ibid., p. 250.
7 Quoted in ibid., p. 247.
8 Ibid., p. 1.
9 Ibid., p. 7.
10 Ibid., p. 248.
11 Ibid., pp. 247, 248.
12 Philippa Ibbotson, 'The Stimulus of Silence', *Guardian*, 1 May 2006, p. 26.
13 Noise Abatement Society, http://www.noiseabatementsociety.com.
14 Josh Fecht, 'New York Mayor in Fight against Noise Pollution', *City Mayor's Archive*, 10 June 2004.
15 Paul Marston, 'Hearing Aid for Construction and Manufacturing Workers', News Release, 11 September 2005, http://noiseabatementsociety.com.
16 Although it has been recognised that the condition can occasionally 'resolve itself' or respond to medical treatment (Ayan Panja, *An Essential Medical Miscellany*, London: Royal Society of Medicine Press, 2005, p. 112).
17 L. Bernardi, C. Porta and P. Sleight, 'Cardiovascular, Cerebrovascular, and Respiratory Changes Induced by Different Types of Music in

Musicians and Non-Musicians: The Importance of Silence', *Heart*, 92 (2006), pp. 445–52 (p. 445).

18 Ibid., p. 449. RR stands for Respiratory Rate; LF:HF for low frequency and high frequency.

19 Ibid.

20 Ibid.

21 'Noise Linked to Heart Attack Risk', http://noiseabatementsociety.com, 25 November 2005.

22 Tracy Hampton, 'With RNA Intereference, Silence is Golden: Scientists Probe New Approach's Clinical Potential', *Journal of the American Medical Association*, 291:23 (2004), pp. 2803–4 (p. 2803). RNA stands for ribonucleic acid.

23 Ibid., p. 2804.

24 Ibid.

25 Greg Hannon, quoted in ibid.

26 Cheryl Cmiel et al., 'Noise Control: A Nursing Team's Approach to Sleep Promotion', *American Journal of Nursing*, 104:2 (2004), pp. 40–8.

27 D. Scalise, 'Shhh, Quiet Please', *Hospital and Health Networks*, 78:5 (2004), pp. 16–17 (p. 17).

28 See John J. Cook, 'Silence in Psychotherapy', *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 11 (1964), pp. 42–6.

29 G. Lee, *Leadership Coaching: From Personal Insight to Organisational Performance*, London: Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, 2003, pp. 125, 126.

30 D. Megginson and D. Clutterbuck, *Techniques for Coaching and Mentoring*, Oxford: Elsevier Butterworth-Heinemann, 2005, p. 31.There is a recognition that this technique works generally in a learning context: see, for example, M. B. Rowe, 'Pausing Phenomena: Influence on the Quality of Instruction', *Journal of Psycholinguistic Research*, 2:2 (1974), pp. 203–24.

31 Suzanne Kurtz, Jonathan Silverman and Juliet Draper, *Teaching and Learning Communication Skills in Medicine*, Oxford: Radcliffe Medical Press, 1998; Appendix 2, 'The Two-Guide Format of the *Calgary-Cambridge Observation Guide*', pp. 225–31 (p. 226).

32 Ibid.

33 Lynne Brindley, 'The "Undergraduate Masses" Have not Squeezed out Our Readers', *Guardian*, 12 June 2006, p. 33.

34 Tristram Hunt, 'Scholarly Squeeze', *Guardian*, 29 May 2006, p. 27.
35 Jean Baudrillard, *America*, trans. Chris Turner, London and New York: Verso, 1988, p. 10.
36 Ibid., p. 6.
37 Thomas Merton, *The Waters of Silence*, London: Hollis and Carter, 1950, p. 3.
38 Baudrillard, *America*, p. 6.
39 Henry D. Thoreau, *Walden* [1854], ed. J. Lyndon Shanley, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1971, p. 8.
40 Ibid., p. 130.
41 Ibid., p. 135.
42 Ibid., p. 136.
43 Thomas Carlyle, *Signs of the Times* [1829], in *Works*, vols. 1–30, New York: AMS Press, 1969, 27, pp. 63, 80.
44 Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, New York: Routledge, 1991, p. 153. I discuss the clash between such views and those of Lyotard in my *Lyotard and the Inhuman*, Cambridge: Icon Press, 2001.
45 '"Sound Bombs" Hurt Gaza Civilians', *Guardian* (Gaza), 4 November 2005, p. 6.
46 Steele, 'Arab Despots'.
47 Harlan K. Ullman and James P. Wade et al., *Shock and Awe: Achieving Rapid Dominance*, Washington: National Defense University Press, 1966, chapter 2. The text of the book can also be found at http://www.shockandawe.com/, from where this quote is taken.
48 George Steiner, *Language and Silence: Essays 1958–1966*, London: Faber and Faber, 1967, p. 16.

4 Where Silence Matters: Religion

1 William Shakespeare, *Hamlet* [1601], ed. Harold Jenkins, London and New York: Methuen, 1982, V.ii.363, p. 416.
2 Monica Furlong, *Contemplating Now*, London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1971, p. 13.
3 Ibid., pp. 13, 14.
4 Ibid., pp. 108–9.
5 Ibid., p. 18.

6 Ibid., p. 20.
7 Ibid., p. 58.
8 George Fox, *The Journal of George Fox*, revised edition, ed. John L. Nickalls, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1952, p. 12. Idle talk was no more appreciated by other religious enthusiasts of the day, with the figure of Talkative in Part One of John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1678) held up as representative of the superficiality of 'carnal' society. Talkative's sheer volubility – 'I will talk of things heavenly, or things earthly; things Moral, or things Evangelical; things Sacred, or things Prophane; things past, or things to come; things forraign, or things at home; things more Essential, or things Circumstantial' (*The Pilgrim's Progress*, Parts One and Two, ed. J. B. Wharey, rev. Roger Sharrock, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1928, 1960, One, p. 77) – is suspect to the work's hero, Christian. Ironically enough, Bunyan was engaged in a bad-tempered pamphlet dispute with the Quaker movement, in the person of Edward Burrough, in the later 1650s, although neither side would have considered such words at all idle.
9 William Penn, *A Brief Account of the Rise and Progress of the People, Call'd Quakers*, in William Penn, *The Peace of Europe, The Fruits of Solitude and Other Writings*, ed. Edwin R. Bronner, London: Everyman, 1993, pp. 283, 284.
10 Richard Bauman, *Let Your Words Be Few: Symbolism of Speaking and Silence among Seventeenth-Century Quakers*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983, pp. 29, 30.
11 William Penn, *Some Fruits of Solitude*, in *The Peace of Europe*, p. 37.
12 Bauman, *Let Your Words*, p. 31.
13 See Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation* [1966], London: Vintage, 1994.
14 George H. Gorman, *The Amazing Fact of Quaker Worship*, London: Quaker Home Service, 1973, p. 21.
15 Ibid., p. 25.
16 L. V. Holdsworth, with Joshua S. Rowntree, *In Quietness: Thoughts on Silent Worship*, London: Friends' Book Centre, 1945, p. 14.
17 Gorman, *Amazing Fact*, p. 30.
18 Ibid., p. 37.
19 Ibid., p. 38.
20 Quoted in *Christian Faith and Practice in the Experience of the Society of Friends*, London: London Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends, 1960, para. 246 (no page numbers; quote from 1908).

21 Gorman, *Amazing Fact*, p. 40.
22 Quoted in ibid., p. 44.
23 Quoted in ibid., p. 109.
24 Pierre Lacout, *God is Silence*, trans. John Kay, London: Quaker Home Service, 1985, p. 2.
25 Ibid., p. 9.
26 St Ignatius Loyola, *The Spiritual Exercises*, London: Burns, Oates and Washbourne, 1923, p. 3.
27 Ibid., pp. 13–14.
28 Joseph Rickaby, ibid., p. 18.
29 Ibid., p. 152.
30 Thomas Merton, *The Journals* of *Thomas Merton*, New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996, II, p. 395.
31 Ibid., p. 396.
32 Ibid., p. 429.
33 Ibid., p. 440.
34 Ibid.
35 Ibid., p. 441.
36 Ibid., p. 482.
37 Ibid., p. 484.
38 Ibid.
39 Ironically, for one who agonised so much over whether he should write at all, and whether this was consistent with the Trappist lifestyle, Merton's poetry has not met with a great deal of critical success, with T. S. Eliot famously advising him to think more and write less. See Monica Furlong, *Merton: A Biography*, London: William Collins, 1980, p. 215.
40 Thomas Merton, *The Waters of Silence*, London: Hollis and Carter, 1950, p. 267.
41 James A. Jaska and Ernest L. Stech, 'Communication to Enhance the Trappist Silence: The Trappist Experience', *Journal of Communication*, 28 (1978), pp. 14–18 (p. 14).
42 Ibid., p. 15.
43 I will avoid the issue of whether or not Buddhism qualifies as a religion, and follow the general practice of including it under that heading (by default as much as anything else). A suggestion made by some

commentators is that it is an 'atheistic religion'. For a detailed discussion of this issue, see Raimundo Panikkar's *The Silence of God: The Answer of the Buddha*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1989.

44 Nagarjuna, *Averting the Arguments*, trans. Frederick J. Streng, para. 70; Appendix B, in Frederick J. Streng, *Emptiness: A Study in Religious Meaning*, Nashville, NY: Abingdon Press, 1967, pp. 222–7 (p. 227).

45 Karl Potter, *Presuppositions of India's Philosophies*, Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1972, p. 241.

46 Tan Acharn Kor Khao-suan-luang, *Directing to Self-Penetration: Six Dhamma Talks about Centring the Mind in Non-Attachment*, trans. Bo Thai, Kandy, Sri Lanka: Buddhist Publication Society, 1985, p. 21.

47 Pat Allwright, *Basics of Buddhism: Key Principles and How to Practise*, Taplow, Bucks: Taplow Press, 1998, p. 22.

48 Ibid., p. 23.

49 'Buddhist Meditation', by Shinzen (Steven) Young, in Richard H. Robinson and Willard L. Johnson, *The Buddhist Religion: A Historical Introduction*, 3rd edition, Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1982, Appendix, pp. 226–35 (p. 234). As John Lane even more pointedly asserts, '[m]editation is non-credal; it has nothing to do with religion of any kind' (*Spirit of Silence*, p. 86).

50 Panikkar, *Silence of God*, p. vi.

51 Ibid., p. 14.

52 Ibid.

53 Ibid., p. 148.

54 Ibid., p. 21.

55 Ibid., p. 151.

56 Ibid., p. 154.

57 Ibid., p. 155.

58 Ibid., p. 175.

59 Dale S. Wright, *Philosophical Meditations on Zen Buddhism*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998, p. 94.

60 Quoted in ibid.

61 Quoted in ibid.

62 Ibid., p. 95.

63 Ibid., p. 96.

64 Ibid., p. 97.

65 André Padoux, 'Mantra', in Gavin Flood, ed., *The Blackwell Companion to Hinduism*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 2003, pp. 478–92 (p. 485). Tantras being the body of Sanskrit religious literature (eighth to eleventh century) claiming to take precedence over the Vedas, religious verses from an earlier period.
66 Ibid.
67 Sri Ramana Maharshi, *The Teachings of Bhagavan Sri Ramana Maharshi: In His Own Words*, ed. Arthur Osborne, London: Rider, 1971, p. 156.
68 Ibid., p. 90.
69 Khalil Gibran, *The Prophet*, London: Heinemann, 1926, p. 71.
70 *Tao Te Ching*, chapter LVI; in Arthur Waley, *The Way and Its Power: A Study of the Tao Te Ching and Its Place in Chinese Thought*, London: George Allen and Unwin, 1934, pp. 141–243 (p. 210). The work has been attributed to Lao Tzu, although its authorship cannot be conclusively proved. Thus Waley: 'We do not know and it is unlikely that we shall ever know who wrote the *Tao Te Ching*' (ibid., p. 99).
71 *Tao Te Ching*, chapter LXXXI; ibid., p. 243.
72 For more on the Realists, see ibid., pp. 68–91.
73 Ibid., pp. 44–5.
74 Ibid., p. 45.
75 Ibid., p. 59.
76 Ibid., p. 99.
77 George Steiner, *Language and Silence: Essays 1958–1966*, London: Faber and Faber, 1987, p. 31.
78 Max Picard, *The World of Silence*, trans. Stanley Goodman, London: Harvill Press, 1948, p. 17.
79 Ibid., p. 21.
80 Ibid., p. 198.
81 Ibid., p. 209.
82 Ibid., p. 211.
83 Ibid., pp. 22–3.
84 Ibid., p. 221.
85 See Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson, Oxford: Blackwell, 1962. For Heidegger, 'keeping silent' (*Schweigen*) is an important part of discourse that helps to reveal Being: 'Keeping silent authentically is possible only in genuine

discoursing. To be able to keep silent, Dasein [Being] must have something to say – that is, it must have at its disposal an authentic and rich disclosedness of itself. In that case one's reticence . . . makes something manifest, and does away with "idle talk" ' (ibid., p. 208).

86 Picard, *World of Silence*, p. 137.

87 Ibid., p. 39.

88 Ibid., p. 71.

5 Where Silence Matters: Philosophy

1 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. D. F. Pears and B. F. McGuinness, London and Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul, revised edition, 1974, p. 74.

2 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1968, p. 49.

3 Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, pp. 73–4.

4 Ibid., p. 5.

5 Ibid., p. 73.

6 Ibid.

7 Sanford Budick and Wolfgang Iser, eds, *Languages of the Unsayable: The Play of Negativity in Literature*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1989, Introduction, p. xi.

8 Ibid., p. xii.

9 Ibid., p. xix.

10 Jacques Derrida, 'How to Avoid Speaking: Denials', trans. Ken Frieden, in Budick and Iser, eds, *Languages of the Unsayable*, pp. 3–70 (p. 16).

11 Ibid., p. 5. Correspondences have also been identified between Derrida and Nagarjuna, however, and Buddhism might be considered a form of negative theology. For Derrida and Nagarjuna, see Robert Magliola, *Derrida on the Mend*, West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 1984.

12 Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978, pp. 11, 18.

13 Jacques Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Ian McLeod, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1987, pp. 1–2.

14 I engage more fully with Derrida's critical writings in chapter 5 ('"Neither Comment, Nor Underscore . . ., Nor Extract": Derrida as Critic'), of my *Beyond Aesthetics: Confrontations with Poststructuralism and Postmodernism*, Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992, pp. 54–69.
15 See, for example, Jean-François Lyotard, *Duchamp's Trans/Formers*, trans. I. McLeod, Venice, CA: Lapis Press, 1990.
16 Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgment*, trans. James Creed Meredith, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952, p. 97.
17 See, for example, Jean-François Lyotard, *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime*, trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994.
18 Edmund Husserl, *The Essential Husserl: Basic Writings in Transcendental Philosophy*, ed. Donn Welton, Bloomington and Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 1999, p. 64.
19 Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, p. 49.
20 Husserl, *The Essential Husserl*, p. 63.
21 Ibid., p. 64.
22 Ibid.
23 See, for example, Edo Pivčević, *Husserl and Phenomenology*, London: Hutchinson, 1970.
24 I explore the relevance of that tradition for countering the authoritarian power of belief systems in our own day in my *Empires of Belief: Why We Need More Scepticism and Doubt in the Twenty-First Century*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006.
25 David Hume, *Dialogues and Natural History of Religion* [1779, 1757], ed. J. C. A. Gaskin, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993, p. 184.
26 Bernard P. Dauenhauer, *Silence, the Phenomenon and its Ontological Significance*, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1980, p. 4.
27 Ibid.
28 Ibid., p. 146.
29 Ibid., p. 12.
30 Ibid., p. 16.
31 Ibid., p. 89.
32 Ibid., p. 184.
33 For more on this topic, see my *Empires of Belief*, chapter 2.

6 The Aesthetics of Silence

1 Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation*, London: Vintage, 1994, p. 4.
2 Ibid., p. 5.
3 Ibid., p. 8.
4 Ibid., p. 7.
5 Ibid., p. 14.
6 Ibid., p. 7.
7 Roland Barthes, *Image Music Text*, trans. and ed. Stephen Heath, London: Fontana, 1977, p. 148.
8 Susan Sontag, *Styles of Radical Will*, New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1969, p. 5.
9 Ibid., p. 7.
10 Ibid., p. 11.
11 Ibid.
12 Ibid., p. 13.
13 Ibid.
14 Ibid., p. 14.
15 Ibid., p. 18.
16 Ibid., p. 21.
17 Ibid., p. 25.
18 George Steiner notes a similar crisis of language, 'a retreat from the word', as he calls it, but is critical of the kind of solution Sontag offers, speaking of 'the suicidal rhetoric of silence' (*Language and Silence: Essays 1958–1966*, London: Faber and Faber, 1967, pp. 30, 69). For Steiner, such a rhetoric is symptomatic of cultural decline.
19 Sontag, *Styles of Radical Will*, p. 32.
20 Ibid., p. 33.
21 Ibid.
22 John Cage, *Silence: Lectures and Writings*, London: Marion Boyars, 1978.
23 Ibid., p. xii. Note that the layout of the original text has not been used here.
24 Paul Griffiths, *Oxford Studies of Composers: Cage*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981, p. 36.
25 Cage, *Silence*, pp. 109–10.

26 Ibid., p. 110.
27 Ibid., p. 126. Cage might well be making an equation between silence and nothing, and the concept of nothing has been the focus of some attention of late; John D. Barrow, *Book of Nothing*, London: Jonathan Cape, 2000, being one example. Apart from the fact that Barrow's treatment is fairly exhaustive, I will steer clear of that equation to stay focused on silence alone, a wide enough topic in its own right.
28 Cage, *Silence*, p. 126.
29 Ibid., p. 129. As with the *Lecture on Nothing*, the original typography has not been reproduced here.
30 Ibid., p. 135.
31 Ibid., p. 3.
32 Daniel N. Maltz, 'Joyful Noise and Reverent Silence: The Significance of Noise in Pentecostal Worship', in Deborah Tannen and Muriel Saville-Troike, eds, *Perspectives on Silence*, Norwood, NJ: Ablex, 1985, pp. 113–37 (p. 131).

7 Where Silence Matters: The Arts

1 Calvin Tomkins, *The Bride and the Bachelors: The Heretical Courtship in Modern Art*, London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1965, p. 87.
2 John Taverner, *The Music of Silence: A Composer's Testament*, ed. Brian Keeble, London and New York: Faber and Faber, 1999, p. 157.
3 Ibid.
4 Ibid.
5 Ibid., p. 158.
6 Mark C. Gridley, *Jazz Styles: History and Analysis*, 6th edition, Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1997, p. 100.
7 It is all too easy to mock this approach, however, as the literary satirist Jasper Fforde demonstrates in his novel *Lost in a Good Book*, when one artist exhibits a work '*so* minimalist it wasn't there at all. They were staring at a blank wall with a picture hook on it' (*Lost in a Good Book*, London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2002, pp. 214–15). The funniest thing about Fforde's jibe is that it is just about possible; it represents an entirely logical extension of Malevich's aesthetic.

8 Kasimir Malevich, *Essays on Art, 1915–1933*, vols. I–IV, trans. Xenia Glowacki-Prus and Arnold McMillin, ed. Troels Andersen, London: Rapp and Whiting, 1969, I, pp. 25, 34.
9 Ibid., pp. 38, 40.
10 Ibid., p. 27.
11 Alexander Rodchenko, quoted in Margaret A. Rose, *Marx's Lost Aesthetic: Karl Marx and the Visual Arts*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984, p. 130.
12 Quoted in German Karginov, *Rodchenko*, trans. Elisabeth Hoch, London: Thames & Hudson, 1979, p. 118.
13 Quoted in ibid.
14 Quoted in Tomkins, *The Bride and the Bachelors*, p. 205.
15 Christel Sauer, 'Robert Ryman's "Realism" ', Introduction to Robert Ryman, *Paris/October 8–November 21, 1999/Studio 7L* (exhibition catalogue), New York: PaceWildenstein, 1999, p. 5.
16 Sauer, Introduction to ibid., p. 7.
17 See ibid., pp. 30–6.
18 The pair met before Merton became a monk, sharing a holiday cottage once, and continued to correspond with each other until Reinhardt's death in 1967.
19 Ad Reinhardt, 'On the Black Paintings', in *Art-as-Art: The Selected Writings of Ad Reinhardt*, ed. Barbara Rose, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1975, p. 85.
20 Ibid., p. 86.
21 Ibid., p. 87.
22 Ibid.
23 Ibid., p. 91.
24 Ibid., p. 53.
25 Ibid.
26 Ibid., p. 56.
27 Ibid., p. 69.
28 Ibid., p. 53.
29 Rose, Introduction to ibid., p. xii.
30 Donald Kuspit, 'Concerning the Spiritual in Art', in Maurice Tuchman et al., eds, *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890–1985*, New York: Abbeville Press, 1986, pp. 313–25 (p. 314); Wassily Kandinsky,

Concerning the Spiritual in Art, trans. M. T. H. Sadler, New York: Dover, 1977.

31 Stuart Jeffries, 'Get Real', *Guardian*, 6 July 2006, pp. 18–21 (p. 20).

32 In a relatively recent example, Mel Brooks' *Silent Movie* (1976) deploys the technique for comic effect.

33 Ingmar Bergman, *Four Screenplays of Ingmar Bergman*, trans. Lars Malstrom and David Kushner, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1960, p. 101.

34 Ibid., p. 112.

35 Ibid., p. 147.

36 Ibid., p. 162.

37 Arthur Gibson, *Silence of God: Creative Response to the Films of Ingmar Bergman*, New York, Evanston, IL and London: Harper & Row, 1969, p. 24.

38 Bergman, *Four Screenplays*, p. 163.

39 Birgitta Steene, *Ingmar Bergman*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1968, p. 62.

40 Bergman, *Four Screenplays*, p. 163.

41 Philip Mosley, *Ingmar Bergman: The Cinema as Mistress*, London and Boston: Marion Boyars, 1981, p. 94.

42 Charles Thomas Samuels, 'Ingmar Bergman: An Interview', in Stuart M. Kaminsky, ed., with Joseph F. Hill, *Ingmar Bergman: Essays in Criticism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975, pp. 98–132 (p. 100).

43 Ibid., p. 122.

44 *The Silence*, in Ingmar Bergman, *A Film Trilogy: Through a Glass Darkly, The Communicants (Winter Light), The Silence*, trans. Paul Britten Austin, London: Calder and Boyars, 1967, pp. 105–43 (p. 107).

45 Ibid., pp. 109, 110.

46 Norman O. Brown, *Love's Body*, New York: Random House, 1966, p. 260.

8 Where Silence Matters: Literature

1 Thus Stephen Daedalus: 'I will try to express myself in some mode of life or art as freely as I can and as wholly as I can, using for my defence the only arms I allow myself to use – silence, exile, and cunning' (James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* [1916], Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1960, p. 247).

2 James Joyce, *Ulysses* [1922], Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971.

3 Gerard Manley Hopkins, *Habit of Perfection*, ll. 4–7, *Poems*, p. 31. Another interesting link can be made here: Thomas Merton at one point began a PhD thesis on Hopkins, and his autobiography, *The Seven-Storey Mountain*, appeared in England under the title *Elected Silence* (London: Hollis and Carter, 1949).
4 Gerard Manley Hopkins, *Habit of Perfection*, ll. 9–16, p. 31.
5 See St Ignatius Loyola, *The Spiritual Exercises*, London: Burns, Oates and Washbourne, 1923.
6 Gerard Manley Hopkins, *Nondum*, ll. 1–6, *Poems*, p. 32.
7 Ibid., ll. 31–6, p. 33.
8 Ibid., ll. 49–50, p. 34.
9 Rainer Maria Rilke, *The Book of the Monastic Life*, First Book of *The Book of Hours* [1899–1905], trans. J. B. Leishman, London: Hogarth Press, 1967, 7, p. 30.
10 Ibid., 2, p. 28.
11 Ibid., 3, p. 28.
12 Ibid., 59, p. 56.
13 Rainer Maria Rilke, *The Book of Pilgrimage*, Second Book of *The Book of Hours*, 30, p. 80.
14 William Wordsworth, *The Prelude: The Four Texts (1798, 1799, 1805, 1850)*, ed. Jonathan Wordsworth, Penguin: London, 1995, Book I, ll. 68–81, p. 40 (1805 edition).
15 Ibid., ll. 90–1.
16 Ibid., Book XII, ll. 10–14, p. 488.
17 Ibid., Book I, ll. 110–13, p. 42.
18 Yu Liu, 'The Ambiguity of Sound and Silence: *The Prelude*', *Essays in Literature* (September 1994), pp. 185–99 (p. 192).
19 John Williams, *Critical Issues: William Wordsworth*, Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave, 2002, p. 157.
20 William Wordsworth, *Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood*, in *The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth*, vols. I–V, 2nd edition, eds E. De Selincourt and Helen Darbishire, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1958, IV, ll. 149–61, pp. 283–4.
21 Laurence Sterne, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy*, Gentleman [1759–67], ed. lan Campbell Ross, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983, p. 490.

22 For a poststructuralist reading of how the unsayable manifests itself in literary texts, see Elisabeth Marie Loevlie, *Literary Silences in Pascal, Rousseau, and Beckett*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003. Loevlie devises the term 'literary silence' to describe the relationship that develops between a reader and a text that acknowledges the existence of the unsayable. She argues that the term cannot really be defined, however, only described, and her concern lies with the nature of textuality rather than silence as I understand it in this study.
23 Ibid., p. 28 (black pages then follow on pp. 28–9).
24 Ibid., p. 27.
25 Ibid., p. 514.
26 Ihab Hassan, *The Literature of Silence: Henry Miller and Samuel Beckett*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1967, p. 13.
27 For Roland Barthes, a 'writerly text' involved readers by giving them work to do; a 'readerly' text, on the other hand, encouraged mere passive consumption (see Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, trans. Richard Miller, New York: Hill and Wang, 1974, pp. 3–4). Sterne seems almost a textbook example of the 'writerly' approach to fiction, with *Tristram Shandy* offering the reader a host of opportunities to enter into the progress of the narrative.
28 Daniel N. Maltz, 'Joyful Noise and Reverent Silence: The Significance of Noise in Pentecostal Worship', in Deborah Tannen and Muriel Saville-Troike, eds, *Perspectives on Silence*, Norwood, NJ: Ablex, 1985, p. 131.
29 Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* [1757], ed. James T. Boulton, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987, p. 68.
30 Ibid., p. 71.
31 Lyotard, *Lessons*, p. 52.
32 Ann Radcliffe, *The Mysteries of Udolpho* [1794], ed. Bonamy Dobree, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980, p. 224.
33 Charlotte Dacre, *Zofloya, or The Moor* [1806], ed. Kim Ian Michasiw, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997, p. 267.
34 A similar fate is undergone by Ambrosio, the protagonist of Matthew Lewis's *The Monk* (1796), another character identified by the devil as suitable material for corrupting (ed. Howard Anderson, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

35 James Hogg, *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* [1824], ed. John Carey, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980, p. 240.
36 Robert Louis Stevenson, *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde and Other Tales*, ed. Roger Luckhurst, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006.
37 Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway* [1925], Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992, p. 44.
38 James Strachey, 'Sigmund Freud: A Sketch of His Life and Ideas', in Sigmund Freud, *Two Short Accounts of Psycho-analysis*, trans. and ed. James Strachey, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991, pp. 11–24 (p. 24).
39 Sigmund Freud, *Two Short Accounts of Psycho-analysis*, trans. and ed. James Strachey, Harmondsworth Penguin, 1991, p. 53.
40 Norman O. Brown, *Love's Body*, New York: Random House, 1966, p. 258.
41 Samuel Beckett, *Disjecta: Miscellaneous Writings and a Dramatic Fragment*, ed. Ruby Cohn, New York: Grove Press, 1984, p. 172.
42 See Les Essif, *Empty Figure on an Empty Stage: The Theatre of Samuel Beckett and His Generation*, Bloomington, IN and London: Indiana University Press, 2001. For 'literary silence' in Beckett's prose fiction, see chapter 6 of Elisabeth Marie Loevlie, *Literary Silences in Pascal, Rousseau, and Beckett*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003.
43 Ihab Hassan, *Literature of Silence*: *Henry Miller and Samuel Beckett*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1967, pp. 162, 31.
44 Ibid., p. xi.
45 Ibid., p. 8.
46 See Georg Lukács, *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism*, trans. John and Necke Mander, London: Merlin Press, 1963.
47 Hassan, *Literature of Silence*, p. 202.
48 Ibid., p. xi.
49 Samuel Beckett, *Krapp's Last Tape*, in *The Complete Dramatic Works*, London and Boston: Faber and Faber, 1986, pp. 213–23 (pp. 221, 223).
50 Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*, in *The Complete Dramatic Works*, pp. 7–88 (pp. 85–6).
51 Strangely, Essif's study of emptiness in Beckett (*Empty Figure*) makes no mention of *Breath*, unarguably the 'emptiest' of Beckett's plays.
52 Samuel Beckett, *Breath*, in *The Complete Dramatic Works*, pp. 369–71 (p. 371).
53 Beckett, *Disjecta*, p. 172.
54 Beckett, *The Complete Dramatic Works*, pp. 201–6, 207–11.

55 John Barth, 'The Literature of Exhaustion', in Malcolm Bradbury, ed., *The Novel Today: Contemporary Writers on Modern Fiction*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1977, pp. 70–83 (pp. 73, 74). In a more positive light, Les Essif sees Beckett's later career as concerned with 'exploring and refining the material meaningfulness of the human figure set in emptiness' (*Empty Figure*, p. 1).
56 Barth, 'The Literature of Exhaustion', p. 70.
57 Ibid., p. 74.
58 John Barth, 'The Literature of Replenishment: Postmodernist Fiction', *Atlantic Monthly*, 245, 1980, pp. 65–71.
59 Barth, 'The Literature of Exhaustion', p. 73.
60 W. G. Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*, trans. Michael Hulse, London: Harvill Press, 1998, p. 52.
61 John Barth, *The Sot-Weed Factor*, London: Secker & Warburg, 1961.
62 Harold Pinter, quoted in John Russell Brown, *Theatre Language: A Study of Arden, Osborne, Pinter and Wesker*, London: Penguin, 1972, p. 18.
63 Russell Brown, *Theatre Language*, p. 15.
64 Ibid., p. 17.
65 Harold Pinter, *The Last to Go*, in *A Slight Ache, and Other Plays*, London: Eyre Methuen, 1968, pp. 129–32.
66 Harold Pinter, *The Caretaker*, London: Methuen, 1967, p. 7.
67 Ibid., p. 78.
68 Katherine J. Worth, 'Pinter and the Realist Tradition', in Michael Scott, ed., *Harold Pinter: The Birthday Party, The Caretaker and The Homecoming: A Casebook*, Basingstoke and London: Macmillan, 1986, pp. 29–39 (p. 32).
69 Russell Brown, *Theatre Language*, p. 93.
70 Ibid., p. 116.
71 Elbert Hubbard, *Essay on Silence* [1905], Kingston, NM: Cranberry Press, n.d.
72 Tom Benton, 'Not Cheap, But Good: Fra Elbertus and the Roycrofters', *Book Source Monthly*, http://www.booksourcemonthly.com (accessed 4 September 2006).
73 Quoted in Freeman Champney, *Art and Glory: The Story of Elbert Hubbard*, Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1983, p. 201.
74 *The Nothing Book: Wanna Make Something of It?*, New York: Harmony Press, 1974; London: Omnibus Press, 1976.

75 Inside dustjacket, Omnibus Press edition. On the back of the dustjacket are various quotes around the theme of nothing, such as 'Nothing begins and nothing ends' (Francis Thompson).
76 John D. Barrow, *The Book of Nothing*, London: Jonathan Cape, 2000, p. 7.
77 Ihab Hassan, *The Dismemberment of Orpheus: Toward a Postmodern Literature*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1971, p. 248.
78 Ibid., p. 257.
79 Ibid., p. 4.
80 Ibid., p. 12.
81 Hassan, *Literature of Silence*, p. xi.

9 Where Silence Matters: Language and Speech

1 Adam Jaworski, *The Power of Silence: Social and Pragmatic Perspectives*, Newbury Park, CA and London: Sage, 1993, p. 1.
2 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Prose of the World*, ed. Claude Lefort, trans. John O'Neill, London: Heinemann, 1974, p. 46.
3 Huey-li Li, 'Silences and Silencing Silences', *PES Yearbook*, 2001, pp. 157–65 (p. 163).
4 Jaworski, *Power of Silence*, p. 25.
5 S. N. Ganguly, 'Culture, Communication and Silence', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 29 (1968–9), pp. 182–200 (p. 200).
6 Jaworski, *Power of Silence*, p. 34.
7 Ibid.
8 Ibid., pp. 44, 46.
9 Ibid., p. 48.
10 See, for example, Deborah Tannen, 'Silence as Conflict Management in Fiction and Drama: Pinter's *Betrayal* and a Short Story, "Great Wits" ', in Allen D. Grimshaw, ed., *Conflict Talk: Sociolinguistic Investigations of Arguments in Conversations*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990, pp. 260–79. Tannen argues that Pinter 'calls for silence at the points where potentially explosive information is confronted' (p. 260).
11 M. P. Bonikowska, 'The Choice of Opting Out', *Applied Linguistics*, 9:2 (1988), pp. 169–81 (p. 169).
12 See Jaakko Lehtonen and Kari Sajavaara, 'The Silent Finn', in Deborah Tannen and Muriel Saville-Troike, eds, *Perspectives on Silence*, Norwood,

NJ: Ablex, 1985, pp. 193–201 (p. 200). The Finnish people enjoy a reputation for silence in a general sense, and the authors are by no means champions of this, noting that '[m]any people see foreign influences as a threat to Finnish culture . . . but if the result is a more communicative Finn, the development is not certainly for the worse' (p. 200).

13 Jaworski, *Power of Silence*, p. 98.

14 See B. Brummet, 'Towards a Theory of Silence as a Political Strategy', *The Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 66 (1980), pp. 289–303 (p. 289).

15 In the UK a famous example of the technique being ridiculed came in a 1997 BBC television programme *Newsnight* when the then government minister Michael Howard was interviewed by Jeremy Paxman. When Howard opted for the evasion tactic, Paxman asked the same question twelve times in the face of Howard's studied refusal to provide a straight answer. Howard was made to look particularly shifty by this simple method, and his reputation took a battering in consequence.

16 Jaworski, *Power of Silence*, p. 115.

17 I discuss the impact of such silencing of opposition in my *Fundamentalist World: The New Dark Age of Dogma*, Cambridge: Icon Press, 2004.

18 David Caute, *The Espionage of the Saints: Two Essays on Silence and the State*, London: Hamish Hamilton, 1986, p. ix.

19 Zimbabwe has since become steadily less democratic, and by 2006 was to all intents and purposes a one-party state, but Caute was at pains to make it clear that it was not so in 1984.

20 See Jean-François Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, trans. Georges Van Den Abbeele, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988.

21 Extreme examples can still be found in recent times, however, with Jaworski citing the case of the *desaparacidos* in Latin America; thousands of individuals rendered invisible by illegal government action for daring to voice political dissent. Holding suspects without trial, the incidence of which has increased in many Western countries as a response to terrorist activity in recent years, is the thin end of the wedge of such practices.

22 M. F. Belenky, B. M. Clinchy, N. R. Goldberger and J. M. Tarule, *Women's Ways of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice and Mind*, New York: Basic Books, 1986, p. 15.

23 Lyotard, *The Differend*, p. xiii.
24 Lyotard considers the special case of the Jews in his *Heidegger and 'The Jews'*, trans. Andreas Michel and Mark S. Roberts, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1990. His main complaint about the generation of Germans who lived through the Nazi period and then its post-war aftermath (including, significantly, the famous philosopher Martin Heidegger), was that they conveniently 'forgot' the persecution of the Jews, thus effecting a conspiracy of silence about the issue (p. 82).
25 Jaworski, *The Power of Silence*, p. 167.
26 Tannen and Saville-Troike, eds, *Perspectives on Silence*, p. xi.
27 Ibid., pp. xvii–xviii.
28 Muriel Saville-Troike, 'The Place of Silence in an Integrated Theory of Communication', in ibid., pp. 3–18 (p. 3).
29 Ibid., p. 17.

Conclusion: Campaigning for Silence

1 Muriel Saville-Troike, 'Silence', in R. E. Asher, ed., *The Encyclopaedia of Language and Linguistics*, vols. 1–10, Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1994, 7, pp. 3945–7 (p. 3947).
2 See Karl D. Kryter, *The Handbook of Hearing and the Effects of Noise: Physiology, Psychology and Public Health,* San Diego, CA and London: Academic Press, 1994, for an analysis of the extensive literature on this topic. Recent studies in Finland have suggested there may be a link between sleep deprivation and the development of heart disease (Anil Ananthaswamy, 'Why We're Not Immune to Losing Sleep', *New Scientist*, 16 September 2006, p. 9).

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