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NEW WRITING

## Silences

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*How is it possible to write of the myriad kinds of silence with which we are surrounded? I am thinking especially of those dense or jagged silences so impervious to words, which increasingly appear in a world become too much, and too little, to bear.<sup>1</sup>*

Over the last few months I have been listening intently, trying to identify as accurately as possible the texture and consistency of the silences in which I have been enveloped. It quickly became apparent that this was not going to be a study of silence in the sense of soundlessness. Buildings creak and sigh, their electrical appliances buzz and whirr, click and beep. Outside there is the rumble, chug and squeal of cars and trucks; sirens punctuate the roar of peak hour traffic and pierce the pre-dawn quiet. By day, bird calls and the swoosh of wind brushing through the leaves of this tree-filled city are almost omnipresent sounds—a soundscape changing in tone and intensity at every moment. Late at night the possums thud their way across the roof and the air rustles against branches in a manner somehow more austere, more pointed in the dark than in the light of day. It is always amongst these mingled sounds of earth and world that pools of silence are created in human encounters, human gatherings.<sup>2</sup>

It was in a large workplace meeting, the sort of meeting held in a stuffy, windowless room filled with too many bodies and chaired by an institutionally powerful man, that I first began to study silence. For as the silence in that packed room took root and spread—a silence fed and watered by the burble of the chair's meaningless utterances—I realised that there is such a thing as a silence comprised entirely of people refusing to say aloud what they are thinking. This was not the awkward silence which follows an inappropriate remark. This was a thick and muddy silence. It was a silence suffused with an intensely swampy acceptance that *nothing could be said* to stem the tide of fantasy-babble flowing from that man's mouth. Beneath his

words our silence gathered and deepened. His world bore no relation to ours. How often does this happen?

Another meeting, smaller, in a room with windows. Things that had to be done were discussed. Who would do them, when they would get them done, that sort of thing. Someone mentioned an institutional barrier to a certain action—an action required by the institution. These words were met by a fleeting eruption of silence, that flash of silence which follows the emergence of a stubborn, intractable truth. This silence neither seethes nor thunders. It simply appears as a momentary gash in a conversation. Certain facts are unmentionable. Having been mentioned, they are gobbled up by silence. Were they really mentioned? There is no written record, just a remnant of a memory of the flicker of a tongue of silence, swallowing them up. No ripples appear upon this pool of silence. Its name is, I think, complicity-born-of-exhaustion. Who, after all, has the energy required to protest against every single little absurdity they encounter in the world? But such absurdities are piling up...

The swirling whirlpool of silence slowly, inexorably built in intensity, sweeping throughout the entire tutorial. This was the silence which accompanied the students' inability to answer a single question about the reading assigned for the week—the text no one had read, as they were each assuming the others would have done it. We could not discuss that reading together, so we did not. This is a guilty, disorienting silence. A sliver of a world in common that ought to have come into existence did not. Those responsible for contributing to that part of the world instead let it slip away into nothingness. The loss is palpable.

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It rained last night, and for a snatch of time this early morning the air was perfectly still. On the top of a tree sat a bird, unmoving. Across the garden was a stranger-cat, paws tucked beneath chin. I was perched on the front stoop. There we all were. Is there such a thing as an appreciative, welcoming silence fully shared by tree and bird, cat and human? For one hovering instant it seemed real, and a moment of shared presence.<sup>3</sup> But when was the last time I shared an appreciative silence in the company of stranger-human beings? I cannot remember.

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I can remember, although I do not enjoy doing so, the simmering silence of a family home in which every member longed to be elsewhere. This was the exact, diametrical opposite of a companionable silence. It seethed with resentment, rage, incomprehension. And while it was preferable to the sounds which inevitably boiled to its surface, it was the silence of a world already shattered.

We have all felt the silence that blankets the room after all the words have been said yet no understanding has been reached, no common ground agreed upon. Could this silence be so loud because it is formed from the silence of two separate worlds (at least)—silences which do not fit together warp and weft, hand and glove, but collide against each other and jerk away, over and over, an endless clubbing and hammering, until someone leaves the room?

And then there are the stunned, shocked, appalled silences that follow the most recent utterances of our less than competent political leaders. They are legion. We are awash in such verbiage, like shipwrecked sailors we try to maintain a slippery grasp upon tiny rafts of

silence hastily constructed in their wake. Yes, there are commentators who snort and squawk, contributing mightily to the background noise, but there are more and more of us who choose to cling more tightly to our individual, half-sunken silences. What, after all, is left to say? The claims we would rebut come from cloud-cuckoo-land: to engage with them in any way is to treat them as *potentially* true, as *possible* facts. To do so is to lend outright lies a degree of reality, a solidity, a weightiness they do not inherently possess. And in fact rivers of ink have been spilled in an attempt to convince those who dispense lies that what they are saying is not true. Is it not abundantly clear that our less than competent leaders already know this? In the face of this knowledge, solitary silences multiply and bob about upon a veritable ocean of untruths, an ocean inseparably mingled with rivers of demonstrable facts. When it feels as though you are drowning, the flavour of the water does not matter. Choking, we close our mouths. Silence ensues.

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It is not possible for some of us to maintain our sanity if we do not retreat to our own silence on a regular basis. If we remain solely within our own silence for too long, we lose our sanity. This is not a nice conundrum.

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In 2010 a performance artist, Marina Abramović, shared her silence with 1,000 strangers, one at a time, over the course of almost three months. For eight hours a day, day after day, she sat in a chair in front of a small, square table. Across from her was another chair, and to this chair the strangers flocked, just for the chance to sit in silence with Abramović, to gaze into her eyes as she gazed into theirs. Many of them cried as they shared her silence/she shared their silence. Before this event, held at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, there were apparently concerns that no one would choose to come and sit in silence with her.<sup>4</sup> What surprises me is that this event, this artwork, this sharing of silence is not still running, that the line of strangers waiting to sit with her in silence does not stretch across the continent.

To be acknowledged by another, to have one's existence affirmed, to feel allowed to take up space without demonstrating one's capacity to achieve something or other while in that space ... to bathe in the undistracted attention of another, to offer your own undistracted attention to someone else, to have that offer accepted ... Are these not increasingly rare and precious gifts?

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Some silences are heart-breaking. My mother's dementia has reached the point where she can only speak on the phone for thirty seconds or so, and then only if my brother hands it to her as he tells her who is on the other end. She says my name, and there is joy in her voice. I say hello and that I love her, all in one rushed sentence, while she still remembers to whom she is speaking. "I love you, too," she says. And then, "how *are* you?" The last time we spoke I told her I'd been well, and asked how she was doing. She found this question too difficult to answer. Her recent past eluded her; she simply did not know how she had been over the last

little while, and to be reminded of her unknowing was unnerving. So instead she asked, “how are *you*?” I told her, again, but then there was an awful silence: confused and panicked. She had forgotten who was on the phone, no longer understood why she was even holding that small rectangle, so she turned and pressed it into the hands of the nearby man. She wasn’t quite sure who he was. I know that soon I will not be able to speak with her at all, for her world will no longer include a daughter. I dread the appearance of that silence.

But that silence already haunts me. I struggle to name it. To call it the silence of forgetfulness seems woefully inadequate. It feels more like the silence of total erasure. Surely it is a silence already known to every asylum seeker whose right to enter a functioning world is denied. It is the silence that says, in effect, “you do not exist.” What are we to make of the fact that the current government in Australia is, in some respects, behaving as though it has advanced dementia?

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When was the last time I encountered a pregnant silence, a rich silence shared and nurtured by a collection of human beings focused together upon a common topic? You can feel it, taste it in the air—the precise moment just before something of deep significance is said aloud.<sup>5</sup> Once again, I cannot remember.

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He is fifteen, which is part of the problem. Fifteen-year-old boys do not always respond when spoken to. But he is also on the autism spectrum, and when he is in his own world, he very often does not even realise he has been spoken to. At those times, it is as though he is surrounded by his own private, silent airlock. Although you are trying to talk with him, he really does not hear you. At other times, he knows full well that he has, for instance, been asked a question or been told that it is time to do something other than what he is currently doing. But if he does not feel like answering, or does not feel like doing something else, then he deliberately steps into a wilful silence from which every other human being is excluded. It emanates from him, and when it is directed at you, it feels as though you are physically being pushed away. You are the bearer of worldly complexities, worldly requirements such as the need to have a shower, or to come to dinner. Such demands he finds overwhelming. Being a gentle soul, he does not shout or lash out with fists or feet. He just exudes silence. With this silence, he barricades himself against an intrusive world the operation of which he does not fully comprehend.

I do not think you need to be on the autism spectrum to want to hide yourself away from a world increasingly incomprehensible. But when it comes to the practise of *wielding silence against all bothersome others*, it troubles me to think of just how common it has become, of how so many of us have taken to engaging in spectrum-like behaviour. We stare at our smart phones, our laptops, pretending the people around us are not around us.

I am troubled as well by the fact that so many of the silences I find when I go searching for them are silences of last resort. These silences are draped in desperation. “How much better is silence; the coffee cup, the table.”<sup>6</sup> So wrote Virginia Woolf in her novel *The Waves*. This is a silence yearned for by a male character, but thought of, and written by, a woman sitting almost

certainly alone, in front of a table. The quote continues: “How much better to sit by myself like the solitary sea-bird that opens its wings on the stake. Let me sit here for ever with bare things, this coffee cup, this knife, this fork, things in themselves, myself being myself.”<sup>7</sup> This image, in which *nothing* is happening, is riveting. Could it be the best depiction in English literature of a desperate, silent escape from too much world? Should you wish to Google this quote, you will discover that it ends just there, with those bare, unmoving things. The narrator sits, seemingly all alone, devoid of any human contact, and seemingly, in that moment, at a kind of peace. But no. In the novel, the passage actually concludes with these words:

Do not come and worry me with your hints that it is time to shut the shop and be gone. I would willingly give all my money that you should not disturb me but will let me sit on and on, silent, alone.<sup>8</sup>

The spectre of a world too much to bear haunts even the barest things; worldly demands, like the ordinary, daily need to close a restaurant, threaten to, and will, drive a stake through this scrap of individual silence.

Which means that it is and it is not like the silence of my office. Here is a desk, a mug of tea, a notepad and pen: things in the silent service of a phenomenological dig through human experience, memory and imagination. A silence casting a net in search of other silences, like this one: “Oh Mrs Dalloway, always giving parties to cover the silence.”<sup>9</sup> There are lots of Mrs Dalloways in the world. We’ve all met some. And sometimes the silence they cover with their parties, their chatter, is a silence from which we need occasionally to be rescued. A silence of long-term depression, say, or of crushed plans, failed dreams, the silence of a life ground and compromised out of recognition. To be distracted from this silence, if only for an evening, is no small thing. It is also the case, however, that sometimes these parties cover up the silence of lives not lived but drifted through—lives surrounded by directionless, empty silence. The silence, perhaps, of those who have never known their lives to matter in any meaningful way whatsoever. (Why have we created a world in which so many people feel their lives do not matter at all?)

Or perhaps, underneath it all, the silence covered by Mrs Dalloway’s parties is the primordial silence, that vast, cosmic silence preceding all sound and following all sound, the silence out of which the very stuff of each one of us was created, miraculously, atom by atom, and the silence to which we shall return. I find it impossible not to picture such a silence as night—moonless, starless dead of night. This is a silence towards which I do not strain my ears. I am led to believe, though, that some do.

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Others seem to yearn for the sound of cataclysmic world-destruction. I do not like to listen out for such a thing, but at the same time I, we do seem to bend our ears in that direction constantly—if only for fleeting moments at a time. I am reminded of Julia Kristeva’s concept of the abject.<sup>10</sup> It is a torn and bloody mess; we shield our eyes, then peek through our fingers. Similarly, we stop our ears, and a minute later we tune in to the 24hr news channel on our personal listening device. The poet T. S. Eliot and the moral philosopher and novelist Iris Murdoch were in complete agreement on at least one point; human beings cannot bear very much reality.<sup>11</sup> But it is just as true that human beings cannot bear too little contact with reality. We hide ourselves away; we reappear, yearning for, seeking something, something bloody well real, I suspect. Something so real, so meaningful that it will shock us all out of our

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self-constructed silent exiles. Something which will force us to attend to one another and this absurd world in which we dwell.

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I am back in my office, staring at this document upon a screen. Sitting next to me, on the desk, is a very quiet ham and cheese sandwich. Its silence will not protect it. Still, from my perspective, at least, this is an infinitely better silence than the silence of the waiting-for-apocalypse. It is also the silence of extraordinary privilege. No unpaid bills haunt this silence, no fears of eviction or re-possession, none of the bone-deep exhaustion which accompanies a double-shift. Exams have finished, the final marks have been submitted, glorious stretches of small silence spread out before me. Though perhaps they are better called small pockets of silence—for at best they embrace only the length of a sentence, but usually they accommodate only a word or two. These silent, word-filled envelopes blink in and out of existence like the light of a fire-fly. Those which linger, which take up residence and refuse to be budged: these I collect, and sort, and wait until they have arranged themselves into an entire paragraph. All words, sentences, and paragraphs do require their own unique silent wrapping. It is the aural equivalent of the white space between letters and words on the printed page. But these small silences seem to me to be far more *active* than the white of a page. Pages, in my experience, do not twist and writhe beneath a word wrongly chosen. Tiny little silences have, however, shoved aside the words I've asked them to hold. There is no other way to put it. Nor does there appear to be any correlation between the size of a silence and its strength.

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It was not possible to think about the strengths, or weaknesses, of various silences until I had grown accustomed to thinking about silences as presences. In western culture, we are taught that silence is the absence of sound, or, as some clever clogs would have it, the absence of ears. What matters is that silence is always associated with absence, with nothingness (and this is *not* a happy, productive nothingness). I suggest that, when it comes to silences 'heard' by human beings, *the idea of silence as an absence* should be placed in the same curio cabinet as phlogiston and the flat earth. Silences can be thick or thin, razor-sharp or dull as dishwater. They can be cloying or abrasive, repellent or attractive. They can be heavy or merry or anxious or awe-struck. And who has never encountered a disapproving silence? No one, that's who. Silences. We feel them, respond to them, create them, try to escape *from* them, try to escape *into* them, and we almost never stop to think about them as being actively present in our lives. Yet my sense is that they are piling up around us, that we are increasingly being buffeted about by silences which, if not directly contradictory, are very much at cross-purposes. No wonder so many of us are feeling so torn and bruised, these days.

In the midst of the horrid fantasy-burble-met-with-swampy-silence meeting, I was longing for the solid silence of the coffee cup, the table. *And* at that precise moment I was taking refuge on my own half-sunken silent raft. Truth be told, as I felt my colleagues' silent rejection of the institutional higher-ups' view of things take hold, I was remembering an earlier instance of institutional insanity ('insanity' used here solely to describe a refusal of reality). It was an email we had received to inform us of what to do in the event of an institution-wide loss of internet access. The email supplied us with, I kid you not, a link to a webpage upon which internet

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status updates would be posted. At the time I read this email, I thought it marked the precise moment when the world as I had known it came to an end. In the meeting, I just clutched my pen, focussing upon its factual existence in my hand, and wishing I were elsewhere. My problem was that the swamp-silence rejection of fantasy was so weak, so fleeting. Though it was a shared silence, it was powerless to re-assert or re-constitute a world in working order, a world in which reality could be openly acknowledged.

...

I dream of a vast and active silence: welcoming, affirming, yet insistent upon quiet. No beeps, no buzzes, no mindless, meaningless chatter—the verbal equivalent of shiny things— allowed. Within such a silence, we might be forced to look into each other's eyes, to strain our ears towards our own lives, listening for anything meaningful, anything matter-full. Within such a silence, stubborn, intractable facts would find a home. Babble-burble would not. My mother would find it restful; the fifteen-year-old would comprehend it. Cups, tables, and chairs would appear as needed. I imagine that after some time this silence would begin to provide a few pockets in which words could be carried. Small pockets, only roomy enough for words like 'enough', 'no more.' I do not know where this silence might take us, but I am sure we would not choke upon it, nor would we feel lost or adrift within it.

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Postscript: I am sitting alone in my car, stuck in grey-morning traffic, sure to be late for a meeting. All sounds are muffled, leaden. Suddenly a young woman begins to run across the intersection, beyond awkward, knees knobbing and feet flopping, hair all adrift, heedless of the truck only a metre away. Her face is ablaze with a lop-sided grin, and without a word she throws her arms around a pedestrian standing on the sidewalk. Although the road ahead has cleared, traffic remains at a standstill for one stunned and silent moment.

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## Notes

1. I am using the term 'world' as the political theorist Hannah Arendt defined it; "the world and the people who inhabit it are not the same. The world lies between people, and this in-between...is today the object of the greatest concern and the most obvious upheaval in almost all the countries of the globe." Hannah Arendt, *Men in Dark Times*, Harcourt Brace & Company, San Diego, New York, London, 1995, p. 4.
2. Again I am thinking of Hannah Arendt, and her following observation: "We humanize what is going on in the world and in ourselves only by speaking of it, and in the course of speaking of it we learn to be human." Arendt, p. 25. I suspect that when certain silences prevent or discourage us from speaking of what is going on, then, each time it happens, a little of our humanness drains away.
3. With respect to sharing presence with non-human beings, see, for example, Luce Irigaray, 'Cultivating Our Sensory Perceptions', in Luce Irigaray and Michael Marder, *Through Vegetal Being*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2016, pp. 46-51.
4. 'The Artist is Present', 2010, MoMA, [https://www.moma.org/learn/moma\\_learning/marina-abramovic-marina-abramovic-the-artist-is-present-2010](https://www.moma.org/learn/moma_learning/marina-abramovic-marina-abramovic-the-artist-is-present-2010).
5. The philosopher Bernard P. Dauenhauer names this kind of silence "fore-silence." About it he writes, "A new saying or hearing is being prepared for in silence." See Bernard P. Dauenhauer, 'On Silence', *Research in Phenomenology*, vol. 3, no. 1, 1973, p. 15. Also writing of a kind of silence present before a new saying, the feminist theologian Nelle Morton wrote of "the hearing that brings forth speech," and I think she expresses the communal, participatory quality of this silence beautifully. Nelle Morton, *The Journey is Home*, Beacon Press, Boston, 1985, p. 206.
6. Virginia Woolf, *The Waves*, ed., Gillian Beer, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1992, p. 246.
7. Woolf, p. 246.
8. Woolf, p. 246.
9. Michael Cunningham and David Hare, from the screenplay of the film 'The Hours' <[http://www.script-o-rama.com/movie\\_scripts/h/the-hours-script-michael-cunningham.html](http://www.script-o-rama.com/movie_scripts/h/the-hours-script-michael-cunningham.html)> Perhaps surprisingly, this quote is nowhere to be found in either the novel *Mrs Dalloway* by Virginia Woolf, or the novel *The Hours* by Michael Cunningham. The quote abounds upon the Internet, however, most often attributed incorrectly to Woolf.
10. Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez, Columbia University Press, New York, 1982, pp. 1-4.
11. In his poem *The Four Quartets*, Eliot wrote "... human kind/Cannot bear very much reality." See Derek Traversi, *T.S. Eliot: The Longer Poems*, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, New York and London, 1976, p. 100. Murdoch, almost certainly responding to his words, wrote "It is true that human beings cannot bear much reality..." See Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, Routledge, London and New York, 2014, p. 62.