

**Cartographies of Silence:  
Mapping Concepts of Silence and their Contexts**

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## **Abstract**

This study offers a contribution to the discourses surrounding ‘silence’, arguing that the transformation of the meaning of silence as it shifts between contexts depends upon what it is being defined in opposition to, and that in each case, what is posited in the space marked by silence is of central importance to the discourse surrounding this context. Aware of the interdisciplinary engagements with silence, this thesis presupposes that silence is not ‘nothing’, and that the question of agency is central to the distinctions between silences. Drawing on a number of theoretical perspectives pertinent to each context, this thesis proceeds by engaging with silence as it is featured in discourses surrounding animals, trauma, secrecy, and listening. These theoretical perspectives are explored also through a number of cultural texts – creative non-fiction, short stories, film, poetry, and also testimony. These case studies are not only illustrative, but also offer further perspectives on each context, and the meaning generated for silence. Unlike most other engagements with silence, this thesis not only takes the definition of silence to be unstable and changeable, but also confronts the question of why ‘silence’ is used in these discourses, positing that it is its association with space that is being drawn upon across these contexts. This thesis argues that it is because ‘silence’ comes to be figured as a creator of space, what is at issue in these contexts is what is conceived of as being in this space of silence – Otherness, isolation, individuality, intersubjectivity.

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# Introduction

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The technology of silence  
the rituals, etiquette

the blurring of terms  
... words or music or even  
raw sounds

Silence can be a plan  
rigorously executed

the blueprint of a life

It is a presence  
it has history a form

Do not confuse it  
with any kind of absence.  
(Rich 1975: 139-40)

The title of this thesis is taken from a poem of the same name by Adrienne Rich, but this is not only because of the pertinence of the commonly quoted third stanza, above, but because in its entirety it spans many types of silence. From the ‘lies’ in language, to the unspoken, the silence of images or the visible world, the ‘silence’ of the scream of an illegitimated voice, the acknowledgement that language cannot do everything, yet still retaining a belief in the power of language, Rich’s poem names many ‘terrains’ that might be called silence (Rich 1975: 139-143). But it is not only its engagement with silence as neither absence, nor a clearly defined single subject, that I would align this thesis to; I also find the metaphor of ‘cartography’ to be a particularly useful one. A map of silence might resemble the tracing of a coastline, since the most common way to define silence is to contrast it with something it is not (sound, language, expression), like the line on a map between land and water, the space of the littoral which changes with tides and time. Whether land or sea is to be situated as ‘silence’ matters less than the point that ultimately neither functions as artistic

‘negative space’, though each forms the outline of the other, both constitute an environment on which one can travel, a space which is place.

I use this metaphor because I do not consider silence to be ‘nothing’, or something which does not really exist. I do, however, believe that the word and concept of ‘silence’ is used to describe nothingness, and absence, but ‘silence’ is also used to describe many different issues – from the visuality and stillness of images, to trauma, to prayer. What this thesis takes for its subject is precisely these different issues which are described as ‘silence’. Silence, in being defined through what it is not, becomes highly context specific, to the point that what is meant by ‘silence’ can be difficult to know unless its context is clear. In this it is similar to deictic words – such as ‘I’, ‘she’, ‘now’, ‘there’ – which despite having clear semantic definitions, have variable specific denotations, depending on their context (who is saying ‘I’, where is ‘here’). This tells us more about language than silence. Because there are words whose meaning depends more on the words around them than something ‘out there in the world’, it might be presumed that what that word is used to describe is not ‘out there’. ‘I’, ‘you’, ‘she’, ‘they’, all depend on context for meaning, and yet this is precisely the space in which we live. Likewise with silence, regardless of its changeability in meaning, what it refers to is not just ‘nothing’.

This thesis has evolved out of research that I originally engaged with during my Master’s degree. Focusing on the representation of torture in dramatic works from South Africa, most of the literature I encountered presumed a purely negative, violent, connotation for ‘silence’, with the notable exception of the privileging of ‘remaining silent’ during interrogation. I was struck by the variety of definitions for ‘silence’ as it appeared in academic discourses in different disciplines, from describing empty space on a page, a pause in music, animals, a cultural stereotype, God, a legal right, a metaphor for censorship, and death. It also seemed significant that most engagements with silence presupposed that what silence meant was self-evident within their work, or at least did not acknowledge the divergence of meaning across other discourses. I also wished to find ways of describing silence within my own experience, and explain how it could range from being profoundly negative, to being extremely valuable to me, without entering into a diatribe against sound, noise, language. What is meant by ‘silence’ in this thesis, as I have already stated, is changeable; it alters significantly from chapter to chapter, and the separate denotations should not be conflated. But there are also parameters: the silences in this thesis are defined less in terms of sound (audibility), and tend more towards definitions which depend upon language. This in

part has evolved out of the importance of the concept of choice or agency in this research – an issue which is far clearer in terms of language, than in noise or sound.

Using the resources of Critical Theory and Cultural Analysis, this thesis sets out to question how and why the relationship between language and silence undergoes significant transformations in a range of different contexts. Aware of existing research on silence in anthropology, discourse analysis, legal practices, and spiritual traditions, this study starts from a different premise that silence, rather than being defined only in terms of an absence, or as a negative, depends on agency, the choice of whether or not to *be silent*. The research proceeds by way of examining silence from a number of theoretical perspectives in the contexts of animal life, trauma, secrecy and listening, accompanied by a series of case studies drawn from a range of cultural fictions – poetry, short stories, novels, films – and also from testimony. These case studies are not only illustrative but also have a generative function by giving a fresh dimension to the theoretical speculations. Unlike most other engagements with the theme of silence, this thesis not only takes the definition of silence to be unstable and changeable, but also confronts the question of why ‘silence’ is used in these discourses, positing that it is its association with space that is being drawn upon across these contexts. Exploring how and why the meaning of silence changes between contexts, I shall be arguing that it is the shift in what silence is being opposed to which changes its definition (for example, in being defined in contrast to human language, to free speech, or to oppressive discourse). This shift in what silence is being defined against implies that despite the use of the same term ‘silence’, and even recurring metaphors or other tropes of language, the concept being called ‘silence’ is not equivalent across these contexts. Arguing that it is because ‘silence’ comes to be figured as a creator of space, what is at issue in these contexts is what is conceived of as being in this space of silence – Otherness, isolation, individuality, intersubjectivity.

## ***Literature On Silence***

Having noted that definitions of silence range widely, so too do the sources that engage with silence as their subject. While this renders silence an interdisciplinary topic, and provides a large volume of work to be considered, it also makes it difficult to discern which uses of ‘silence’ are relevant. This thesis tends not to draw on those whose engagements with silence set out to prove that it does not exist, or presuppose silence purely in terms of absence. An example here might be the work of John Cage,

who, in defining silence purely in relation to sound, ultimately comes to the conclusion that there will never be such a thing as silence (1958: 8); though he does address the question of agency in silence, it is more to illustrate that while the study of music has generally focused upon it as intentional sound, thinking of the impossibility of silence draws attention to the continual unintentionality of most sound (1955: 13). This definition of silence is strictly tied to its definition as the physical sensation of vibration against the ear drum and tympanic bones which our brains registers as sound, an extremely literal definition which does not further a discussion of other texts which engage with silence as presence, or a genuine subject. And while it touches on the concept of agency, it does so only to reiterate a lack of agency in regards to silence – this effectively removes the possibility of studying silence (if it does not in fact exist) and its removal from agency does not further the intent of this thesis to think through alienation, or at the other end of the spectrum, ‘choices to remain silent’.

Part of the structure of this thesis aims to recognise different, sometimes exclusive definitions of silence. I have however chosen to focus on engagements with silence which are trying to think of silence as *something*, or of there being something in silence, which is worth thinking about, rather than being dismissed as ‘nothing’. An example of the extent to which different discussions of silence can almost be speaking separate languages is the contrast between Dauenhauer’s Silence: The Phenomenon and Its Ontological Significance (1980), which posits silence as both integral to language and necessary for any engagement with others – and Langdon Gilkey’s response, the article “The Political Meaning of Silence” (1983), in which he argues that his experiences in solitary confinement in a prisoner of war camp was in no way about interconnection or self-expression. This in part illustrates the importance of recognising that what is being spoken of here is not the same thing. This is a central issue – that a discussion of ‘silence’, referring to a Quaker prayer, is not the same thing as the ‘silence’ being referred to in a discussion of censorship, or the ‘silence’ surrounding rape, or the interpretation of mime, or silent film. A number of collections provide a useful overview of the variety of engagements with silence, and the different meanings and valences that ‘silence’ can carry. Silence: Interdisciplinary Perspectives (1997), edited by Adam Jaworsky, offers a wide variety of approaches, from linguistics, discourse analysis, ethnography, music, visual art, performance art, narrative analysis. Perspectives on Silence (1995), edited by Deborah Tannen and Muriel Saville-Troike, is equally broad in its scope – from non-verbal communication and gesture, to acts of worship, cultural stereotypes, psychological and ethnographic engagements with ‘pausing’. Silence and Listening as Rhetorical Arts (2011), edited

by Cheryl Glenn and Krista Ratcliffe, collects essays which are more historical, and political in their focus. While these collections indicate the variety of academic writing on 'silence', they do not offer much reflection on the reasons why the meaning of silence diverges so greatly between the collected works, or what implications this has for contemplating 'what silence means'.

A number of monographs on silence do engage with its changeable meaning, even if the authors align themselves predominantly with one position. Bernard Dauenhauer's Silence: The Phenomenon and Its Ontological Significance (1980) both engages with silence as a theme within philosophical texts, and sustains a discussion of silence's inseparability from language, and its place as a foundation of intersubjectivity and self-expression. Cheryl Glenn's Unspoken: A Rhetoric of Silence (2004) also explores the inter-relation between silence and language, and pays particular attention to meaningful, communicative silences. Sara Maitland's A Book of Silence (2008) is more of a personal engagement, though broad in its research, defining silence in terms of solitude and separation, rather than intersubjectivity. Stuart Sim's Manifesto for Silence: Confronting the Politics and Culture of Noise (2007), engages with disciplines where silence has been historically situated as valuable, if not integral to contemplation (philosophy, religion, literature), and uses this to express the need for silence to create a space for reflection and critical thinking as something which is devalued and eroded by a contemporary, noise-focused culture. This may seem particularly pertinent to modern everyday life, but it is not a new theme. It is also to be found in George Steiner's essays, though what is being referred to as 'noise' shifts from being 'sound' to a sort of 'verbosity': "[in contemporary society] we ... speak far too much, far too easily, making common what was private ... This world will end neither with a bang nor a whimper but with a headline, a slogan, a pulp novel larger than the cedars of Lebanon." (1966: 53-4). In his collection of essays Language and Silence: Essays on Language, Literature and the Inhuman (1998), Steiner also defines illiteracy as a silence, a 'loss of words', but he also conceives of the choice not to write, to remain silent, as a political act, if contrasted to writing words which are 'indifferent' to the political situation they are written in (1961: 25; 1966 54; in Steiner 1998). A similar anti-'noise' position is to be found in Max Picard's The World of Silence (1948) As in these other texts concerned with silence, Picard's book generally defines silence in positive terms – that is, not exclusively in terms of needing to be 'broken', or as 'nothing' – though Picard's work is heavily influenced by his religious (Christian) beliefs which nevertheless privilege 'the Word' (and thus remains tied to the centrality of language in that philosophical-religious paradigm).

There is a significant body of work around the theme of 'silence' within feminism, and gender studies; for example Rosjke Hasseldine's The Silent Female Scream (2007), Adrienne Rich's On Lies, Secrets & Silence: Selected Prose 1966-1978 (1980), or the concept of 'hearing each other into speech' in Nelle Morton's The Journey is Home (1986). This thesis draws on essays by Wendy Brown (2005), and Anne Carson (1995; 2008), both of which are concerned with the valuation of women's voices. There is a large body of work concerned with trauma and silence, a significant number of which are focused on women and sexual violence. Because so much of my focus has not been on silence and trauma, and my chapter which does reference trauma draws on Auschwitz as its case study, I have not drawn on these texts. Many other works have touched on associations between women and silences in particular contexts, among those I have drawn on have been Karma Lochrie's Covert Operations: The Medieval Uses of Secrecy (1999), and Patricia Spacks' Privacy (2003). I have used a number of these works, and found the different discussions to be insightful. I would identify as a feminist, and my own interests and research into silence has been influenced by my own experiences, but I have not confined the texts that I am drawing on, either for theoretical frameworks, or as case studies, to ones which would be clearly identified as feminist.

As I have already mentioned, there is a vast literature aligning silence with violence and trauma, both from a psychoanalytical perspective concerned with repression or denial, and in other discourses on memory, or mourning. An example which simultaneously offers a number of engagements with silence, but without reflecting upon the implied definition of silence, is Shadows of War: A Social History of Silence in the Twentieth Century (2010), a collection edited by Efrat Ben-Ze'ev, Ruth Ginio, and Jay Winter. While proposing 'silence' as a third space between memory and forgetting, which allows a certain amount of agency in silence, this work does not posit a possibility for silence outside of a relation with violence. Giorgio Agamben's Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive (2002) is situated in these discourses which engage with this particular 'silence', but I do not engage with these discourses more widely, in part because this thesis intends to broaden the possible meanings for silence beyond that of violation.

Given the sheer variety of engagements with silence, it is important for me to make it clear what this thesis is *not* attempting to do. I have already mentioned that I am not working with texts that set out to argue that there is no such thing as silence, such as

John Cage. This thesis is not an ethnographic study, and most of my discussion is not focused on cultural specificities of silence. This thesis does not engage in conversation or discourse analysis, nor is it focusing on silence in the works of a single theorist or text. It also, in part due to questions of scope, includes little engagement with psychoanalytical discourses. And while certain religious discourses have been particularly useful (such as the concept of apophysis which I discuss in my first chapter, and return to throughout this thesis), I have also tended to avoid theological engagements with silence's place in worship, including references to it in religious texts, the 'silence of God', though there is a significant body of literature on all of these. The extent to which I engage with texts on animal communication, or animal rights, environmentalism, is also limited. While attempting to examine different forms of silence, this is not an all-encompassing survey. Nor is this an attempt to set up silence as an unequivocally 'good thing', at the expense of ignoring the discourses surrounding oppression in terms of silence. Nor am I setting out to argue 'against' noise and sound, or to argue that contemporary society has lost some connection with silence which it once had (I do not feel in a position to make such a statement). It is however important to recognise a certain privilege in having 'silent places', both historically and in contemporary society, be it private rooms, private beaches, secluded homes – silence can be a commodity, as is perhaps unintentionally evident in Maitland's (2008) work – the privilege enjoyed by those who can have 'rooms of their own', or in Maitland's case a moor of their own.

## ***Structure Overview***

This thesis has separated different silences based on whether their silence is agential, that is, whether or not being silent constitutes a choice. The first two chapters engage with silences which are not entered into out of choice. Between these two the distinction between absence and loss is pivotal, that is, the difference between whether the being in question has never had language, or whether language has been 'lost'. The two later chapters engage with silence which is agential, that is, silence which has been chosen. Between these two the figuring of silence as a form of separation, or as the basis of interconnection, is the distinction.

### **Chapter 1 – Silence as 'Absence'**

The first chapter begins with the need to distinguish between 'absence' and 'loss'. Drawing on the work of Dominick LaCapra (1999), 'absence' is defined as the non-



presence of something which never was present; 'loss' by contrast is given as the 'non-presence' of something which was at some point present. This conceptual distinction is necessary given the prevalence of the use of 'silence' to describe experiences of wordlessness after trauma (silence as the loss of language), and the need to distinguish this from the 'silence' of animals, which is both non-agential, yet more a form of 'absence'. It is also in the discussion of silence as absence that the question of a silence 'outside of language' arises, and the concept of there being knowledge, or sense, which is apprehended as being 'beyond words' is discussed. A significant number of issues which will recur throughout the thesis are explored, drawing on concepts discussed by Timothy Walsh (1998), R. P. Blackmur (1959; 1989), and Anne Carson (2008); exploring linguistic tropes such as 'inexpressibility', the use of the word 'something' to gesture beyond words, or 'catastrophic' speech, as means of expressing this 'outside' of language using words. These tropes recur in numerous discourses surrounding silence, as do metaphors of animality, yet despite this 'common language' of silence I feel it is important to recognise the difference between 'silences' when what is at issue is whether there is agency, and what are the reasons for a given silence. Moving from this foundation of focusing on silence in terms of language, I turn to an examination of animal silences, and the issue of the centrality of language in the distinction between being human and being animal. Here silence is defined in terms of its opposition to human communication, and what is posited in this space of silence is Otherness, in this case, inhumanity. Drawing in part on the Aristotelian definition of humanity as *zōon logon echōn* (the animal with the capacity for language) this chapter discusses the continued reiteration of this dichotomy, with reference to the work of Max Picard (1948), Sara Maitland (2008), and Giorgio Agamben (2004). This discussion raises the question of why the silence of animals is figured as so important, and also as something frightening, and also touches on the question of how 'to talk about animals', given their position as both living beings with whom we share a bounded world, and yet also as creatures who to varying degrees remain 'Other'. Cautious of a romantic tradition of talking about animals which projects an animal's thoughts, I examine a text by Barry Lopez, Apologia (1997), in which animals are neither anthropomorphised, nor rendered utterly alien, and the question of what can be known, or communicated, is left open.

## Chapter 2 – Silence as 'Loss'

This chapter focuses on silences which are defined as the loss of language. In this, silence is defined in opposition to a 'fully human free expression', and what is posited in the space of silence is a dehumanised isolation. This moves into an area where there

is a great deal of literature, for example on the theme of silence and trauma, and one which is perhaps the most prevalent discourses of silence. I focus my attention on two themes, first of all the ‘indescribability of pain’ in the work The Body in Pain (1985) by Elaine Scarry, in which she argues there are no words for, during, and even after, the event of the bodily experience of pain. The second theme is the ‘unspeakability of evil’, which is drawn from Leonhard Praeg’s article “Of Evil and Other Figures of the Liminal” (2010), which argues that things which horrify us, which are identified as ‘evil’, are also experienced as difficult to render into language. Between these two, the question arises of how to then speak of pain, and horror; and it is at this point that I turn to testimony. Discourses of trauma often situate silence in opposition to free speech, or the ability to speak without hindrance from traumatic memory. While there is a brief engagement with Carles Torner’s The Silence of Abraham Bomba (2009), I focus in particular on testimony concerned with a certain category of prisoners at Auschwitz, those referred to as ‘*Muselmanner*’. The ‘figure of the *Muselmanner*’ is central to Giorgio Agamben’s work Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive (2002), and while I find his engagement useful in thinking through ‘the problems of testimony’, it is on the testimony of *Muselmanner* themselves, and those bearing witness to them, that I wish to focus on. This is drawn from an extensive article by Zdzislaw Ryn and Stanislaw Klodzinski, “On the border between life and death: a study of the Muselmans in the concentration camps” (1987). In the case of the *Muselmanner* their silence becomes a symbol of their ‘dehumanisation’. While being associated with silence, and defined in terms of their silence (their tendency not to speak), the testimony itself both destabilises this image, and provides another question: “Is it necessary to continually speak?” This question is raised by a survivor, and it brings us to further questions – namely why the imperative of speaking is seen as being what determines whether or not one is ‘human’.

The silences examined previously are ones that are not entered into by choice – the silence of animals is not chosen, nor is the silence of pain, horror, dehumanisation. Much of the discourses which only consider silence in terms of being negative draw on these issues to define silence as alienating, oppressive, something which needs to be ‘broken’. The next half of my thesis is concerned with the possibility of agential silences, that is, silences which are chosen, wilfully entered into, or engaged in.

### Chapter 3 – Silence as Wilful Separation

The third chapter engages with the possibility of choosing to be silent, and focuses this discussion around the concepts of secrecy and privacy. Secrecy is often listed as a

negative form of silence, and certainly secrecy, tied to deception, can be debilitating, or destructive. I draw on the work of Sissela Bok (1984), in which she both acknowledges the negative aspects of secrecy, but also situates it close to privacy in being necessary for a certain amount of individuality and independence. Wendy Brown's (2005) discussion of the extent to which remaining silent (even in a context where 'breaking silence' is valued) might be a form of resistance, does not conceive of it as a form of freedom in itself; however my discussion engages with the possibility of silence as a form of freedom if conceived of in terms of privacy. In these discourses silence is defined in contrast to oppressive, hegemonic, discourse, and what is placed in silence is the possibility for independence. I further explore the idea of silence as creating privacy, by analysing Oscar Wilde's short story "A Sphinx Without A Secret" (1994), drawing on the work of Patricia Spacks (2003), and Virginia Woolf's A Room of One's Own (2000), to work through the importance of the separation created by silence and secrecy. With particular reference to Shirin Neshat's film Women Without Men (2010) this chapter continues to try and think through what the possible 'pleasures' of secrecy/privacy might be, and whether it could be something which is not only a form of resistance, but a form of freedom. In exploring the narrative of this film, a number of silences are revealed, some constituting forms of oppression, others forms of resistance, others opening the possibility of independence from censure, a space to constitute individuality, and finally also the possibility of 'shared', intersubjective silences.

#### Chapter 4 – Silence as Listening

The last chapter engages with the definition of silence as the choice to listen. Whereas previous chapters generally defined silence in terms of separation (alienating, or liberating), this chapter situates silence as intersubjective. Here silence is defined in opposition to oppressive discourse, or to discourse/language which devalues other's voices, or refuses to engage with them on their terms. What is posited in silence is therefore the possibility for this engagement, for intersubjectivity. This chapter argues that having a space in which one is 'free to speak', is very much contingent on others there, their complicity in that space – the silence between people who are listening to each other. This form of silence is certainly present in theory, and yet it seems to be often absent in discourses around breaking silence, where so much attention is given to those speaking, almost as if in isolation. This chapter draws on Bernard Dauenhauer's work Silence: The Phenomenon and Its Ontological Significance (1980), which is largely concerned with silence as a structure within language, but which argues that silence is fundamental to an encounter with an Other. Salome

Voegelin's Listening to Noise and Silence: Toward a Philosophy of Sound Art (2010) works through silence and listening in reference only to art, and yet her engagement allows for the destabilisation of the dichotomy between language and silence through her focus on sound and noise. King-Kok Cheung's work (1993; 1994) engages with the concept of attentive silences, drawing on her analysis of literary texts, and yet it is also this engagement where the social implications of listening silence are clearest. Cheung's engagement returns the discussion to the theme of testimony. Engaging first of all with Shirin Neshat's installation Turbulent (1998), with reference to Voegelin's thoughts on listening and noise; this chapter moves on to the second, more in-depth case study in Ingrid de Kok's poetic series "A Room Full of Questions" (2002). This series touches on all the different forms of silence which I have been examining throughout this thesis, and also allows me to continue to think through the importance of the silence of listening, creating an intersubjective space.

# Chapter One

## Silence as the Absence of Language

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### *Absence and Loss*

The etymology of ‘silence’ is relatively unambiguous: its use in English derives from the French *silence*, meaning ‘the absence of sound’, from the Latin *silentium*, ‘a being silent’, from *silens* or *silere*, ‘be quiet or still’, of unknown origin (Chambers 2010:1005). In Latin *tacitus* (in English we have *tacit*) also meant silence, or something ‘passed over in silence, done without words, assumed’ (Chambers 2010: 1110). Silence is soundlessness, wordlessness, stillness. While this gives the appearance of being very clear, it does not disclose how important the distinction between being ‘without words’ or ‘without sound’ might be. Silence relies heavily on its context for meaning – as I shall be further exploring with the concept of *apophysis*, silence is defined in terms of what it is not (language, or sound, or free speech, for example), and relies on its context to make this opposition clear. The precise definition of silence varies greatly in different studies,<sup>1</sup> marking it as a contested space. Is silence a break in language, or sound, or may it be in relation to other things? Is silence an absence, or a thing in itself? What value-judgements lie in the distinctions between noise and sound and quiet or silence? It is worth recalling at this point that the word ‘noise’ shares its root with ‘nausea’, and is still generally used in a more pejorative sense than ‘sound’. To say that something is silent is more than just descriptive. Silence is not only to ‘say nothing’ or ‘make no noise’ or ‘communicate

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<sup>1</sup> This was touched on in the introduction – for the variety of definitions of silence see Jaworsky (1997); Tannen and Saville-Troike (1995); Glenn and Ratcliff (2011).

nothing' – to say that something is silent also marks the speaker's listening for, or to, something in that space. It marks expectation (what do you expect which is not there?) but, also, sometimes the lack of expectation – the presupposition that there is nothing there.

So far my discussion of the meaning of silence has remained vague, in part because 'silence' comes to be defined, if not in terms of opposition, then in contrast to what it is not: not-language, not-sound, not-communication. It may be useful here to use a spatial metaphor – silence is defined as a space, it is defined through what it is excluded from or excludes. By extension those who are silent are perceived as either excluded from, or excluding, others. It is because of this definition through subtraction (describing what it is not to give shape to what it is) that the contestations of what is included in its scope come about. If it is to not-speak, what about body language? If it is the absence of sound, is reading alone 'silence'? Is silence a space emptied of meaning, invisible, still, or is it simply removed from one *mode* of carrying significance? In a number of ways, 'silence' is a metaphor – while strictly denoting the absence of sound (and thus by correlation to speech, the absence of spoken language), it is used to figure other absences also. In being defined as what it is not, silence comes to resemble *apophasis*, or negative theology (*via negativa*), in which God is figured through what God is not.

Silence has long been an issue in theology. Within the Christian tradition, Benedictines, Trappists, Quakers, Carthusians, and Amish have all engaged with silence – perhaps it could even be argued that all religions which institute forms of reverential silence, in holy places, around the name of a God, in ritual or as intrinsic to contemplation, meditation or prayer, are all engaging with silence. But my brief discussion of negative theology here is not focusing on the presence of silence within this tradition, but the similarity of its conceptual structure. *Apophasis* (from the Greek *apophanai*, 'to show no') or *via negativa* (Latin for 'the negative way'), describes God as fundamentally beyond any human conception, and therefore simultaneously beyond human language.

In writing on the apophasis of Clement of Alexandria, Hägg (2006) notes that there is a paradox in placing anything beyond language, namely that despite this exclusion, we continue to talk about it, bringing it back into language, as an image of the outside or beyond (2006: 155-6). Clement speaks of God as 'nameless', and calling on 'God' or 'Lord' or 'the One' is not actually conferring a name, but using an imperfect place-

holder “so that our mind may have these things to lean upon and not wander at random.” (Clement, quoted in Hägg 2006: 156). Clement reiterates God’s indescribability and Otherness through ‘alpha privatives’, the expression of absence or negation of a word through the prefix ‘a’ (for example a-theist, or a-gnostic); Hägg notes that theological language of the time Clement was writing (around AD 180) commonly used alpha privatives (it can be found in Gnostic and Hermetic texts, as well as in Middle Platonism (Hägg 2006: 157)), but what is of interest here is the way Clement uses them to ‘describe the indescribable’ (2006: 159). Hägg lists eighteen alpha privatives used extensively by Clement to refer to God, among them ‘invisible’ (ἀόρατος), ‘incomprehensible’ (ἀκατάληπτος), ‘nameless’ (ἄνωνόμαστος), ‘inexpressible’ (ἄρρητος), ‘unutterable’ (ἀφθεγκτος) (2006: 159). Of these, the most commonly used is ἄρρητος – inexpressible – or ἀφθεγκτος – unutterable (2006: 159). Another writer, Alcinous describes God as ἀκίνητος (unmoved) (Hägg 2006: 162), another alpha privative, this time relating to stillness. Similarly, John Chrysostom described God as being ‘unsayable’ (arrētos)[ἄρρητος], ‘unspeakable’ (anekdiēgētos)[ἀφθεγκτος], ‘unwritable’ (anepigrapτος) (in Agamben 2005: 32). Apophasis thus situates God in a space that is defined as being in contrast to what can be described through language, and only touched on through insufficient names, symbols, metaphors, and parables (Hägg 2006: 2). It is the insufficiency of language which ultimately leads to silence – all these negations point towards something which, beyond these words, cannot be approached with language. Clement writes that there is a point where knowledge of God is “no longer transmitted by word of mouth but only revered in adoring silence and holy fear (σεβάσματι δέ καὶ σιγῇ μετὰ ἐκπλήξεως ἀγίας σεβαστού).” (in Hägg 2006: 163). This particular ‘silence of God’ is a place where words fall short, this is distinct from the concept of the ‘silence of God’ which is God’s ‘un-answering’. This silence, given definition through being ‘not-language’, is not an empty space – God is situated there. The indescribable, and the space of silence, is not the same as the *absent* – there may not be language, but there is not nothing. The concept of ‘indescribability’, and of silence as a space outside of language, is one which will be returned to later in this thesis.

The distinction between absence and loss is of great importance in discussing silence, if silence is being defined in terms of what it is not, and therefore in terms of some specific ‘absence’/non-presence. Dominick LaCapra (1999) writes on this distinction in relation to mourning, focusing on the implications between mourning something which is lost, versus the melancholia of mourning something which never was. Though often used synonymously, it is the differences between ‘absence’ and ‘loss’,

and their relation to lack, which is of concern in his paper “Trauma, Absence, Loss” (1999). Establishing a distinction between the two is not, LaCapra points out, the same as arguing that they are binaries – two issues may be distinct but in no way be opposites (1999: 699). The two concepts are linked, and there are indeed occasions when the two converge into the same (losses may pertain to absence), but to conflate the two is to ignore the significant specificity of each, and to generalise every absence into loss (1999: 700). For LaCapra, absence is not a specific event, it is ‘transhistorical’:<sup>2</sup> transcending past, present, and future (1999: 700). Absence is something that is always-already never there, something which never had presence and cannot be lost. Losses, on the other hand, are events, specific in place and time – like a death, as opposed to those who never-were (1999: 700). It is noted that absences are often narrated into losses: the fall from a primary state of grace, or Eden, or completeness (1999: 702). LaCapra gives the example of divinity to illustrate this – the presence of divinity is relatively unambiguous; when conceived of as *loss*, God becomes that which ‘we have killed’ or the *deus abscondus*, the hidden God. If conceived of as *absence* one is left with atheism or possibly some forms of agnosticism. Divinity lost allows for the narration of human failings, sins or faults, but that which is lost can sometimes be regained, and thus the narrative becomes one of redemption or reclamation (1999: 702). LaCapra postulates that this translation of absence into loss may well be integral to all foundational philosophies and fundamentalisms, but the critique of absolute foundations or calls to redemption necessarily entails the disentangling of absence and loss, and some trepidation against the conversion of the former into the latter<sup>3</sup> (1999: 702).

Some of the confusion between absence and loss is tied to their being conceived of as ‘lack’. Both are grappling with how to conceive of the presence of something’s non-presence, its not-being-there: “Loss is often correlated with lack, for as loss is to the past, so lack is to the present and future. ... Just as loss need not be conflated with absence ... so lack may be postulated without the implication that whatever would fill or compensate for it was once there.” (1999: 703-4). There is a danger in correlating lack to deficiency – to be ‘lacking’ is not always to be ‘wanting’. LaCapra illustrates this point with Martha Nussbaum’s discussion of non-Western cultures’ ‘lack’ of the

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<sup>2</sup> LaCapra is explicit that there may be ambivalent absences, and that ‘transhistorical’ is not meant to be utterly invariant.

<sup>3</sup> I would like to briefly note that the distinction drawn between ‘conciliation’ and ‘reconciliation’ in the South African context recognises this difference between absence and loss, and that what was being advocated was not a return to a past state of unity, but the creation of a new community – not the loss of peace, but its historical absence.



novel: if they do not have words, it is that they are absent, rather than 'lacking' (1999: 704). But why, LaCapra asks, convert absence into loss? The answer is to be found in anxiety, which for Freud had absence and uncertainty as its cause, and for Heidegger and Kirkegaard was 'the fear of nothing' (1999: 707). The fear of nothing is twofold: there is "'nothing' to be afraid of", but also it is nothingness which is to be feared. Anxiety in response to absence may never be overcome, but in converting absence into loss, anxiety is given both something concrete to mourn (the lost object) and as noted earlier, the hope of return (1999: 707).

The response to absence or loss through acts of mourning or melancholia illustrates a distinction between the latter two (1999: 713). Mourning, for LaCapra, is a process of 'working-through', a coming to terms with loss or absence. Melancholia, in contrast, is an 'acting-out', a compulsive repetition of trauma (1999: 713). The danger in the conflation between absence and loss is that when the absent (represented as lost) becomes that which is mourned, it has the danger of falling into insurmountable melancholy (1999: 715). The lack of differentiation between absence and loss is in itself to some extent a characteristic of trauma, and the post-traumatic, of its agitation and disorientation (1999: 699). The reliving of the past in post-trauma breaks down the division between past and present, and does not conceive of future possibilities outside this melancholic reiteration of the trauma (1999: 699). It is at this point that LaCapra raises the important example of 'empathetic unsettlement'. Secondary witnesses, those who bear witness to the pain of others, (and this may include the theorist or historian), may experience empathetic unsettlement, a feeling of the victim's experience, but this should not be equated to actually sharing or knowing that experience (1999: 699).

Historical trauma is specific and not everyone is subject to it or entitled to the subject-position associated with it ... empathy and empathetic unsettlement in the attentive secondary witness does not entail this identity; it involves a kind of virtual experience through which one puts oneself in the other's position while recognising the difference of that position and hence not taking the other's place. (1999: 722)

Recognising that the primary witness's pain is not 'transferable' to a secondary witness does not mean that others do not empathise or may not undergo a 'muted trauma' (1999: 717); but keeping the traumas of the primary and secondary witnesses separate maintains the distinction between the losses experienced by the primary

witness, and the absence experienced by the secondary. For LaCapra, 'victim' may be an ethical, or political category, but not a psychological one – both perpetrator and victim may be traumatised by events, but that does not confuse their separate categories (1999: 723).

Mourning is not the only means of 'working-through' trauma, though LaCapra reiterates it remains an important, even necessary one (1999: 714-5). Both narratives and criticism, if they are nontotalising, and explore but do not collapse absence and loss, may be ways of negotiating trauma (1999: 714). LaCapra notes that deconstruction, like Buddhism, can be seen as focused on negotiating and playing out absence, and its relations to 'nonfull presence' (1999: 714). He notes a discussion of the similarities between Derrida's *différance* and 'dependant coorigination' in Buddhism: 'nonfull presence' or the emptiness of things is what marks their interrelationships with others (1999: 714). He quotes the second-century founder of the Madhyāmika school, Nagarjuna, to illustrate this interdependence: "When emptiness 'works', then everything in existence 'works'." (1999: 714). The absence of full presence in this formulation is integral to inter-relations, and therefore to complex meaning. The meaning of a thing thus rests not only in itself, but in the space it leaves for the meanings of others also. Leaving space, or opening space for others will be a theme I return to in my later chapters on silence as listening. This nonfull presence is not loss – a part has not fallen away, but is always already left vacant. This formulation is easily overlaid onto language, as is LaCapra's differentiation between absence and loss. It allows for distinction between the loss of a capacity to speak, and the limits of what is encoded into language (specific event versus a structural issue). Insufficient language may be nonfull presence, but it is not utter absence.

Maintaining an explicit distinction between silence as absence (of language), as opposed to loss is imperative to this study. My discussion of silence distinguishes between the silence which is absence, and silence which is loss, both of which are figured 'negatively', through 'not-being'. In the following chapters I shall be examining, first of all, the silence of absence, and proceeding from that, the silence of loss. There is nothing 'amiss' in the silence of absence; it could be described as 'silence in its place'. But being without sound or language comes also to be conflated with the absence of humanity, with either the divine, or the animal. The silence of absence is naturalised, and that of loss is spoken of in terms of absence, an inverse of what LaCapra discusses. The silence of loss, the losing of language, comes to be understood in terms of dehumanisation, and spoken of in terms of the inhuman (as

distinct from the inhumane). These distinctions – of inhuman absence, and inhumane loss, and the problematic definition of humanity through being-with/in-language (or at least, as not-silent) – are integral to the structure of the following chapters.

## ***Silence as Absence***

This chapter addresses silence in terms of absence. The conceiving of silence as the absence (as distinct from loss) of language becomes figured also as an absence of humanity. I use ‘inhuman’ in this chapter in a very specific way: to denote the ‘not-human’, which is not the same as the ‘inhumane’. My use of ‘inhumane’ hinges upon processes of what might be called ‘dehumanisation’<sup>4</sup> – the experience of the loss of language in the context of extreme pain and atrocity, censorship, and forms of symbolic silencing. I make this distinction to highlight again the difference between absence and loss: the loss of ‘humanity’ and its relation to silence I shall be examining in my next chapter. These two categories are often conflated, at least insofar as the same language is used to speak of loss as is used to describe absence. The inhuman is not a loss, or a lack, in my use of the term here. It is a space where there has ‘never been’ language. In the space of language’s absence, it is not that there is nothing there, but that what is there is not conceived of as being human. It is possible to postulate a space in which an utterly inconceivable, extreme Otherness, might exist – if it did, there would be little that could be said about it. My focus here is on silence which is taken for granted, where there is ‘nothing amiss’, silence is ‘in its place’, rather than being a state that someone has been ‘displaced into’. There is nothing unexpected or uncanny in the silence of the inhuman. The inhuman is that which we expect to be silent, and whose silence is taken to be integral, or presupposed in its being.

This distinction between the inhuman and the inhumane relies to some extent on the presupposition that ‘humanity’ can be roughly situated in language, and that a space outside (conceived as silence) discursively becomes the site of humanity’s Other. This definition of humanity as the ‘speaking animal’ (*zōon logon echōn*) has its roots in Aristotle – in order to be a ‘political animal’, in order to live in a human community, there must be language. Communication becomes the basis of community – Nietzsche

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<sup>4</sup> I am to some extent constrained by language here – I shall be arguing in my examination of silence as ‘loss’ that forms of dehumanisation are conceived of and spoken of as a loss of humanity, but even displaced from language, neither victims nor perpetrators fall outside of ‘being human’. The inhuman is that which has not been conceived of being human in the first place – the absence of humanity, rather than its loss.

paraphrases Aristotle to say “To live alone you must be an animal or a God” (1998: 6). This is making a point about ‘human community’, but circumnavigates the fact that many animals are social, as indeed are the gods in many pantheons. The question of the silence of animals is an issue that I shall be focusing on later in this chapter, but for the moment I shall reiterate that both the inhuman and the inhumane are often figured as being tied to silence – as being spaces of language’s absence or loss. I am working with these distinctions, yet I wish to make it clear that these distinctions are far from unproblematic, though they are commonly reiterated. I do not wish to consider the human category to be one against which all else must be defined, and part of my engagement with the inhumane seeks to engage with the definition of humanity as being situated in language, but this entails that I also use these terms. A significant aspect of this work demands an engagement with the ways in which we experience the world, and this is the point at which, if we define ourselves as human (we are engaged in communication, as a writer and a reader), even as a human animal, appealing to that experience requires an engagement with humanity, as well as with its Others.

I shall be engaging with two forms of silence which are figured as ‘absent of language’. The first is ‘agnostic silence’ – this is largely abstract, and focuses on the silence of the unknown, or the particular silence of the ‘indescribable’, and the ways in which this is brought into language. The second is ‘animal silence’, and offers a further engagement with the distinction drawn between humanity as within language, and animals and the ‘natural world’ being outside of it, as well as ways in which this binary distinction is disrupted.

## ***Agnostic Silence***

In this section I am attempting to engage with silence as the absence of language. It is worth distinguishing two different silences which come under the rubric of the inhuman. The first I shall be touching on is what I am calling ‘agnostic’ silence. I do not mean ‘agnostic’ in a purely religious sense, though in my engagement I will be touching on some silences that have been written of in religious contexts. T. H. Huxley coined ‘agnostic’ (Greek: *a* – not; *Gnosis* – to be known) as a description of his position of uncertainty as to the presence of God or spiritual knowledge (Chambers 2010: 20). But his use is also sometimes considered to be a reference to the altar to the Unknown God in Athens. Aside from the twelve main Gods, the ancient Greeks also worshipped the *Agnostos Theos*, the Unknown God, who was not personified, but

acted as a placeholder for whatever deities might exist but whose natures or names had not been revealed. There was a temple to the *Agnostos Theos* in Athens, and it was not uncommon to swear an oath ‘in the name of the Unknown God’ (Νή τόν Ἀγνωστον; *Ne ton Agnoston*). When the Apostle Paul spoke in Athens, he declared that it was the Unknown God he had come to reveal (Acts 17:22-23. KJV). In using the word ‘agnostic’ in reference to silence, I am not referring specifically to the agnostic position on the unknowability of God, or to the *Agnostos Theos* – I am using it in a very general sense to encompass the ‘unknown’ or ‘unknowable’. A silence is ‘agnostic’ if what it indicates is conceived of as being fundamentally mysterious, other-worldly, inexpressible.

Language functions by naming, and by identifying something as ‘inexpressible’, ‘indescribable’, ‘outside of language’, paradoxically names that which is exterior to it, situating the ‘indescribable’ as a liminal figure – as something which exceeds any description, or is insufficiently captured by a name or word. Encountering something – extremes of pain and fear, the extraordinary, limit/liminal experiences – provokes our desire to understand, to speak of them, to narrate their happening, no matter how tentatively. The concept of the *euphemein* is a useful one when discussing the modes of discourse through which that which is outside of discourse is disclosed. I am drawing here on the use of this concept by the political philosopher Agamben, in his work Remnants of Auschwitz (2005), which I shall be returning to later. Agamben uses the concept of the *euphemein* to explore the preservation of an object’s ‘unspeakability’. There is a mystique surrounding that ‘which is beyond words’ – John Chrysostom described God as being ‘unsayable’ (*arrētos*), ‘unspeakable’ (*anekdiēgētos*), ‘unwritable’ (*anepigrapτος*) (Agamben 2005: 32). He contrasts those who worship through the recognition of God’s ‘incomprehensible nature’, with those seeking to ‘understand’ the divine, writing: “those ones adore in silence, these ones give themselves work to do; those ones divert their gaze, these ones are not ashamed to stare into unsayable glory.” (Chrysostom, in Agamben 2005: 32). It is the word *euphemein* which has been translated from the Greek as ‘to adore in silence’ but which can also mean ‘to observe a religious silence’ (2005: 32). A direct translation is ‘to speak the just/right word’, implying the ‘just’ word is the silent recognition that there are no words beyond this point. In Latin, the phrase *favete linguis* was spoken by a herald at the beginning of official ritual acts, an order to ‘favour me with your tongues/speech’, meaning to ‘favour me with your silence’ so as to prevent any

interruption with inappropriate words.<sup>5</sup> Both *euphemein* and *favete linguis* are a call to silence within a call to ‘just’ ‘speech’, a recognition of the close interconnection between language and ‘un-saying’.

Agamben’s discussion of the *euphemein* is situated within his engagement with discourses surrounding Auschwitz, and testimony which bears witness to what happened there. Agamben is unsettled by the description of Auschwitz as ‘unsayable’ – the *euphemein* is not only the root of ‘euphemism’, it is also linked to the glorification of whatever is rendered ‘unspeakable’ (2005: 32). Agamben recognises an imperative against glorifying or mystifying atrocity, insisting that we be “not ashamed of staring into the unsayable” – even at the risk of discovering that what evil knows of itself, we can also easily find in ourselves.’ (2005: 33). There is of course a subtle distinction between something which is declared to be ‘unspeakable’ – rendered taboo – and something which someone experiences as being ‘beyond words’. Like Nietzsche’s abyss, Agamben turns ‘evil’ into a void which returns the gaze, atrocity is something which is witnessed, to which one bears witness. Whether one may speak of what one has seen remains ambiguous.

The difference between whether a subject is being rendered taboo, or is experienced as difficult to put into words, is an important one when it comes to thinking of what ‘*euphemein*’ means. Agamben’s figuring of it aligns Gnostic Christian beliefs, and the language it uses but which also predates it, with discourses of how to talk about Auschwitz, and whether it is ‘unique and unsayable’. Agamben positions himself in opposition to the position which would render Auschwitz a name as un-utterable as that of the adored and feared God. In his casting of *euphemein* as the marker of a taboo, he turns the concept into a form of censorship. There is a subtle, but important emphasis in this interpretation of *euphemein*: regardless of whether the subject *can* be spoken of, Agamben’s concept of the *euphemein* is one in which it dictates what *should not* be spoken of. Agamben’s response to the charge that he is guilty of attempting to speak of the “unique and unsayable” name of Auschwitz (2005: 31) is to insist that we rise to this challenge and bear witness, gazing upon evil even if we find our gaze turned suddenly upon ourselves. Regardless of whether the gaze is commensurate with an act of speech, there is a grave importance in the refusal to remain silent given a subject one feels compelled to speak and give voice to. The

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<sup>5</sup> Evidenced in Cicero *De divinatione* (2, 83/1, 102); Horace *Carmina* (2, 3, 2); Seneca *De vita beata* (26, 7); Ovid *Fasti* (2, 654); Pliny the Elder *Naturalis historia* (28, 11).

malediction against censorship is not at issue, but I wish again to return to the precise definition of '*euphemein*'.

To speak the 'just' or 'right' words (*euphemein*), to favour with tongues (*favete linguis*) are calls to silence in the presence of the sacred in their original uses. Agamben's discussion focuses upon John Chrysostom's usage of the term within a passage which sets up an evidently binary opposition between irreverently speaking the name of God, and maintaining the 'adoring silence'. It is interesting to note that the uttering of the name of God, the Tetragrammaton (YHWH), rather than an acceptable substitute such as Adonai, may be considered blasphemy. The word *blasphemy* originates from *blasphemein* (speaking evil/harmful words, also used to mean profanity in general), the opposite of *euphemein*. We are presented with a choice between 'these' (*blasphemein*) and 'those' (*euphemein*), in which both positions are consciously chosen and which we are invited to choose between. This representation of the *euphemein* does not allow for this silence to be the response to something, like terror or grace, which exceeds language. But *euphemein* is not spoken of in terms of a negative of language – the call to 'just words' is an invitation to speech, but it is done in the face of something considered to be beyond description.

Euphemism – replacing an offensive word with one without the same connotations – shares the same root as *euphemein*, and might be argued to attempt the same outcome. A euphemism also institutes an 'unspeakability' or silence, but through a substitution of a different word or phrase – the replacement of the Tetragrammaton with Adonai could be argued to be an example. But there is a point where euphemism becomes metaphor – 'eternal sleep', or 'passing on', 'going to a better place', meaning 'death', for example – and it is through metaphor that that which is beyond words can be tentatively apprehended. What I wish to posit is that while Agamben defines *euphemein* as 'dictating the unspeakable', when faced with that which exceeds language it can also allow us to conceive of a way of marking, voicing the excess. To dictate is not only to rule, but to speak, and *euphemein* can be appropriated to designate the attempt to name or speak of something whose name is unknown or perhaps inadequate, a movement towards including an unspeakable within language, rather than demarcating a taboo. To risk repetition, the distinction between the two lies in the difference between declaring something un-utterable, and experiencing an insufficiency of words.

An issue at the heart of any discussion of ‘agnostic silence’ is the question: how do we depict the unknown? Henry Holiday was commissioned to illustrate Lewis Carroll’s The Hunting of the Snark, and one of the first pictures he drew included the Boojum and the disappearance of the baker. The author, on seeing the picture, wrote to Holiday that “it was a delightful monster, but ... [a]ll his descriptions of the Boojum were quite unimaginable, and he wanted the creature to remain so.” (in Walsh 1998: 87). The published image of the baker’s disappearance is largely filled with darkness, through which shape and form cannot be seen for certain. The Snark turns out to be a Boojum, but what a Boojum *is* is not disclosed in either the poem, or the illustrations – it remains ‘unimaginable’. Though, of course, Holiday *did* imagine, and depict it, just as any reader might unfetter their imagination when trying to envision a Boojum. There is an ambivalence in the unknown – its identification is apophatic, it is defined by what it is not, just as silence is. My engagement with agnostic silence hinges upon this ambivalence: that what is being addressed, or named, is simultaneously being identified as being outside of language. I will be focusing on three theorists, Timothy Walsh, R. P. Blackmur, and Anne Carson, whose work touches on how the ‘unimaginable’, or the ‘indescribable’, is nevertheless still spoken of. I am engaging with this question because, while here it is figured as either a fundamental part of language, or as an issue of translation, or tied up with the difference between experience and description, in my next chapter the question of ‘describing the indescribable’ comes to be of central importance in discourses surrounding loss and trauma. Both in agnostic silence, and the silence attributed to dehumanisation, the desire, need and difficulty of nevertheless communicating despite the sense of its impossibility highlights the extent to which these silences are not the same as those engaged with in my later chapters, which are maintained or entered into willingly, though sometimes defensively. In beginning here, with the issue of the silence that attends uncertainty, I also hope to lay down ways of describing silence, ways of thinking of silence, which will be returned to throughout this work.

## ***Gesturing towards Something***

I wish to further explore this concept of speaking of the unknown/unknowable through a discussion of Timothy Walsh’s The Dark Matter of Words: Absence, Unknowing, and Emptiness in Literature (1998). True to its title, this book is largely concerned with literary examples, but the theoretical concepts that Walsh draws upon are useful to explore silence in general. Walsh is concerned with non-presence, and the ways in



which the silence of something which cannot be fitted easily into words is described, both in terms of the silence itself as a subject, but also in terms of the experience of ‘trying to put something into words’. Walsh draws on the work of R. P. Blackmur, among others, to discuss different forms of absence, both within language, and from there more generally in literature. R. P. Blackmur is a significant figure within language studies and literary criticism, but the two works that Walsh focuses on are Language as Gesture (originally published in 1942) and “The Language of Silence: A Citation” (originally published in 1955), the latter of which I shall also be examining. Walsh uses Blackmur to work through some of the interrelations between language and silence – or the point where they touch – and it is Blackmur’s concept of a ‘language of silence’ that I shall be examining more closely. It is Walsh’s concern with different forms of non-presence (absence which is not loss), and his attention to the ways in which language attempts to describe the absent, that are of particular relevance in my working through of ‘agnostic silence’.

Walsh uses several quotations in order to figure ‘the inexpressible’. The first is taken from letters written by Hildegard von Bingen, the twelfth century abbess:

I am very preoccupied on account of a vision that appeared to me in the mystery of the spirit...I understand the inner sense which touches my heart and soul like a burning flame, teaching me the depths of explanations without, however, giving me literary mastery in the Teutonic language, of which I am deprived .... the words in this vision are not like words uttered by the mouth of man, but like a shimmering flame.... (in Walsh 1998: 39).

The second is from Wittgenstein’s Tractatus:

There are, indeed, things that cannot be put into words. *They make themselves manifest*. They are what is mystical ....What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence. (in Walsh 1998: 43. *original emphasis*).

Both of these quotes speak of experiences, or things, which cannot be pinned down in language. I am not setting out to question whether or not Hildegard von Bingen’s ‘visions’, or Wittgenstein’s ‘mystical’, are real or not – discounting such descriptions would entail arguing that there is ‘nothing to be said’ about the unknown, and passing

on – in silence – to the next section. But what is interesting is that much is said, even if what is said keeps pointing towards some ‘deeper’ silence. It is this ‘language pointing towards silence’ that Walsh, and also Carson, find interesting.

As a preliminary, it is useful to engage with Walsh’s conception of language as a form of gesture. In this he is drawing on the work of R. P. Blackmur, whose concepts grew out of linguistic theories about the origins of language, and the speculation as to whether it evolved out of body language (Walsh 1998: 186-7). But Blackmur is not actually concerned with origins, but with the inseparability of language and gesture:

Language is made of words, and gesture is made of motion. There is one half of the puzzle. The other half is equally self-evident if only because it is an equally familiar part of the baggage of our thought. It is the same statement put the other way round. Words are made of motion, made of action or response, at whatever remove, and gesture is made of language – made of the language beneath or beyond or alongside the language of words. When the language of words fails we resort to the language of gesture. If we stop there, we stop with the puzzle. If we go on, and say that when the language of words most succeeds it becomes gesture in its words, we shall have solved the verbal puzzle.... (Blackmur in Walsh 1998: 63)

In this he is not only saying that when we cannot find the right word we resort to sign language, he is arguing that words are gestures, movements: they point, they lead, they are governed by patterns, they ‘move’ us ... and if we ‘feel’ them, then they must be capable of touching us (1998: 65). On one level, the language of being ‘moved’ or ‘touched’ by language is figurative or metaphorical, but what Walsh is highlighting in Blackmur’s argument is not that words literally leap off a page and hit us (though these are also common expressions), but that language and gesture both act as motions towards meanings (1998: 65). Blackmur is intrigued by a line in *Othello*: “I understand a fury in your words/ But not the words.”(1998: 63), and its implication that it is possible to understand something beyond words. Both in this example from *Othello*, and in the previous discussion of the *euphemein*, it is emotions (fury and ‘adoring fear’) which are situated as linked to unspeakability. Walsh argues that language functions as a translation, and despite all this focus on the limits of language, it generally functions extremely well. It would be impossible to speak of ‘language making the world’ or ‘determining the scope of consciousness’ without allowing for the remarkable flexibility and vastness of language. Language can be extremely

beautiful, and is also extremely practical – I do not mean these as platitudes, but as important recognitions that neither Blackmur nor Walsh are arguing that language is totally insufficient: asking for water when you are coughing (or gesturing for someone to pat your back) is important; so is asking for directions at a crossroads, or telling a friend you'll be back in ten minutes. Blackmur is arguing that words work because they are capable of pointing beyond themselves.

Words sound with music, make images which are visual, seem solid like sculpture and spacious like architecture, repeat themselves like the movements in dance, call for a kind of mummary in the voice when read, and turn upon themselves like nothing but the written word. Yet it is the fury in the words we understand, and not the words themselves. (1998: 64)

Walsh explores Blackmur's concept of language as gesture by giving an example from a poem by Bill Kemmet: "... when you come/ next to me the sudden rain/ ends with its hint of what/ the hand can never/ hold. It's in the eye of a fawn/ jumping a chasm far too wide." (1998: 66). Walsh is arguing that these phrases work because they gesture, rather than naming what they speak of, because the name is not enough (1998: 66). Language is a lengthy litany of explanations beyond individual words. This is a love poem, but Kemmet gets closer to speaking about love with 'its hint of what the hand can never hold' than a simple naming or cliché could.

It is worth noting that the 'ineffability', the indescribability of the sublime, the beautiful (and horrific) is itself a cliché, a convention. To an extent these single words or phrases ('it was indescribable ... no words can capture it'), these clichés are like 'love'. What is of interest to Walsh, and also to me, is not the instance when they are simply reiterated, but the ways in which they are spoken of, gestured towards, and through that gesture, possibly approached. Having hopefully established Walsh's position of language as gesture, I wish to examine his exploration of the silence held in the word 'something', of how and what it points towards, and how this ties in to the concept of unnamings.

'Something' is a common word, but it is a specific usage of it that Walsh is examining. He relates 'something' to the linguistic concept of deixis – deictic words are those which rely on their context for meaning, and shift their meaning when their context is changed. Examples are I, you, we, they (person deixis); this, that, here, there (place deixis); now, later, before, after (time deixis) (1998: 156). 'Come' and 'go' may

also be deictic, as indeed are the terms 'self' and 'other'. To a great extent 'silence' also becomes deictic, since what it is (not-words, not-sound, or a sign of trauma, or a position of power) is utterly reliant on context. A sentence such as 'I brought this here for you' is almost entirely deictic: without a context it is impossible to define who, what, or where is actually being indicated. Deictic words often point towards names (I, Hamlet, brought this locket here to Elsinore for you, Gertrude); but the point about 'something' is that while it is also indicative, there are instances when what it gestures towards is nameless (1998: 157). Walsh is not talking about 'something' when it is 'untroubled', for example 'I was looking for something when I tripped over the log', or 'please bring me something from Ouagadougou', or even 'ouch, there's something in my shoe'. In the latter examples the 'something' is unknown, but these are not the nameless things which Walsh is focusing on. He is examining the instances when what 'something' points to is outside of language, something sensed as profoundly important, yet inexpressible.

The illustrations given by Walsh are largely literary, or taken from writings on art or religion. He quotes from D. H. Lawrence's St. Mawr:

There is something else for me ... I can't tell you what it is. It's a spirit ... It's here, in this landscape. It's something more real to me than men are, and it soothes me ... I don't know what it is, definitely. It's something wild... (1998: 157).

And Sir Thomas Browne's reflections on the soul:

Thus are we men, and we know not how; there is something in us, that can be without us, and will be after us, though it is strange it has no history, what it was before us, nor can tell how it entered us. (1998: 154-5).

And Washington Allston's reflection on what it is that we see in art:

May it not be something *from ourselves*, which is reflected back by the object, – something which, as it were, we imbue the object ...? (1998: 154 *emphasis in original*).

Walsh recognises that all of these 'somethings' might not be pointing towards the same thing, but in each discourse 'something' marks "the exact spot where language

gives out ...”(1998:154). This spot is mystery, because ‘something’ is not a temporary place-holder, in this instance. What is being brought home from Ouagadougou, or is pricking in a shoe, these can be disclosed and once seen will have names. But this ‘something else ... something wild’, the ‘something without history’, and the ‘something from ourselves’, indicate something which is sensed, but cannot be pinned down in language: “These somethings are completely on their own, simultaneously signifying nothing and everything, providing habitation for the ineffable in their hollow hallways.” (1998: 155). Walsh sees in the use of the word ‘something’ in these instances the attempt to ‘unname’ what is being spoken of (1998: 155). On one level, these ‘somethings’ are named – they are ‘art’, ‘belonging’, ‘the soul’. But by refusing to settle for these, in insisting on using ‘something’, what is being gestured towards is not a word, but beyond it. ‘Something’ both unnames and attempts to get closer to what is being spoken of. What Walsh is trying to describe is the translation of the ineffable into language, and the moments when a given name is refused, and instead a word which actually cannot disclose what it points to, a word which preserves the absence of words, is used instead, unnameing what you might have presupposed you understood: “By merit of its unrivalled transparency, ‘something’ often functions as a glass receptacle into which we can pour what we cannot say in order to observe it without obstruction.” (1998: 167). Though it seems what is poured into this glass may be unsettlingly opaque, and no less clear to understand. ‘Something’ marks a point where there would otherwise be silence, because what is being gestured to lacks a definite name, or even perhaps in the mind of the speaker, anything else definite. In uttering ‘something’, that which would otherwise have no other moniker might be brought into language, talked about, even if it cannot be precisely named. In this way ‘something’ makes it possible to talk about an un-named thing as *something* – as having a presence,<sup>6</sup> characteristics (something wild, something without history, something in ourselves), as being *real*.

The preoccupation with the outside, or edges, of language, and the search for ways of gesturing to this outside, such as ‘something’ does, becomes particularly clear later in this chapter where I engage with the silence of animals, and also in my next chapter where I engage with testimony. Perhaps it will be possible to think through testimony as a gesturing of language specifically in the context of the loss of the certainty that language will suffice. But for the moment I will continue here, and return to

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<sup>6</sup> As will be discussed later, Scarry’s (1985) work on silence and pain precisely focuses on the fact that if the ‘inexpressible’ cannot be brought into language, its ‘reality’ can be contested, and it is this which has implications for social and political representations.

Blackmur, and specifically his essay “The Language of Silence” (1955), and in particular the importance of the meaning he attaches to silence in this piece.

## ***The Quick***

In his introduction to Outsider at the Heart of Things (1989), a collection of Blackmur’s essays, James T. Jones reads “The Language of Silence: A Citation” as a companion piece to Language as Gesture (1989:10). Instead of approaching the point where language gives way to silence from the direction of language, as he does in the latter, Jones sees in this essay Blackmur’s approach to the same point (where silence and language touch) from the opposite direction, that is, out of silence and into language (1989:10). At first an examination of inspiration, and furthermore an exploration of what it means to put something into words, Blackmur’s “The Language of Silence” (1955) argues that language attempts to speak even of what it has yet to find names for, and yet rather than bemoan the limits of language, its failings, Blackmur engages with this silence which is ‘the rest’ (1955: 382). Blackmur quotes the Chinese author Lu Chi (302 A.D.), who correlates bringing language out of the “inch-space of the heart” (‘inch-space’ having connotations of emptiness), with bringing Being out of Non-Being, and calling into silence for an answer (1955: 389). This is not about inventing new words – while there are certainly invented languages (Hildegard von Bingen created one) these often, though not exclusively, serve to limit those who can understand (an issue of secrecy), rather than opening up new ways of describing or understanding. The language we have is always others’ as well as our own, it precedes us and outlives us, and yet we find ways of making it our own. But it is this ‘silence’ – ‘the emptiness in the inch-space of the heart’ – which Blackmur keeps returning to, and the movement into language, which for Blackmur is a form of translation.

Putting thoughts, feelings, memories, experiences, the tangled ways in which we think, into words that can be laid out and be comprehensible, is not a simple task; finding the right words can produce “either a mystery or a cliché” (1955: 385) – mostly we “hope others will catch from our words the meaning that has all along been half-born between the heart and the mouth.” (1955: 385). To encounter someone struggling to describe something is to recognise that “*something* is being translated into words from another language.” (1955: 383 *emphasis added*). The translation

going on is from thoughts and feelings, intentions, senses of knowing, which do not fit into words, and yet fitting words must be found.<sup>7</sup>

We translate most in our very own language, and so little of it gets into our words. If there were no gaps between our words – in which silence speaks, and in which we recollect ourselves ... – we should never find our thoughts; nor recognise the thoughts of others .... If poetry is heightened speech it is heightened with silence. *Meaning is what silence does when it gets into words.* (1955: 403 *emphasis added*).

In this understanding, meaning is not to be found within language, but beyond it, in what it is gesturing to, in what it is speaking *about*. It is this meaning – and it is worth recalling that ‘meaning’ is a verb, to *have* a meaning is to be signifying, gesturing, towards it – which Blackmur sees as all that is of value in words; the meanings which we place in them and hope will touch others, the meanings which words provoke in us (1955: 387).

In passing, Blackmur describes Lu Chi’s silence as “a quick of hidden sense and skill that may yet become words.” (1955: 389). This depends on an older meaning of ‘quick’, namely meaning ‘alive’, and still evident in the quick of a nail, or a plant (the part which is sensitive, growing). In not yet being words, this quick of sensing and knowing is the silence Blackmur situates as giving significance to language. Near the beginning of this essay, he writes that: “hear[ing] the silence we know that the words are animated by and united with a life not altogether their own...” (1955: 382). What animates and gives life to words are their meanings, and their meanings come from some being – from an intention to communicate and understand, which binds the hearer and speaker, or reader and writer, into a possible dialogue. The quick of silence is inarticulate(d) sense, the being alive which we translate into words.

This is not equivalent to the discussion of the extent to which meaning (or the signified, in Saussurian linguistic terms), always exceeds the word (sign or signifier)<sup>8</sup>. That connotation, and the use of language, is more complicated, unpredictable,

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<sup>7</sup> There is at stake in this the difference between thoughts, speech, and language, and the extent to which unspoken thoughts become situated as unknown, and silent, and separate from language will come to be particularly pertinent to the situating of animals as silent.

<sup>8</sup> Agamben renders this in terms of “a word always [having] more sense than it can actually denote” (1998: 25).

‘exceeding’ the structure of language (denotation), is not what Blackmur is actually musing on, though he does recognise this point. Blackmur is not focusing on the *structure* of language, or the construction of meaning. His subject here is not language, or meaning, but what is ‘behind’ them. He calls this Silence, the Quick. Rather than engaging with the system of language as removed from those who use it, he approaches it as evidence of those who use it, their Quick, their life, their desire to translate this into something sharable. It is from this point that I move to Anne Carson, who also engages with the wrangling between silence and language as a movement of translation, or in her own terms, the issue of ‘untranslatability’ and silence.

## ***Translating Catastrophe***

I wish to turn now to Anne Carson’s essay Variations on the Right to Remain Silent (2008). Anne Carson is a classicist, translator, and poet, and the breadth of her interests is often apparent in the variety of examples and sources that she draws upon. Her work often exhibits an interest in language, and issues of translation or translatability, for example in her poetic work Nox (2009) which includes a painstaking translation of Catullus’s ode to his brother, alongside her own negotiations with the absence, and then death, of her own brother. While I shall be drawing on Carson’s work later in this thesis – specifically her essay “The Gender of Sound” (1995) – it is her engagement with the concept of the ‘untranslatable’ in her essay “Variations on the Right to Remain Silent” (2008) that I wish to turn to here. In this essay, Carson is engaging with silence as the unknown or unknowable, and drawing examples from the Odyssey, the trial of Joan of Arc, and also from paintings by Francis Bacon. It is her engagement with the untranslatable as a means of thinking about the unknown – figuring it specifically in terms of communicability – which is of interest here.

When discussing the ‘untranslatable’, Carson is not referring only to the fact that each language contains words without perfect analogy in others; words might still be precisely defined, albeit with a sentence or two. She also briefly acknowledges that what is lost, or has been destroyed, is also untranslatable – the silence in between fragments can only be reproduced, not filled in.<sup>9</sup> Her focus in this piece is on words which defy translation, which are not intended to be translatable – Carson calls this: “a

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<sup>9</sup> Thus her translation of Sappho, If not, Winter (2003), includes the line breaks, and empty space, implicit in what is literally ‘fragments’.



word that goes silent in transit”(2008). Her first example of this is taken from the *Odyssey*. There are a number of occurrences in Homer’s poetry of what is called ‘the language of the Gods’, though Homer usually provides a translation of the word also. In providing a translation, Homer is setting up a dialogue, a correspondence, between the language of the Gods, and his own ancient Greek. There is an occasion, however, when no translation is provided – when Hermes gives Odysseus a plant whose medicine will protect him from Kirke’s magic: “... at the root it was black but like milk was the flower./ MOLY is what the Gods call it.” (2008) The plant is described (the colour of its roots and flowers) and named, but this information remains insufficient to give it any name other than ‘MOLY’. It refuses translation in that it refuses to disclose further meaning. In saying that MOLY is untranslatable, Carson is pointing out that there is no *corresponding* word – there is only this one name. The name might be appropriated, but not moved, not *translated*. If repeated it remains a foreign word, and the flower itself is not identified in the languages – and therefore also knowledges – of anyone other than the Gods.

A word that goes silent in transit, the untranslatable, is a refusal of cliché for Carson. Cliché is itself a borrowed word in English, it is a French term taken from printing, meaning ‘to make a stereotype’. But what Carson is examining is the extent to which all of language is “a gigantic cacophonous cliché. Nothing has not been said before. The templates are set. Adam long ago named all the creatures.” (2008). Language rests on familiarity, regularity – language which insists on remaining foreign disrupts and unsettles, but also forces one to encounter what it speaks of as being strange, of not being something already comprehended or assimilated. Carson argues that a cliché is a question – it asks, rhetorically, ‘don’t we already believe we understand this?’ The untranslatable is the answer to this question when it becomes ‘catastrophe’ (2008). To understand what Carson means in saying “catastrophe is an answer” (2008), it is useful to recall the etymology of the word, since as a professor of Classics she is doubtlessly using it with its history in mind. ‘Catastrophe’ comes from the Greek *katastrophē* – ‘an overturning’ – and was used to mean ‘a reversal of what was expected’, specifically in the narrative of a drama. In medical usage it is a death from inexplicable causes either preceding, during, or after an operation. The first recorded use of ‘catastrophe’ to mean a sudden disaster is not attested until 1748. If cliché is a question (implying the answer is already familiar), the answer is an overturning of expectation. To clarify – the untranslatable confronts us with the foreign, with another language, another knowledge. Trying to describe the untranslatable is an attempt to render it familiar, to assimilate it. Cliché is a reiteration, in familiar terms, regardless

of other possibilities. If something is red, it is like a rose; if it is black it is like the night. Catastrophe is the disruption of this, it is the unpredictable, it is another way of speaking that challenges you to question what is known, rather than to assume you fully understand.

Carson explores the possibility of catastrophic untranslatability through the transcripts of the trial of Joan of Arc, in 1431. She acknowledges that there are already a number of translations that have occurred that distance a reader from Joan's own words – she spoke Middle French, her responses were transcribed by a notary, and later translated into Latin, and some of her answers were deliberately falsified (2008). But it is Joan's refusal to answer in the expected or demanded way that Carson is examining, specifically her answers to the judges' questions about the 'voices' which guided her. It was on the nature of the voices that much of her trial rested. She began to hear the voices when she was twelve, and though they were intensely experienced, they were without narrative, and she did not originally attribute to them any further characteristics such as names, faces, smell, motion, warmth (2008). During her inquisition she was urged to add such characteristics, but she also responded to interrogation with answers that, while not refusals of the questions, do refuse to speak 'translatably' (2008). Her voices were intensely present to her, but they also challenge comprehensible description. Joan's 'catastrophic' replies trace out, not an image of the voices, but a picture of their invisibility. An example that Carson obviously delights in is the response Joan gave when asked if the voices were plural or singular: "The light comes in the name of the voice." (2008). For Carson, this "is a sentence that stops itself. Its components are simple, yet it stays foreign, we cannot own it. Like Homer's untranslatable *MOLY* it seems to come from somewhere else and it brings a whiff of immortality with it." (2008). What Carson means by 'immortality' here is the otherness of the Gods – in her first example from the *Odyssey*, she notes that the Gods of the ancient Greek pantheon do not particularly differ from humanity in any way (appearance, intelligence, even strength), they are cliché humans – except for their immortality (2008). For Carson it is their immortality which marks them as *other* than human. The 'whiff of immortality' in Joan of Arc's speech is its otherness – the point at which it indicates something beyond the human, something only uneasily translated into human terms, something which goes silent in transit.

When asked "In what language do your voices speak to you?" Joan replied to her judges: "Better language than yours." (2008). To an extent these replies, when they are such as this, are functioning as *euphemein*, or as Clement described the name of God:

words which are placeholders for something which far exceeds them. Carson writes that given a choice between catastrophe or cliché, the latter feels to be the safest place – to slip outside of language’s comprehensibility is isolating, to slip outside of its predictability is experienced as violence (2008). What Carson is attempting to point out is that this is not actually a choice between two: translation is itself a third space, a space between the two that negotiates between the known and unknown (which might also be the unknowable) (2008). Carson sees this engagement with silence as being, not a question between ‘chaos and naming’ (because who, after all, would not prefer naming), but about opening a space between the two, a space of ‘translation’, a space where language is not ‘fixed’, where words stop themselves (2008). Even when encountering the catastrophic, the untranslatable, what is being touched is the threshold, the littoral – the space between, existing in both and neither. “In the presence of a word that stops itself, in that silence, one has the feeling that *something* has passed us and kept going, that some possibility has got free.” (2008, emphasis added). Extrapolating this silence in which ‘something slips free’ to painting, Carson takes note of Francis Bacon’s statement that what he likes about a certain self-portrait by Rembrandt is that the eyes have no sockets (2008). In this uncanny gaze, Carson sees the untranslatable: “what [t]his look sends forward, in our direction, is deep silence.” (2008). She draws a connection between this deep gaze, and a certain sentence of Hölderlin’s, which Carson says haunts her, though she cannot explain why (2008): “Often enough I tried language, often enough I tried song, but they didn’t hear you.”<sup>10</sup> (2008). Words often haunt us for uncertain reasons, but between the gaze of painted (socketless) eyes, and the pronouns in this sentence which Carson describes as “com[ing] face to face with themselves” (2008), what I think is important is the ‘you’. This ‘you’ despite being unheard, is not nothing (it is not that language and song called out, and nothing was heard). If we are to speak of this ‘you’ as an Other, they are addressed (in language and song), they are seen (the socketless eyes), but this ‘you’ slips, unheard, perhaps unspeaking – and yet still implicated as being there. If ‘you’ is unheard by language, how can ‘you’ be described? And how can ‘you’ be listened to? Carson’s description of this third space between catastrophe and cliché, which is also held within the uncanniness of the returned gaze of a painting, puts me in mind of the saying that to gaze too long into the abyss is to risk it gazing back – the sudden ‘you’. This image circles around this space of absence, which unsettles because in its emptiness we occasionally glimpse ‘something’.

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<sup>10</sup> “*Öfters hab 'ich die Sprache, öfters hab 'ich Gesang versucht, aber sie hörten dich nicht.*” (2008)

It is possible to triangulate a connection between Carson's 'untranslatable', Walsh's 'somethings', and Blackmur's dwelling on 'understanding a fury in your words, but not the words'. Towards the end of "The Language of Silence" (1955), Blackmur muses on the words Smollett puts into the mouth of a character in Humphry Clinker, namely the phrase: "our satiety is to supperate" (1955: 401). This strange phrase is a malapropism, but for Blackmur, it also serves as "a verbal translation of thought which was not verbal" (1955: 402), a language stripped of its clichés (1955: 401), words that are suddenly rendered uncertain. This is not just about language-play. It is about understanding [something] in the words, but not the words. About there being something being held by words which is identified as being more or other than 'just' their meaning. For Blackmur this is the trace of the 'quick', of the being trying to communicate, trying to mean – a living which Blackmur calls silence. The paradigm which sets out a silent (living) being, in contrast to a speaking being, or a being with language, is certainly not one specific to Blackmur, and the question of the relations surrounding this are a significant part of the following section. But what I find interesting in Blackmur is that his engagement with this quick silence, translated into language, is that it renders whatever language (even a strange *mot injuste*) is uttered as a translation, a *manifestation*, of the quick silence, rather than subsuming it.

Both Walsh and Carson speak of language which points towards agnostic silence as 'liberating' or 'freeing' kernels of meaning or feeling. For Carson, something has passed us by, and got free. For Walsh "[to unname is] to strip away our too-comfortable acquaintance with these seemly unproblematic words in order to liberate the ... mysteries at their root." (1998: 155). Though for Carson, it seems that what has broken free from predictable speech might also have slipped our grasp, whereas for Walsh, we can only begin to apprehend what is held in silence once it is unnamed. Catastrophic speech acts as unnamings – but what I wish to argue here is that catastrophe and unnamings do not serve to puncture agnostic silence, they do not name what is undisclosed within it. But they do permit the silence itself to be spoken of. Instead of naming the unknowable, catastrophe describes its unknowability. What is excluded (like silence from language) remains included insofar as it is retained as a signifier of the outside. The words 'silence', the 'unknown', the 'unnamable' bring in the outside of language, as images of what lies beyond it. But, I would argue, what Carson and Walsh are getting at is that these clichés serve to separate through an illusion of inclusion (we know what that thing is – it is the unnameable thing, it is a boojum!). Catastrophe, and unnamings bring the silence closer, by refusing to settle for

single words which might function as a placeholder. They point beyond the altar of the unknown God, to the space beyond it.

To posit that nothing can be said about the unspeakable, we ignore the attempts that have been made to engage with it. I have situated this discussion of agnostic silence as being related to absence – but it is an absence of language, not everything in existence. Writing about the unknown posits some presence, a sense of there being something outside of language. If we accept that there is fundamentally nothing outside of what may be known through language, then agnostic silence holds nothing at all inside of it, it is a hallucination, a trick of the light (in the name of the voice). But I am suspicious of a response which dismisses an engagement with silence. To say ‘there is simply nothing there’ preserves the unspeakable as much as any ban against speaking. ‘Nothing might be said ...’ naturalises the concept of silence as being unfathomable, a position which will become extrapolated onto many different silences. This has already been evident, for example in Agamben’s discussion of the *euphemein*. While it allows him to explore the implications of calling an event ‘unspeakable’, he is simultaneously conflating two different silences: ‘how do we describe what happened at Auschwitz’ and ‘how do we describe God/the divine mysteries’. To correlate silence with ‘nothing’ also would have grave consequences for Blackmur’s concept of the quick – all that is not, or not-quite, words, but is still thought, felt, recalled. All that we might struggle to put into words, and yet which is the point of so much that might be said.

I have addressed the issue of agnostic silence because it represents, among the different silences that I shall be examining, perhaps the closest to a concept of ‘extreme’ or ‘deep’ silence: the unfathomable, if you will. In this, silence is being defined in contrast to human language, and being set outside/beyond its boundaries. The same descriptions come to be applied to other forms of silence, and it is this transference which I think is worth examining. Both the silence in my next section, which engages with the silence of animals and nature within discourses which define humanity as the being-with-language, and in my next chapter which engages with dehumanisation, will touch on the reiterated metaphors of ‘darkness’, the ‘demonic’, and ‘wilderness’ which are used to figure silence in terms of negative space. I mean negative not only to connote ‘malign’, but also ‘lack’ – in art the negative space around a figure is what provides definition for its form. Though it has been less pronounced in my examination of agnostic silence, my concern is with what it means to *be silent* – to be a being which is not speaking – especially given the contexts in

which silence is judged to be so profoundly negative. These descriptions of being 'beyond', or 'outside', situates silence as a space, and what comes to be placed in this space is Otherness. It is the Otherness of animals in reference to their 'silence' which is the focus of my following section.

## ***Animal Silence***

In the following section I shall be discussing the correlation drawn between animal life and silence. I am situating this 'silence of animals' within the discussion of agnostic, inhuman silence for a number of specific reasons. Situating humanity within language, and drawing a division between animals and humans, situates animals both as non-human (inhuman), and as silent in a way that humanity is not. The silence of animals is often given as part of what defines them *as* animals, as *not* human. Animals remain an 'unknown' in this equation, both because they are separated from the transmission of knowledge through language which is taken to be so integral to being human (i.e. their thoughts are 'mysterious'/elusive), but this muteness is also sometimes taken to be evidence of the absence of any thought (i.e. their thoughts do not exist). I do not wish to simply accept these representations, but I do find them useful as a means of exploring the extent to which *being human* becomes discursively entangled with *being with/in language*, at the expense of any being which exists outside of human language. Exploring the correlation of animals and silence will also be fruitful, because the use of the figure of the animal as an epitome of silence is a concept I shall be returning to later in this thesis, when examining silence as the loss<sup>11</sup> of language.

It is useful to begin with a discussion of the distinction between two words meaning 'life' in ancient Greek, because this distinction becomes intertwined with their relation to language, and also what it means to be human. The first is *zoē*, the life held by all living things; and the second is *bios*, life that is a 'way of life', life that has been 'qualified' (Agamben 1998: 1). This distinction comes to define what it means to be human for Aristotle – while all life, in being alive, has *zoē*, only humans have *bios*. It is worth recalling that the word 'animal' derives from the Latin 'animale' (living

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<sup>11</sup> It is interesting that in mythology, the silence of animals is often converted from absence into loss through the concept of there having been a time when they did speak/could be spoken to (in the past, in some time yet to come). In this, animals as 'silent living beings' renders language as a suspended potential.

being, a being which breathes), from ‘anima’ (breath, and, importantly, also soul). The use of ‘animal’ was not common in English before the 15<sup>th</sup> Century; the word which preceded it was ‘deer’, which was not originally confined to define a single animal (that which we now call a ‘deer’ was in Old English called a ‘heorot’). The origin of ‘deer’ ties back into Germanic languages (Old Norse ‘dyr’, German ‘tier’, Goth ‘dius’) and from there to Proto-Indo European ‘\*dheusom’, meaning ‘creature that breathes’, from the root \*dheus- (‘breathe/gasp’) (Chambers 2010: 35-6; 258). These words (animal and deer) with different roots which say the same thing, point towards the ‘livingness’ of being animal, of *zoē*.

The classical Greeks produced a plethora of definitions of the distinction between humans and other animals. Some scholars have identified over three dozen examples, most following the formulaic ‘man alone of the animals does/has ...’ (Heath 2005: 6). Distinctions include laughter, knowing good and evil, knowing God, shame, grammar, having sex at all times of the year, and having sex with other animals (2005: 6). But the one which is most often reiterated is *zōon logon echōn*: ‘the living being with language’. *Logos* is a word with numerous possible meanings, and later translations of this phrase often transcribed it as ‘reason’ (Heath 2005: 7). Its root is the same as the verb ‘*legō*’, which means ‘to gather’ or ‘count’, but also to ‘recount’ and ‘to say’ – when Homer uses ‘*logos*’ it denotes only speech, and not reasoning (2005: 8). Heath argues that the translating of ‘*logos*’ as ‘reasoning’ also misses the emphasis Plato places on reasoning as ‘the silent debate of the soul within itself’ (2005: 9). Plato acknowledges the difficulty in expressing knowledge, the sense of ‘inexpressibility’ of wisdom, but also believed that philosophers had the responsibility to speak (*logon didonai*) of what they have learned (2005: 9). It is this responsibility – the possibility – of speaking *with* others which becomes the basis of human community.

As indicated in the introduction, this thesis aims to engage with the meaning of silence in various contexts, and the silence of a human person is usually defined in terms of language, and the distinction of others based upon its absence. Aristotle’s “Politics” places human community, the *polis* (city), in direct relation to human speech:

Among living beings only man(sic) has language. The voice is the sign of pain and pleasure and this is why it belongs to other living beings (since their nature has developed to the point of having the sensations of pain and pleasure and of signifying the two). But language is for manifesting the fitting and the unfitting and the just and the unjust. To have the sensation of

the good and the bad and of the just and the unjust<sup>12</sup> is what is proper to men as opposed to other living beings and the community of these things makes the dwelling and the city. (1253a, 10018: in Agamben 1998: 7-8; also in Heath 2005:10))

This division between ‘living’ and ‘a way of life’, the ‘wilderness’ and ‘the city of men’, and the connection drawn between these and language is also evident in Albert the Great’s commentary on Aristotle:

[N]ot every animal has a tongue, and it is not necessary that every one that has the sense of taste have speech [*loquelam*] because, as is said in the second book of *On the Soul*, ‘taste is for the sake of being’ and ‘speech is for the sake of well-being.’<sup>13</sup> Thus it is absent from imperfect animals, for example, the shellfish, or at least it is not apparent to us, and yet nevertheless they have the sense of taste. (Albert the Great 2008: 36).

Shellfish seem a strange example in the question of the purpose of an animal’s tongue, and a difficult animal to be able to extrapolate to all other animals from. Language is connected to the ‘tongue’ – we still speak of ‘mother-tongues’, the word ‘language’ has its root in ‘langue’, which means both ‘language’ and ‘tongue’. But Albert the Great, after Aristotle, draws the difference between the tongues of people and animals because of the ‘additional capacity of speech’. The tongue is an organ of the sense of taste, taste is for *zoē*, the sake of being. Human tongues can also wrap themselves around speech, which is *bios*, well-being. *Zoē*, animal life, becomes a figure of humanity’s other in this discourse, an otherness inextricably tied to silence. In the following sections, I wish to examine two examples where the silence of animals, even ‘nature’ as some entirety, come to be figured not only in terms of the inhuman, but also in terms of being threatening to one’s humanity.

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<sup>12</sup> Implied in this is the presupposition of the concept of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ being fundamentally different from questions of ‘pain’ and ‘pleasure’ – a presupposition which will be problematized in my next chapter, in Praeg’s (2010) definition of evil as ‘that which agitates’, linking the evaluation of moral questions with bodily experiences.

<sup>13</sup> Albert the Great is quoting Aristotle’s *De anima* (420b16–20).



## *Animal Images*

I wish to turn now to Max Picard's The World of Silence (1948). In a review of a variety of engagements with silence, Cheryl Glenn discusses this book as a "major speculative investigation into silence as an ontological principle, from its resonance in language to its power in religion and philosophy..." (Glenn 2004: 8). Glenn situates Picard as part of the scant tradition which allows silence a presence, rather than simply a 'nothing'. She creates a dichotomy between engagements with language/silence which privilege language as definitive of "power, liberation, culture, or civilisation itself" (2004: 3) and which situate silence as 'nothingness' (2004: 3). She does recognise that even though Picard allows silence presence, he also explicitly privileges language as constitutive of humanity: "it is language and not silence that makes man truly human. The word has supremacy over silence." (Picard 1948: 15). Picard is referenced by a number of theoretical works on silence, many of which acknowledge his work as an 'early example' or forerunner and influence on other engagements with silence. Maitland (2008), Dauenhauer (1980), Toop (2010), and Walsh (1998) all reference Picard, generally very favourably. It is precisely because Picard's engagement with silence touches on the difference between absence and loss (the contingency of human agency is of great importance to his conception of what human silence can be), and also reveals a preoccupation with a human/animal division, that I will be discussing him at this point.

Max Picard's discussion of silence is ultimately founded upon a definition of silence rooted in specifically Abrahamic theology. It is defined in relation to speech, or more precisely, to what he defines as the uniquely human, *divinely* bestowed capacity for the word<sup>14</sup> (1948: 29-30 and elsewhere). Picard's silence is a suspension of speech which returns the individual (Picard uses the term 'man' throughout) to a state akin to the moment preceding the 'gift of the word', but in which the individual is still in relation to the word which exists within them as a potential (1948: 28). A 'holy' silence is one which keeps the individual in a relation to God, and to a hierarchy in which humanity/'man' is distinguished by the capacity to possess 'the word'. While silence and speech exist in relation to one another, humanity exists in relation to both. While suspended between both silence and speech, an individual must constantly negotiate their relationship between the two. Silence pre-exists language, it is the existence before creation: "silence on its own, the world of silence without speech, is

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<sup>14</sup> Picard continually uses the small 'w', in other texts this is sometimes capitalised.

the world *before* creation, the world of unfinished creation, a world of menace and danger to man.” (1948: 28. emphasis in original). With speech, silence becomes “part of man and a lawful part of speech ....Through speech silence, that wild, prehuman monster, is transformed into something tame and human.” (1948: 29). It is speech which gives silence meaning, and therefore structure and order, though for Picard these are rooted in theological terms. Silence in the human mind is the knowledge of the *Deus abscondus*, the hidden God, while speech is ‘God revealed’ (1948: 29).

For Picard, humanity exists in motion between the worlds of speech and silence. He describes the individual who is silent as existing in the same moment as that immediately preceding the gift of speech, a point where words exist but are on the ‘point of vanishing’ unless they are articulated (1948: 47). Unlike a being which is incapable of language, humanity can be in a silence which does not exclude language. Humanity can choose to speak or choose to be silent (in a silence which is only a pause, not a permanent renunciation or divorce from language). “In the moment before man (sic) speaks, language ... hovers between silence and speech ... Human freedom<sup>15</sup> decides whither the word shall go.” (1948: 45). Humanity exists between speech and silence so long as they retain the capacity for speech – Picard is not engaging with enforced silencing, his concept depends upon the hinge of choice, the freedom to move between the worlds of speech and silence. It is the maintenance of a relation with language – and the divine word – even in silence, which renders humanity human. It is this silence (which Picard considers ‘holy’) in which the divine word is enclosed that is differentiated from a silence ‘empty’ of the word (1948: 47). If speech were to lose its relation with this holy silence, the space where this silence was would contain ‘only the emptiness of the abyss’ (1948: 47), a space where not even silence, or at least holy silence, exists. Language must remain in an acknowledged relation with silence, Picard seems to be arguing, since it otherwise can only consider silence as its own antithesis – a void or abyss, rather than a space where the word may also be found. This silence that cannot hold language within it (a silence that is no longer a position of choice, since there is no alternative, no language beyond it, or held within it) swallows speech, rather than holding it on the tip of its tongue: “Words are absorbed by the emptiness, and a monstrous fear arises in man that he may cease to be a man when the last word has vanished into the emptiness of the abyss.” (1948: 48). Language and silence are thus entangled with what it means to be human, and what it means to be human, for Picard, is tied to the ‘divine word’.

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<sup>15</sup> In this, animals are not ‘free’ to choose to not-speak either.

While silence is 'positive' insofar as it is 'presence', Picard does differentiate between different types of silences, not in terms of their presence but in their relation to either the divine (holy silence), or the demonic: "the power of darkness and terror, that which can erupt from the underground of silence, the power of death and evil" (1948: 49). Picard's language is certainly hyperbolic, but it does render his vision of silence and language in clear terms. What this demonic 'evil and darkness' consists of is revealed once more through what it is opposed to: it is 'the word', specifically "the word in which the spirit dwells – that is, in which truth and order dwell." (1948: 49). The demonic is therefore the antithesis of truth and order, it is a *disorder* which can only be brought 'into subjection' by either words or silence which maintain the spirit of the 'divine Logos' within them (1948: 50). Picard illustrates this dynamic in an extensive passage:

But for the victory of the spirit that is in the word over the demonic power that is in silence, silence would have taken possession of everything and laid it waste. Before the creation of the word, silence had occupied everything. The earth belonged to silence. It was as though the earth were built on and over silence; it was merely the edge of silence. Then came the word. Demonic silence sank into ruin, but it seemed as if after all the earth would have to be torn from silence piece by piece as clearings are made in the primeval forest. From the primeval forest of silence arose, through the spirit that is the word, the *friendly* ground of silence which feeds and carries the word. But in the night the elemental force in silence sometimes becomes all-powerful. It is then as though an invasion of the word were being prepared. The dark forest appears as the place where silence is gathering its forces for the attack. The bright walls of the house seem like the tombstones of the word. Then a light appears upstairs in the room of a house, and it is as though the word were being spoken for the very first time. The whole colossus of silence lies waiting for its master like an obedient animal. (1948: 51 original emphasis.)

Picard paints an apocalyptic image of the world abandoned to the 'underground of silence', an extended metaphor through which he seems to be describing not only some sort of mythic past, but also a recurring and constant struggle. Despite his reiteration of states of flux, it is 'man' who is in motion in Picard's definitions of silence and speech, constantly moving between these states of speaking and being

silent. He describes this as a constant movement between ‘destruction’ and ‘resurrection’ – destruction because in silence one exists precariously, ‘transiently’ (comparing human speech to animal silence, he writes that it is language which establishes man as “not a fleeting, transient animal, but a firm, enduring reality” (1948: 104)). One is ‘resurrected’ in language not only through this creation of ‘enduring reality’, but through the establishment of a relation with God through the divine Logos (1948: 47). “Out of silence, again and again, as though by a creative act, comes the word, the absolutely other. This creative act thereby becomes embodied in the basic structure of man.” (1948: 47). It is the ‘divinity’ in language that renders it ‘absolutely other’, but it is an otherness which ‘man’ takes on, in contrast to animal life. To an extent, this resembles Carson’s divine ‘otherness’ which is immortality, and it is the ‘divine’ otherness of the word, which segregates Picard’s conception of human life, and being animal.

Holy silence is fundamentally *human* silence for Picard, since it is only humans who may speak, and for him speech is a divine gift which demarcates humanity from all other beings. He does write that humanity is related more to language than to either the body or to nature:

The solitude around the human body is there because man has been lifted high above all other physical phenomena of nature. Language watches over him and he belongs to language ....When man ceases to rise through language above what he seems to be – that is, above his purely external appearance, this external body is then separated from the world and becomes pure nature – but fallen, evil nature. (1948: 102)

It is ultimately through language that ‘man’ is ‘man’, because it is through language and language alone – because even holy silence is not actually conceived of as a state *without* the ‘divine Logos’ – that ‘he’ remains in relation to the divine. For a human individual to fall out of relation with the word is not to be wholly animal, but to be caught between worlds of speech and silence:

[N]o longer able to establish a connection between itself and the order of extra-human nature[, it] lies in an abyss between the word that is no longer present with it and the rest of nature with which it cannot establish a connection. Malignantly it lies between nature and the word. In the place of

the word it has mere shouting and emptiness in the place of silence.  
(1948:102-3).

Picard's definitions of what it means to be human are thus equally reliant on what it means to be capable of speech, what silences exist and one exists within, as much as his definitions of word and silence rely on his concept of humanity, and human states of grace – or the fall from them.

Picard's silence is not only interiorly divided, it is also *divisive*. He dedicates several chapters to the issues of silence in relation to animals and nature, to objects and art, as well as to different categories of people. To engage with the first issue, Picard continues in the tradition which situates 'man' as distinct from nature precisely because of a capacity to speak, both reiterating 'man as *zōon logon echōn*', but also through his metaphors for silence, which often correlate it to some sort of animal state: "The demonic element in silence is tamed by the spirit of truth and order, and silence then follows the word like a useful, obedient animal...." (1948: 49-50. animal metaphors appear elsewhere also). This tethering together of silence and the natural world through these metaphors renders both as ambivalent wildernesses which are only in a 'correct state' when in subservience to 'man'. In using the natural world as a metaphor for silence, Picard sets up a correlation between them, one which I shall briefly examine, since he reiterates it in his own definitions of silence. If silence may behave like an animal, what *are* animals in this discourse?

In being defined by their *lack* of speech, and the word, Picard also argues that animals are only as they appear, while humanity, being with language, is capable of being *more* than their appearance: "If man had no language he would be nothing but an image and a symbol and identical with his own image, like the animal that is exactly as it looks. The animals' appearance is its nature, its image is its word." (1948: 100). Animals are 'unredeemed', 'innocent', they are bodies, while 'man' is also mind, thoughts, words (1948: 109). Picard writes that "Animals are images of silence. They are animal-images of silence more than they are animals." (1948: 110). Animals are images of silence – for Picard I would presume that man is made in the image of God, something here tied up also with having 'the divine word'. I shall return to this concept of 'animal-images' later in this chapter. Despite having a 'violent actuality', animals are also described as being like things that have dropped out of a human dream (1948: 103). In this, the 'reality' of animals is presupposed to be threatening, violent, dangerous to humans. Animals exist in Picard's world solely through a human

gaze, one which perceives only the unspeaking surface of their forms. I say 'unspeaking' because Picard engages with animal/natural 'sounds', dogs barking, birdsong, thunderstorms and to a great extent groups them as all the same (1948: 111). But even these engagements serve only as part of a reinstating of nature's divergence from human word. In one passage, it is said that a man calls out in the mountains, and "the forest catches up the word and gives it back to man in the echo, for it belongs to man and not to the forest." (1948:138). In a double movement, nature is both anthropomorphised, and set as other to mankind.

Picard's correlation of silence both to symbolic 'animalness', and to danger is a theme that I will continue to engage with throughout the next section. While his language is certainly hyperbolic, Picard's rendition of the relations between the word, holy silence, and demonic silence, resemble the divide between *bios* and *zoē*. While Picard's distinction rests on the potential for human silence to result in speech, it is the destructiveness of inhuman silence and the extent to which even its very presence comes to threaten 'being human' which I find interesting. The theme of an inhuman silence threatening the self also runs through Sara Maitland's engagement with silent places.

## ***The Fear of Forests***

Sara Maitland's *A Book of Silence* (2008) is of value because she does not conceive of silence in terms of loss. She actively attempts to explore silence, both as an 'experience', and through her extensive reading of theoretical and religious engagements with silence as a source of prayer and creativity, but also in her reading of biographical accounts of solitude. What I find of particular interest in her engagement is that while setting out explicitly to see silence as generative or nurturing (in positive terms), when she does experience and discuss silence in terms of being a malevolent force, she comes surprisingly close to Picard. Maitland both consciously acknowledges the extent to which her conception of silence is completely bound up with a notion of physical space, and simultaneously does not reiterate this point, so that the extent to which she is talking about space *as* silence at times seems to disappear. She is invested in finding creativity and spirituality in reclusive silence, and situates herself in opposition to most depictions of silence solely in terms of darkness or oppression. This is very evident in the context of her search for silence; much of this work, apart from exploring different silences in history and culture, its place in

religion and in exploration and ‘extreme geography’ (2008: 46), is also autobiographical: chronicling her own relations to silence throughout her life and her ‘quest’ towards it. The places where she seeks to ‘settle’ into silence are explicitly isolated: “Virginia Woolf famously taught us that every woman writer needs a room of her own. She didn’t know the half of it, in my opinion. I need a moor of my own ... twenty-mile views of absolutely nothing.” (2008: 1). Maitland does acknowledge that she uses ‘solitude’ and ‘silence’ interchangeably in the text (2008: 17) but does not further reflect either on the significance of using these words as synonyms, or indeed how this correlation might affect a definition of ‘silence’ – expanding beyond a relation to sound and speech, and into issues of space, and contact with others.

The issue of isolation/solitude is more subtle, but nevertheless present, in the rest of her discourses around silence. She has an expressed interest in what might be termed ‘testimonies of silence’: the selection she draws upon are taken from mountaineers, polar explorers, yachtsmen, and political prisoners – all of whom are writing about ‘silence’ in the context of being utterly alone. Snowed-in and confined to tents, stranded in the mountains, single-handedly circumnavigating the world, being locked in a basement for two years (2008: 93-109), are all described in terms of silence rather than solitude.<sup>16</sup> Maitland also – briefly – discusses sensory deprivation and the use of solitary confinement in torture and in prison, again in terms of being cut off from sound and speech, rather than in terms of human contact (2008: 91). She also never reflects upon how this might be problematized by human deafness, or impaired hearing. Maitland observes, perhaps too summarily, that what seems to determine whether silence is experienced as generative or oppressive, is whether or not it is a consciously chosen situation (2008: 92). She does acknowledge that even those who have been forced into silence have sometimes found it generative (for example, Boethius), or at least survived with relative sanity (Marguerite de la Rocque), and that there have been individuals who have chosen their silence and ultimately found it destructive (Donald Crowhurst) (2008: 95-107). Her observation of the influence of whether one has chosen one’s solitude/silence or had it forcibly imposed, feels understated, though it seems to be the root of a number of conflicts she enters into surrounding the issue of whether silence is a benevolent, or positive phenomenon. She is invested in finding creativity and spirituality in reclusive silence, and situates herself in opposition to most depictions of silence solely in terms of darkness or

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<sup>16</sup> Maitland does acknowledge that a number of explorers have been notorious introverts, but does not develop any implications of this observation, such as whether it is actually separation/isolation that these individuals have been seeking, rather than ‘silence’.

oppression. In an often referred to exchange, a friend describes silence wholly in negative terms, concluding that ‘silence exists to be broken’ (2008: 28). Much of Maitland’s disagreement with this position hinges on the difference in definition – the ‘silence to be broken’ is the silence of oppression, rather than Maitland’s wilful entrance into solitude. Until we come to the issue of forests.

Her engagement with the specific ‘locations’ of silence is present from the beginning of her work, and one of Maitland’s chapters bears the title “Silent Places” (2008: 154), which focuses mostly upon a single ‘silent space’, one which Maitland finds difficult to engage with. Her quest for silence takes her most often to ‘open’ spaces – to deserts, islands, highlands, moors. While noting that she has yet to encounter a report of a silent jungle (2008: 48) and while most of “Silent Places” is concerned with the silence of forests, this is a silence Maitland reiterates as something frightening and sinister: “I am not alone – I know a good number of other people – bold walkers of high hills or those happy to sail little dinghies in tidal waters alone, both surely far more dangerous activities in physical terms – who do not like to be in forests, who are scared or freaked out by them.” (2008: 173). Whereas she secludes herself on Skye for six weeks, she remains only three days at the edge of the Caledonian Forest,<sup>17</sup> and leaves just as afraid as she arrived, though with a litany of reflections on that fear:

It was very silent, too. I knew ... I had been right to be scared. This was primal landscape and full of silent shadows of menace, the menace of being lost, magical-mad like Merlin, swallowed up into something wilder, bigger, and infinitely more ancient than myself. In my mind I could hear the ghost wolves howling in the hungry winter ... around me was a dense silence into which I could not see and in which anything might lurk concealed, I had a deep sense of relief that there were no [real] wolves. (2008: 178).

She seems simultaneously aware that the menace of the forest is rooted in her personal feelings towards it, that it is a fear based ‘in her mind’, rather than in the environment,

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<sup>17</sup> She had considered travelling to the Black Forest in Germany, but did not wish to engage in a foreign language since she felt it increased the need to be in contact with others (2008: 175). So, she decided on the Caledonian Forest, which is: “from a southern perspective, associated with madness and magic. The terror of the wild wood is older than the oldest stories...” (2008: 176). It is worth noting that she approaches ‘forest silence’ presupposing its fearsomeness. It is interesting to note her position: while she has numerous links to Scotland, she keeps situating herself as being ‘from the south’, it is a perspective reiterated at other points also, as when a friend says in response to her quest for silence “why leave the south?” (2008: 29).



and yet maintains the fear of the forest as something objective, or at least something shared by many. As in Picard's failing to make a distinction between birdsong, or a thunderstorm (both of which are silent by virtue of not being Logos), Maitland also conflates a landscape and wild animals (albeit the 'ghosts' of them) as both being part of this threatening silence. Maitland is aware of her segregation of the forest silence, and explicitly links it to the issue of physical space:

The silence of the forests is about secrets, about things that are hidden. Most of the terrains of silence – deserts, mountains, oceans, islands, moorland – have austere but wide views. They are landscapes that can be appalling in their openness, but at least you can see what is coming ... But the silence of the forests hides things; it does not open them out but closes them off. (2008: 178).

The silence of forests is one of secrecy in this work, and while Maitland does offer an interesting engagement with the issue of integrity (the withholding of information under torture (2008: 184)) and the relation between silence and speaking in folk tales<sup>18</sup>, it is precisely in regards to the silence of forests that her trepidation and hostility mirrors that of others whose position she has described as oppositional to her own:

Forests are enormous but they give no sense of space, because you are always in the tiny bit of forest you are in – you cannot see out. When in the eighth century Boniface went into the endless forest, which ran away beyond the Rhine through Germany, Poland and into Russia, to convert the pagans, almost the first thing he did was summon Anglo-Saxon Benedictines to set up monasteries and start singing in the silence. This was a silence that he knew needed breaking. (2008: 174).

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<sup>18</sup> Forests and folk tales are the subject of her most recent work *Gossip from the Forest* (2012), in which she explicitly acknowledges that when writing *A Book of Silence* (2008) she did not engage with forests because she responded to them only in terms of fear (2012: 11). *Gossip from the Forest* (2012) is in part her attempt to negotiate this fear through an engagement with fairy tales. She situates her fear of forests as having its origins in her readings of fairy tales, in which they are discursively situated as places of danger – as where the witch and the wolf live. While her reflections on forests in fairy tales allows her to eventually situate them also as spaces of sanctuary, bounty, and even home, forests also remain *exotic* in her discussion: conceptually as places outside of human civilisation in the stories, and for Maitland herself the place of forests is *in stories*, as opposed to her own experience. She also often reiterates her continued fear of forests in terms of being enclosing, concealing – and by implication the fear of other people, and animals, which might be concealed.

This quote sets humanity against a silence that is simultaneously pagan, and ‘natural’ – that of an ‘uncivilised’, ‘unconverted’ wilderness. This uncomfortable relation to forest silence, renders it as blinding and isolating in its enclosure – like Picard’s ‘primal’ wilderness, where the word is called upon to gradually tear clearings. I find it interesting that regardless of the question of whether or not a wilderness is a dangerous place to be, or whether animals may be dangerous, the symbol of this danger (and their wildness) should be silence, and in turn, that wildness, and wilderness should be the symbol for a dangerous silence.

Maitland usually relates the sounds of nature as being more akin to silence than the sounds produced by people (both in terms of machinery, but also specifically spoken language). While nature may produce ‘sound’, she usually refers to the sounds of people as ‘noise’ (2008: 40). This relation once more renders the presence of other people (since machines are also evidence of the presence of people) as what is at issue, more than issues of ‘sound’ versus ‘silence’ in general. This is also evident in her preference for the silence of distance, as opposed to her experience of the ‘enclosing’ forest – the need to see oneself as alone, ‘see what is coming’, to be able to look upon the landscape rather than being a part of it. I cannot help but extrapolate this to her desire for solitude – being in the midst of people gives one over to their unpredictability, and a similar point might be made about the silence of animals.

Maitland’s exploration of silence is also very much a self-exploration, what silence meant to her as an individual, and her own evolving conceptions of it. She acknowledges that there are ‘silences which need to be broken’, while steadfastly also insisting that there are other forms of silence, forms which are not experienced as *lacking* in any way, despite the absence of sound or language. What actually constitutes her definition of silence is never clearly articulated (though its ineffability is what she describes as one of its characteristics). To some extent, the work is a quest for definition, a definition whose pre-requisites include the equivalence between silence and solitude, and the possibility of ‘presence’ rather than absence. Her conception of silence (apart from being firmly tied to the concept of solitude) is similar to Picard’s insofar as they both posit silence as presence; identify language as being linked to a state of being ‘human’ or ‘sane’; conceive of a silence which maintains a relation to language; and one which is generative; but also, both conceive of the ‘dark side’ of silence. This is for Picard the space of silence which is the antithesis to ‘truth and order’. For Maitland, the dark is (in terms of space) enforced isolation, and the wilderness (forest silence) in which one might be lost – both in a

failure to find one's way home, but also in the sense of being 'lost' i.e. dead. In both Picard and Maitland, the metaphors of 'darkness' and 'wilderness' are used to describe a 'bad' silence, one in which one may lose one's soul, or one's sense of self.

These writers touch on an inhuman silence and do so through metaphors of demons and wilderness. Picard, as I have already noted, writes almost excessively through metaphors of mute and untamed<sup>19</sup> animals. Maitland recreates the dichotomy of good/bad silence within nature itself, so that while some landscapes (like deserts and moorland) liberate her into silence, forests enclose, even drown her in it – forests she describes in terms of the insane and the predatory. In so doing, these writers do not totally reject the 'negativity' of silence. Negative in terms of 'malign', but also in terms of space – these silences are profoundly linked to 'lack'. Lacking in a (human) capacity for language, an 'order' or a 'structure' capable of disclosing 'truth', in sanity or constraint. Associating these with humanity, and identifying this silence as being without these attributes, this silence is not only identified as inhuman, but as threatening to humanity – and I shall be arguing that the reason it is seen as threatening is because in being 'outside' of the human, 'it' is not seen as 'recognising' the human.

### ***Human/Animal Images – Nosce te ipsum***

This section returns to Picard's statement: "Animals are images of silence. They are animal-images of silence more than they are animals." (1948: 110). Picard uses animals to embody silence, as does Maitland, but this is not only using animals as metaphors for silence as not-human; this description renders animals literally nothing more than 'images of silence'. But Picard's description of animals as 'more image than animal' allies him to Descartes' belief in animals' lack of sentience. It is worth recalling that the root of 'animal' ties it to both 'breath' and 'soul', and the etymology of 'image' goes back to the Latin *imago*, a copy, a likeness to something else – in being more image than animal, what we are talking about is rendered soul-less, and superficial.

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<sup>19</sup> It is worth thinking about the extent to which 'taming' an animal is also about bringing it into relation with human language, as part of trained obedience, to respond to gesture or spoken words. Interestingly, 'man' becomes a verb, to 'man' a hawk or a falcon is to accustom them to the presence of people.

When the presence of mind – or soul – is contested in animals it is precisely because they do not manifest it in language. Picard is rooted in the tradition which permits no reasoning (a conflation between ‘language’ and ‘reason’ inherent in the word *logos*) to animals, because none is expressed by them. A particularly clear argument of this position is made by Descartes in his Animals are Machines (in Armstrong and Botzler 2003), in which he argues that all animals’ actions – including their sounds expressing pain, or the responses of domesticated animals to human words – can be explained as resulting solely from instinct, and not thought. This stems from a definition of a clear break between ‘thinking’ and ‘feeling’:

...there has never been known an animal so perfect as to use a sign to make other animals understand something which expressed no passion; and there is no human being so imperfect as not to do so, since even deaf-mutes invent special signs to express their thoughts ... the reason why animals do not speak as we do is not that they lack the organs but that they have no thoughts. It cannot be said that they speak to each other and that we cannot understand them; because since dogs and some other animals express their passions to us, they would express their thoughts also if they had any. (2003: 276)

For Descartes, animals are soulless machines set running about the world by God’s hand. His use of ‘perfect’ and ‘imperfect’ makes language-use a hierarchical distinction, as is the distinction between ‘instinct’ and ‘thought’:

Doubtless when the swallows come in spring, they operate like clocks. The actions of honey bees are of the same nature...and of apes in fighting, if it is true that they keep discipline. Their instinct to bury their dead is no stranger than that of dogs and cats who scratch the earth for the purpose of burying their excrement; they hardly ever actually bury it, which shows that they act only by instinct and without thinking. ... if they thought as we do, they would have an immortal soul like us. This is unlikely, because there is no reason to believe it of some animals without believing it of all, and many of them such as oysters and sponges<sup>20</sup> are too imperfect for this to be credible. (2003: 276)

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<sup>20</sup> I do not know what grudge Aristotle, Albert the Great, and Descartes, bear against invertebrates and molluscs, but they are repeated as the paradigm of soulless, imperfect

Descartes, like Picard, does not separate the possession of language, and the possession of soul. Logos, the 'Word' which is divine, reason, and human speech are conflated.

To a great extent, a description of animals depends very heavily on what is presupposed about being human. It is interesting to note that Linnaeus'<sup>21</sup> taxonomic name for humankind was not originally *Homo sapiens* – he classified *Homo* alongside *Simia*, *Lemur*, and *Vespertilio* (bats) as *Anthropomorpha*, that is, 'human-shaped' – *Primates* was only used after the tenth edition (Agamben 2004: 24). And, also before the tenth edition, the generic name *Homo* was followed not by a distinguishing characteristic but the adage *nosce te ipsum* (know yourself) (Agamben 2004: 25). In this, any reader is hailed as necessarily being human, if they recognise themselves as such. As Agamben paraphrases: "man is the animal that must recognise itself as human to be human." (2004: 26). In this, Agamben renders 'humans' as the animals which call themselves human. Linnaeus responded to the criticism that his taxonomy appeared to render 'man' as created in the image of an ape, by writing "[a]nd nevertheless man recognises himself." (in Agamben 2004: 26). Linnaeus' taxonomy creates humans as a species which recognises itself, within a wider genus in which humans also see their own likeness. Thomas Huxley, in a speech promoting Darwinism, comforted his audience by arguing that humanity remains superior to the gorilla because of language (Heath 1998: 32). This 'comfort' is interesting as a shift in 'animal silence' from being threatening – comforting because it promises a separation when a separation is wished for.

To think through some of the anxiety tied up in animal silence, I will continue to work through the separation between human and animal, and also instances where this separation is unclear, or uncertain, or contains liminal figures between these two categories. In *The Open* (2004) Agamben argues that the focus on characteristics – such as speech – which might segregate humans and animals serves to create a system whose purpose is to produce 'humanity' as a discrete category. While including a number of disciplines in its scope, Agamben dubs the system 'the anthropological machine' – the system of speaking/known about humans. Agamben's concept is rooted in biopolitics, the creation of a system of knowledge about being human (and

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animals. I cannot help but wonder if this starts to bring us to the importance of appearances – oysters cannot return a gaze, and their bodies are difficult to relate to our own.

<sup>21</sup> Linnaeus dismissed Descartes' positioning of animals as soulless, saying "surely Descartes never saw an ape" (in Agamben 2004: 23).

inhuman) serves ultimately to regulate human life. It is often argued that in creating the category of human/animal what is enabled is the exclusion of certain humans into the animal. Rather than looking at the 'exclusion of humans into the animal category', I wish to examine the opposite: the drawing in of 'animals' into the 'human'.

While relegated to myth and excised from 'serious' scientific works, both Linnaeus and a number of his contemporaries took accounts of beings such as mermaids seriously enough to include them in their taxonomies. Peter Artedi lists sirens alongside seals, Caspar Bartholin gave them the taxonomic name *Homo marinus*, and Linnaeus classifies them along with humans and apes (2004: 24). Edward Tyson's 1699 discussion of orang-utan<sup>22</sup> anatomy includes the discussion of whether 'Pygmies', Cenocephali (dog-headed people), satyrs, and sphinxes should be classified as apes, monkeys, humans (2004: 25). These ambiguous boundaries do not render the concept of being human equally ambiguous – no doubt Edward Tyson was certain of his own being human (*nosce te ipsum*) – and these uncertain parameters also permit the classification of human 'races' in the liminal, ambiguous space. To call an orang-utan a 'Pygmie' is also to conflate any of the people also referred to as 'pygmies' with orang-utans. But it is also precisely the ambiguous border between being human and being animal, a space in which 'monsters' are found, which permits the contemplation of what it is that has become blurred. Is a 'person' with a dog's head or a fish's tail to be ranked as human? Is resemblance about the body, or about thinking, or *speech*? The question that should follow this would be to ask what we would make of what they had to say.

Much of this discussion of the distinction between animals and humans results in the essentialising of animals, as though what defines them is some quintessential 'animality'. While Aristotle defines humanity as the animal-with-the-additional-capacity, thus placing humanity both among and apart, a number of other instances correlate all other animal species to each other. Descartes argues that what is true of one animal must be true of all others, and thus if one is incredulous when faced with an oyster as to whether or not such a creature has a soul, one must equally doubt whether any other animal does also. Agamben's discussion of animals also tends to be in the generic; when focussing on humanity, this generic functions as a contrasting Other, but it is interesting that specific instances are used – the tick, the bee – to

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<sup>22</sup> The two names other than orang-utan which Tyson uses is 'Pygmie' and 'Homo sylvestris' (forest man), both of which situate it in proximity to humanity, as indeed does the meaning of orang-utan ('person of the forest' in Malay).

illustrate the difference between an animal's experience of the world in contrast to what is familiar to humans, but without reflecting whether or not the differences between specific animals (the tick versus the magpie, the bee versus the elephant) might equally be as great as that between the animals in the examples, and humans. It is also interesting that the examples are once more a matter of tongues – the tick which cannot taste, only sense the temperature of a liquid (2004: 46), the bee sucking honey even when its abdomen is amputated (2004: 52) – like Albert the Great's shellfish, a divide is drawn between the tongue which only eats, in animals, and the human tongue, which is capable of more. And why is it again a matter of tongues – to taste blood, or honey, to cry out in pain, or to express 'authentic thought' that is at issue?

Like silence, animals also come to be defined through privation – without (which also means outside) language, 'thoughts', soul, politics, Aristotle's 'City of Men'. This absence is equated to lack, perhaps most explicitly in the use of 'imperfect' to describe creatures seen to be particularly different from human beings. Agamben's discussion of the anthropological machine is ultimately not concerned with being animal, but being human. The dangers of segregating animals from humans is the approximation then of some humans close to the animal – the subhuman, the dehumanised. Agamben's exploration of the anthropological machine leads him back to issues surrounding humanity, and the humane, but I wish to turn again to 'animality'. Agamben's discussion circles around liminal figures and to some extent circumnavigates the animals and wilderness of Picard and Maitland. Both Picard and Maitland use animals and wilderness to embody frightening, inhuman silences, and I wish to disentangle some of the anxiety bound up with 'animality' and 'being human'.

### ***Seeing with(out) Language***

It is problematic to conflate animals with their environment, but as is evident in Maitland, this conflation of a 'wilderness' with the 'wild things' that inhabit it, or may be 'concealed by it' also links animals with the 'silence' of a landscape – in not being a 'being', it is not even sentient. It is interesting to note the etymology of forest, specifically its two possible origins. It derives from the Latin *forestem silvam* or *forestis sylva*. One theory traces *forestis*, as signifying 'preserve', to *forum* in the sense of 'court' or judgement, and thus meaning 'land subject to a ban' – a hunting preserve. The other possibility links *forestem silvam* to *foris*, meaning outside, beyond a threshold, the root of the word 'foreign' (Chambers 2010: 400). For Maitland, the

forest is a place where she is vulnerable, lost – for Picard the wilderness is both antithesis and threat to the ‘word’, ‘truth’, and ‘order’. It is too easy to render this as a predictable binary between what has been identified as Self and Other; I wish to explore this in more specific terms. If this is a division being drawn along a fracture between language and silence, what is the anxiety in this fracture? This seems to be a fear of being ‘reduced’ to the body, to the ‘visible’.

Picard’s discussion of the word and silence describes animals – or silent beings in general – as ‘nothing other than they appear’. Having the capacity for language creates another dimension – a *world* of language, a world of meanings, a sense of things being more than just as they appear because of added layers not only of symbolism, but also of their place through words in language. A world of language in which humanity is so bound up that even when not speaking, a human is not *without* language. The world is suspended, poised, it remains present. It is only in losing a relation to this potential for language that, for Picard, a human will cease to be human. This is not all that different from some of the theoretical frameworks I shall be examining in my next chapter on inhumane silences, where to be silenced becomes inextricable from dehumanisation. But is this really the spectre of the inhumane which haunts the inhuman? I find this a somewhat problematic framework with which to engage with the inhuman (meaning literally what is *not* human), precisely because its actual concern is the human. To say that the anxiety present in the figure of the animal is the anxiety of being treated like an animal (by other humans) is not an anxiety bound to animals, but towards humanity. But this also returns us to language. So what is the anxiety in this silence?

It is perhaps not that the inhuman is silent, but that language is ‘silenced’ before it. The forest, and animals, do not speak – and therefore are not considered human – but it is also humanity which is muted. It is not only ‘they’ who cannot speak to ‘us’, but that ‘we’ cannot speak back. If language disappears, and we are nothing other than we appear to be, we are not all that different from animals – our bodies are vulnerable as theirs are, to us, to each other. If being human means to be both a physical being (a body which is not all that different from animals) but also embedded in a conceptual, linguistic commonworld, it is the latter which is rendered invisible from the outside, or more accurately, that words are indistinguishable from meaningless sounds. If the inhuman cannot see language, then the inhuman cannot see one’s ‘humanity’.

Animals are understood in terms of being body, in terms of visible form, rather than invisible thoughts. The body is the site of anxiety in a quote from Walter Benjamin:



“In aversion to animals, the predominant feeling is fear of being recognised by them through contact. The horror that stirs deep in man is an obscure awareness that something living within him is so akin to the animal that it might be recognised.” (1996: 448). The focus on aversion is problematic, insofar as it does not contemplate the possibility of a recognition, or an ‘awareness of something akin to the animal’, in terms other than horror, or disgust. This section from One Way Street (1996) is titled ‘Gloves’, which centres on the concept of touching (contact). Gloves might ‘protect’ a hand from direct contact with an animal, as a second skin, a barrier against the world, so as to not touch or be touched by an animal; but gloves are also often made of leather, and are thus also a point when contact is made with an animals’ skin. Benjamin’s fear here is a fear of recognition, of ‘something’ – like Walsh’s ‘something’ this preserves what ‘it’ is without a name – which might be recognised by an animal as familiar, a kinship between human and animal. In focusing on touching, on contact, Benjamin’s fear is precisely one rooted in being *body*, perhaps the vulnerability of the body; this “something living within [that] is so akin to the animal it might be recognised” (1996: 448) is a *living* thing. The kinship is being alive, being body, the vulnerability implicit in this, the point where, even if language is what distinguishes humans, outside of language we remain vulnerable.

This argument shifts into metaphors of visibility in response to Picard’s ‘images’, and his quotation of Socrates “Speak, that I may see thee!” (1948: 109), and also to Maitland’s ‘concealing’ forests, Linnaeus’s *Anthropomorpha*, and self-recognising humanity (*nosce te ipsum*). This may in part be due to the prevalence of visual metaphors to describe thinking, comprehension – to *see* what someone means. Language becomes a gaze which names, a way of seeing the world in terms of names, a ‘seeing through language’ when he says that “[t]he animal’s ... image is its word.” (Picard 1948: 100). What an animal ‘says’ is itself – its physical presence is its only declaration. Walsh also touches on language in terms of viscosity in describing language as gesture, though unlike Picard he is making no judgement on the silence of animals in doing so. It is interesting that his example from Bill Kemmet’s poem should use an animal – ‘something in the eye of a fawn’ – to express the inexpressible (1998: 66). This focus on ‘seeing’ becomes linked to silence because without a system of language to verbally communicate, the only other ‘common’ space is the material world which is apprehended, to a great extent, through vision. If language becomes associated with thought, as in Descartes, silence throws ‘thinking’ into question – not because thought is absent, but because its form remains unknown. But it is often in animals’ eyes that what they are presumed to know, or to be thinking, is projected –

what animals see, often being conflated with what is being seen in them. It is precisely such a focus on what ‘animals see’ that is at the heart of Rilke’s “Eighth Elegy” in The Duino Elegies (2009), and through this also the preoccupation of so much of the extensive philosophical discussion that centres on this poem. Rilke’s elegy primarily draws on sight, but uses metaphors of vision to describe thought and understanding – that ‘the creature sees the Open’, and is free from the apprehension of death (2009: 49), and apprehends life as ‘boundless’, ‘unfathomable’, ‘pure’ (2009: 51) is all presupposed in an animal’s gaze. Humans are ‘spectators’ (2009: 51), and it is in looking at animals that Rilke presupposes humans apprehend what an animal sees (the Open), even if in the same moment that knowledge is presented as unknowable because of *being human*. There is an extensive philosophical engagement<sup>23</sup> with Rilke’s elegy as a means of distinguishing between human and animal, though I find it to be a problematic source to base any philosophy, given that a singular ‘creature’ or ‘animal’, and what they literally see or comprehend, cannot be generalised to over a million species.

Language is difficult to separate from perspective, it is through language that humans name and narrate. Identifying humanity with language, and defining both in contrast to animality, is demarcating a world held in common among humanity, founded and maintained through language. To an extent this is reiterating Aristotle’s description of the ‘City of Men’ – where it is through language that the concepts of justice or injustice are both apprehended and instituted as an agenda. This makes humanity a conceptual community, by which I do not only mean that this is a community which is imagined (the city may not have physical walls), but one which is based upon the negotiation of abstract concepts (justice, injustice, ‘good’, ‘evil’). I shall return to the concept of a human commonworld created by language in my next chapter, but here I wish to observe the point with which I began my engagement with animal silence – defining what it means to be human as *bios* (qualified life) through the possession of a linguistic commonworld, from which *zoē* is explicitly excluded, and to furthermore define *zoē* in terms of being animal, bare life, silence, but also in terms of human deprivation, only begs further questions of all that is being excluded, all that is silent.

As will be further explored in the next chapter, human pain and suffering come to be figured in terms of animal, or inhuman, silence, and of *bios* being stripped down to

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<sup>23</sup> It is from this poem that Agamben takes the title of his work The Open (2004), which includes a prolonged discussion of Heidegger’s work on this elegy, which is beyond the focus of this thesis.

zoē. Agamben's use of these terms defines zoē in terms of deprivation – this conflates absence and loss (being not-human, and dehumanisation) and also renders forms of nature as 'nothing other' than an undifferentiated other to humanity. Dumb beasts and dark forests are clichés, and disclose nothing – as clichés they say nothing, and their silence which becomes intrinsic to their definition, also, 'says' nothing. But defining silence solely in terms of otherness to humanity becomes problematic because there is more to 'being' than language. In asking 'what does it mean to be silent', I seek to posit the possibility that one can be silent and not be nothing, and not necessarily be demonic, wild, dangerous.

I am also concerned with the correlation of zoē to deprivation, especially given the use of silence and animality to figure 'dehumanisation'. Scarry argues that intense pain pushes the victim outside of language, outside of the commonworld (1985); Agamben likewise correlates the figure of the *homo sacer* to the werewolf, an exile from the community, and also describes bare life as human life stripped of its *bios*, reduced only to zoē, the life held in common with animals (1998). While the examples being drawn on by Scarry and Agamben are ones of intense human suffering, this correlation of intense human suffering to an 'animal existence' raises an important question: how do we speak of an animal's pain, especially given that even in Aristotle's paradigm, they do have the voice (though not the words) to signify this? Is it an animal's wordlessness that we liken ourselves to, when an experience is unspeakable? Outside of language, how can there be a notion of the desire to speak? What is an animal pushed outside of, if it is not to be language, when subjected to pain? If it is already zoē, where beyond that could it go? It is possible to argue that zoē, life as 'living' as opposed to 'a way of life', is not something which one is reduced to, but is that which is vulnerable in us. The 'bare' of 'bare life' is taken from Benjamin's '*blosses leben*' – also translatable as 'naked life' (in Agamben 1998: 65), a translation which is useful to keep in mind: that nakedness might be clothed, housed, wrapped in language, but remains vulnerable – capable of pleasure and pain. This vulnerability is always already there, *bios* might aim to protect zoē, for the very conception of the 'just and unjust' implies protection as well as punishment – but nevertheless, we are always already zoē with every breath.

It might well be observed that my own work here recreates the human/animal division, even quite obviously within the overall structure which divides inhuman, from human (and inhumane). But marking the inhuman as separate recognises that when it is included it is not brought into the same category as the human, but into the inhumane,

which is not an apprehension of another life, except through privation, and the correlation to deprived humans. While the inhuman is still defined apophatically, it is in terms of absence, rather than lack, and questions what is *present* in what is perceived as an absence. The ‘animal’, and also the ‘human’ act as clichés, but they are also attempts at bringing something being gestured to into language. How do we break our presupposed familiarity with what it is to be one, the other, both? Does separating ‘animals’ from dehumanisation function as a breaking of a cliché, because it breaks the recurrent metaphor of human suffering being correlated to animal life? While it does retain animals, the inhuman, as an Other, it recognises the point at which being animal, or for that matter, being unknown, cannot simply be either assimilated or dismissed. Carson compares encountering the untranslatable to a gaze in which we see ‘deep silence’ (2008) – this is in reference to a painting, and I hope I have already established that I am cautious of rendering animals and images as too comparable, and yet I wish to grasp hold of this to ask what happens when we recognise that we might be seen by animals? There is significance in being able to recognise another’s gaze, and not correlate it to one’s own, recognising the limits of one’s own perception, and know that others perceive beyond these limits, without always knowing what it is that they see, or know. This recognition of another’s knowledge as outside of one’s own is an issue that is returned to in the last chapter of this thesis, concerned with ‘listening’. Both humans and animals exist in the world, and are alive – *quick* – even if they do not speak (like we do). What we can make of the thought of animals’ knowledges, if we do not posit ourselves as the centre of the world, while still recognising that an other’s knowledge, untranslatable knowledge, the unspoken/unspeakable, also remains unknowable, is the focus of this case study which follows.

## ***Road-kill and Other Creatures***

It is worth reflecting on why I have shifted from engaging with animals and silence to gazing – to looking at animals and to the gaze of animals. I think that the prominence given to the gaze of, and visibility/physicality of animals in philosophical discourses is tied up with their silence, or perhaps more specifically their muteness, the absence of words. It is such a position which is taken by John Berger in his essay “Why look at animals?” (1977). Unlike an engagement between two humans (who recognise their capacity for language, even if that language is not understood), animals can never ‘confirm’ a human: “always its lack of common language, its silence, guarantees its distance, its distinctness, its exclusion....” (1977: 14). Instead, there is only the gaze,

animals and humans regarding each other. Berger acknowledges that animals may also regard other animals with wariness and close attention, but it is human contemplation of the significance of these mutual gazes that Berger is interested in (1977: 13-4). Looking at animals, Berger sees a human gaze apprehending a simultaneous familiarity and strangeness, a strangeness which is not only about difference (that animals *look* different, or have different 'habits, times, physical capacities' (1977: 13)), but about a certain mysteriousness tied to their silence:

The animal has secrets which, unlike the secrets of caves, mountains, seas, are specifically addressed to man [sic] .... What were the secrets of the animal's likeness with, and unlikeness from, man? The secrets whose existence man recognized as soon as he intercepted an animal's look. (1977: 14-5)

What Berger describes in terms of being 'addressed to man', I would prefer to think of in different terms – caves, mountains, seas, are not living beings, they cannot be deceitful, if they 'conceal' anything it is not anything they 'know', they 'know' nothing. What is seen in an animal's gaze is precisely the possibility of knowledge, sentience, but a knowledge which remains, to a great extent, unknowable. But Berger is not attempting to 'mystify', or 'demonise' animals, nor does he render difference or strangeness in terms of inferiority. Furthermore, the strangeness works in both ways – humans and animals surprise each other, both are seen by the other, and cannot understand each other's communications – the latter becomes myth when Berger recalls "the conviction that it was man who lacked the capacity to speak with animals – hence the stories and legends of exceptional beings, like Orpheus, who could talk with animals in their own language." (1977: 15). Berger writes about animals gazing, and about looking at animals, as a way of writing about animal silence, and, I would argue, that this attention to the visual, to the gaze, is often what is resorted to when faced with silence.

I would like to look at a specific engagement with animals, which even when showing a certain familiarity, maintains a relation to the animals' thoughts, ways of knowing, experience, as unknowable, but not insignificant. Barry Lopez's Apologia (1998) is an essay about road-kill. But in taking this as its central narrative, it also muses on animals in the particular (the particular individuals that Barry Lopez encounters), and his response to their deaths, their bodies, and the meaning of such a response. Set out as small paragraphs of text on each (unnumbered) page, Apologia is somewhere

between poetry and picture book. It is his urge and habit to remove the bodies of animals from the roads, and the litany of bodies which he lists serves to pin down his musings to the particular. Lopez's animals are never 'the animal', 'the creature', as a symbol of all animal life, as though apart from humans there were only one other species, a stereotype, cliché – each one is particular, and stands only for itself. This is particularly clear in his descriptions of a badger: "... admire/ the long claws, the perfect set of its / teeth in the broken jaw, the ramulose / shading of its fur – how it differs / slightly, as does every badger's, / from the drawings and pictures / in the field guides." (1998). This badger differs slightly, as every one does, from the pictures in the books, because it is not the same one, each one is particular – each one is *this* one.

In "Why Look at Animals?" (1977) Berger writes that "[a]nimals are born, are sentient and are mortal. In these things they resemble man [sic] .... in death [...] the two parallel lines [of human and animal lives] converge ...." (1977: 13-5). Being alive is inseparable from the possibility of death, and it is at death Lopez encounters most of these creatures, or more often after death, when they are only bodies, remnants. It is his response to these bodies that opens up his questions:

A few miles east of home / in the Cascades I slow down and pull over for/  
two raccoons, sprawled still as stones .... / I carry each one away / from the  
tarmac into a cover of grass or brush / out of decency, I think. And worry. /  
Who are these animals, their lights gone out? / what journeys have fallen  
apart here? (1998).

Despite his wonderings, his worry, and concern for 'decency', he also recognises his complicity – he hits a young sage sparrow in Idaho; near Broken Bow he hits a barn swallow that ends up caught in the grille, and he loses control of his car attempting to avoid another bird in the Wind River Range. In the latter instance he is also vulnerable, also faces the possibility of dying on the road. But it is not just these that he takes time to acknowledge – stopping to rest he washes off the "carcasses of bumblebees, / wasps and butterflies ... the insects, / the aerial plankton of spiders and mites. / I am uneasy carrying so many of the dead." (1998). Lopez's thoughts are focused not only on the 'big' creatures, but is explicitly concerned with what has gone unnoticed: "What else have I missed, / too small, too narrow?" (1998). Lopez also marks the complicity of others in the deaths, and subsequent fates of the bodies of these road-killed animals – writing about a doe he finds, he says he drags her from the road "by the petals of / her ears .... / All of her doesn't come....The stain of her is

darker than the black asphalt. The stains / go north and off to the south as far as I can see.”(1998). The stains stretching away in both directions down this road mark the tracks of other cars which, though not being the one which hit this doe, do not stop. But others also act as he does, or show appreciation for what he is doing: a farmer approaches him from a field in Idaho, marvels at the habits of nighthawks which makes them hunt just over the road; “[h]e asks if I would mind – as though I owned it – if he took / the bird up to the house to show his wife. ‘She’s never seen / anything like this.’ He’s fascinated. ‘Not close.’ // I trust, later, he will put it in the fields, not throw the body/ in the trash ...” (1998). Lopez trusts this man to continue with the gesture of respect – to be laid to rest in a field, rather than ‘thrown away’ as refuse; and while asking his permission might imply a perception of ‘ownership’ (which Lopez never claims), it might also be another form of respect.

Lopez does not rant against the violence of other drivers, or their carelessness, even if they are complicit in these deaths; he trusts that other people share his sense of wanting to do *something*, will care and show respect in some way: “[H]ow many have this habit of / clearing the road of smaller creatures, people who / would remove the ones I miss? I do not imagine / I am alone. As much sorrow as the man’s/ hand conveyed [...], it meant / gratitude too for burying the dead.” (1998). Lopez asks who will come after him, ‘catch the ones that he has missed’, and yet it is not a rhetorical question presupposing that no one shall, he does not think that his desire to make some gesture is unique. It is Lopez’s questions which I wish to turn to – the questions which Lopez asks but offers no answers for.

Lopez’s questions give shape to his awareness – each of these creatures on their own journeys (as he is) whose paths have crossed the road (or the road has crossed theirs) – he does not try to project what this means to them, of what each one, from deer to gnats (aerial plankton), think of death, or how they may have faced it. He does wonder about their lives, and this shared space – the environment which includes the road. But he also tries to understand his own response, why he removes the bodies, what it is that he is actually feeling: “...Why do you bother? / You never know, I said. The ones you give some / semblance of burial, to whom you offer an apology, / may have been like seers in a parallel culture. / It is an act of respect, a technique / of awareness.” (1998). The reasons vary from being displaced away from Lopez himself (perhaps they were sacred, in another time or place, to another people), to something situated very much in him, as a specific person: the felt need to act respectfully, to demonstrate awareness. Laying down the sage sparrow he has hit, Lopez first of all shuts its eyes,

then nods before he leaves, “a disconcerted gesture, out of simple grief.” (1998). The reasons why he engages in these rituals (which are like the recognition of a human death) he cannot always fully explain, they remain ‘disconcerted’, and later he struggles to fully name what it is he feels that is not only grief, or pity.

Lopez cannot fully explain what it is that he feels as he reflects on the litany of bodies, on these open questions (‘what journeys have fallen apart here?’, ‘who was this?’, ‘what has gone unnoticed?’). He has stated that what he feels is grief, some desire to show respect, demonstrate his awareness, the opposite of indifference or blindness. But still he also reiterates that he cannot fully put this into words:

The weight I wish to fall I cannot fathom, a sorrow over the / world’s dark  
hunger. // ...The words of atonement / I pronounce are too inept to offer me  
release. Or forgiveness. / .... What is to be done with the desire for  
exculpation? // ... I do not want the lavabo. I wish to make amends. (1998)

Words are not working – he cannot name the weight upon him, words of atonement are not apt, and do not dispel the weight. He does not answer the question ‘What is to be done with the desire for exculpation?’ – like his other questions he leaves them unanswered for the reader to confront with their own answers, or uncertainties. What is to be done with this desire? Should it be explained away, or fed, and what will ease it? Lopez concludes this essay with a brief reflection on the power of words, just two sentences alone on the page: “I anticipate, in the powerful antidote / of our conversation, the reassurance of a human enterprise, / the forgiving embrace of the rational. It waits within, / beyond the slow tail-wagging of two dogs / standing at the screen door.” (1998). As if this wordlessness was a poison, the antidote lies in a friend’s dialogue; his uncertainty can be pacified by human ways of meaning-making, and ultimately reason will be forgiving. Recall that *logos* is translated both as ‘reason’, and as ‘words’. Rationally, he is not responsible for most of the deaths he has encountered, those that he was involved in he attempted to avert, even at his own risk. Reason, and his friend’s assurances, may offer forgiveness, but for the moment he holds onto this feeling, the questions without answers, the uncertainties which he does not attempt to fill in but recognises that he does not know. He does not know what to do in the face of these deaths, or what to do with his emotions.



Earlier in this essay, Lopez mentions that he tended to avoid the eyes of other people who passed as he removed the bodies – by not returning their gazes he keeps his attention on the remains he is handling, his own thoughts, rather than looking for other humans' judgements, even if in their eyes he would also see sorrow or compassion. He might also have seen confusion, or amusement, or suspicion, but in avoiding their gaze (the eyes are windows), he keeps himself separate, keeps himself in his own not-knowing-what-else-to-do, not-knowing-what-to-say. I presume he closes the eyes of the bird he kills not so it will not 'look at him', but because this is a ritual in (human) death, a gesture he extends to the bird, like the nod, despite the fact that such ritual would not have meaning to the bird itself, or other birds. Lopez marks the deaths of these numerous creatures without presuming to know what this means to *them*, or to glimpse visions of eternity, or even some pan-animal consciousness in their eyes. They are silent in their deaths, and even alive he knows that he could not have known their thoughts; it is not just their death which separates them from him, it is only in death that he encounters them – as people do most wild animals in modern society.

Between his thoughts, the landscape (which he does not conflate with the animals whose habitat it is) whose beauty cannot make him forget "the heavier memory" of the dead, between this, and his friend's antidote words, are the dogs. The dogs which stand (tails wagging) both on the threshold of the house, and also between Lopez and the road-killed creatures he has been mourning – both as domesticated animals, living in a house as companions, both safe and still at risk from the roads. He must pass by them before he gets to the antidote of conversation, human reasoning and forgiveness. Their response to him appears to be curiosity, and some pleasure (they stand at the door, wagging their tails), but they do not offer the forgiveness he feels he needs. He does not project their thoughts either, neither what they do or do not know. Such a theme is briefly explicit in Adrienne Rich's lines from "Twenty-One Love Poems": "[Your dog] knows – what can she know? / If in my human arrogance I claim to read / her eyes, I find there only my own animal thoughts: / that creatures must find each other for bodily comfort, / ... that without tenderness, we are in hell." (Rich 1974: 148). Again it is the openness of these questions ('what can she know?') which does not presume to apprehend this animal's knowledge, and what is seen in her eyes is a human projection of 'animal thoughts', even if they are held to be mutual, such as a desire for physical contact, tenderness.

Rich and Lopez restrain themselves from making individual animals symbolic of ‘the animal’, or of nature in its entirety. While describing these animals as Other, it is not through setting out animal knowledges as absolutely different from human ways of knowing (presuming to know the ways in which they are different), but in marking the boundaries of *human* knowledge, and acknowledging the possibility of others which we might barely be able to imagine. The dogs in Lopez’ narrative could die on the road just like other animals, and people (how people might respond might be different if it was recognised that they were someone’s property – livestock or pet); but for the time being, in the space of this essay, they are alive, and proximate to Lopez: he sees them, they see him, they react to each other. If he speaks to them, they might even respond, though not with words. Their ways of knowing also remain impossible for them to disclose, even if, in their proximity to Lopez and his human companions, they can respond to words (come, sit), even know their own names – even *have* speakable names (though hardly ones which they can determine), which none of the wild animals do. Again they stand at a threshold, the doorway on whose far side Lopez situates the antidote of words, and yet even once he has passed through these two dogs may serve as a living reminder of what remains outside, and their own worlds remain unuttered and unutterable.

Lopez’s essay engages with animals by making himself, his presence, explicit in this narrative – the animals he writes about are specific, not only to species but even individually, he writes about them as he encounters them, with his own ways of seeing, thinking, his own needs, which include in this case the desire to acknowledge their existences, and their deaths. He is unable to put a precise name on the burden he feels, or to know what to do (just the desire to do *something*), and his desire to make amends is also situated as something at odds with words or reason. The animals are silent and dead, mostly – just as humans become. But Lopez gives shape to their inarticulate stories by using questions that gesture to their own unanswerability, the point where all he has are questions.

Lopez is writing about animals who are dead, and to a certain extent this means that what he is really writing about is the question of how to comport oneself towards the death of a non-human Other, rather than the question of the ‘silence’ of animals, or their being outside of language, and thus to a certain extent their lives remain ‘unknowable’. Lopez writes about animals as unknowable, but does so without

projecting what animals do or do not know onto them, except as *questions*, which give shape to the unknown, but do not actually fix it down. It is also through death that Lopez begins to think of this unknowability (since he does not encounter any of these wild animals while they are still alive, with perhaps the exception of the insects), and this unknowability remains in the figures of the two dogs waiting for him at the door.

The question of how to talk about the unknown, or the unknowable, in this case has been situated within trying to express areas of the speaker's own experience, and the limits of that experience, such as when confronted by another being whose experience remains to a great extent something which cannot be apprehended. Lopez is not only confronted with the lives of these animals being far from his knowledge, but simply how to speak of death, the death of another being, one's own mortality, is also at stake in his words. I have stated in this chapter that in these contexts – discussing 'the unknown', 'something' which does not easily fit into words – that silence comes to be defined in terms of the 'outside' of language. When we move to the context of talking about animals, a division is drawn between humans and animals which often falls along this divide between language and silence. It is silence's definition in opposition to the space of language, and thus humanity, which aligns it with 'animality', here. But it is also possible to turn this equation around. Because silence, in being defined in opposition to human language, comes to be a space in which the non-human is situated, that is, in the space of silence there is Otherness, presupposing the Otherness of animals means that they will be associated with silence. This equation will continue to be present in my next chapter, in which I engage with the correlation between silence and dehumanisation. This question of how to describe experience, how to make sense of death, becomes particularly clear in issues of trauma, situating this as a central question for testimony, which is the subject of my next chapter.

# Chapter Two

## Silence as Loss of Language

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### *The Loss of Language*

The previous chapter took for its subject the definition of silence in terms of the ‘absence of language’ – that is, silence in terms of ‘having never had’ language. This was discussed in terms of being ‘inhuman’, meaning not-human, given a definition of humanity which was contingent on language. The term ‘inhuman’, and the theme of the ‘loss’ of humanity, will also recur throughout this chapter, but I wish to make it particularly clear that the division between absence and loss remains relevant, and that I would not interpret ‘dehumanised’ human beings in terms of being literally no longer human, indeed, I find this to be a problematic aspect of the language which is common in these discourses. That being said, I believe that the use of the metaphor of the loss of humanity, a regression to animality, functions as a means of traversing a silence, that is, as a means of describing something which is felt to be indescribable. This chapter seeks to engage with silence as the loss of language. Silence is a common trope in discourses surrounding loss, pain, grief. This is made particularly clear in discourses around atrocity and violence. In the previous chapter what was at issue was the concept of a space beyond language, rather than the experience of the loss of meaning, or loss of language, which I will be examining here. In terms of my overall structure, in neither this chapter, nor the previous one, am I dealing with silence which is *agential*, that is, in neither absence nor loss have the subjects chosen to remain silent. But equally, the concept of agency makes less sense when referring to the ‘absence of language’, because the possibility of speech is not something which has been deprived. Some of the issues with conflating ‘animal silence’ with the silence associated with dehumanisation I have already touched on. This chapter posits that

silence is defined here also in terms of an opposition to 'language', but also 'free expression', an 'ease' of language which is lost in experiences of pain and horror.

This section disentangles a number of different strands which are identified as 'silence' within the general discourses around violence, in order to think through what is distinct in each. While I believe that these different 'silences' tied up with discourses of violence are interconnected, I think it is useful also to be able to distinguish them. I will separate three different 'strands' here. There is what I might denote as 'the unspeakability of evil'. To a certain extent this ties into my previous discussion of 'agnostic silence', in that it is setting 'evil' as in some intrinsic way being beyond comprehensibility, or language. I shall be discussing this concept ('unspeakable evil') through an article by Leonhard Praeg, whose engagement with this theme is useful insofar as it both engages with the language used in this discourse, and also the extent to which, in his own experience, this is also tied to the bodily experience of horror or agitation. Separate from the 'unspeakability of evil' is what I shall be referring to as the 'indescribability of pain' – that is, the difficulty encountered in relating experiences of pain. In this I am drawing on the work The Body in Pain (1985) by Elaine Scarry. The distinction between these two lies in the difference between 'the experience of horror', and the 'sensation of pain', each in their own ways giving rise to a sense of the insufficiency of language. I shall be examining these in more detail shortly.

Separate from the above is what might be called 'imposed', or 'structured silence' – forms of taboo, censorship, political, social, cultural 'silencing'. These might be devastating in their effects, as in the example of repressive political regimes, or in the case of war, and may be described in terms of 'evil', but the 'silence' they are creating is concerned with language that is in the public sphere, or at least inter-personal. With technologies of surveillance increasingly permitting the monitoring of private communication, and taboos which include what might not be spoken of even within private spheres either (for example domestic violence, sexual violence, 'family secrets' etc.), this is a complicated category. But what is at issue here is the *control* of the flow of language by groups or individuals – and their dictation of what is spoken about, or how, if at all. Language itself may be complicit in taboos, it is after all a social structure – the associations of certain words, connotations, concepts of obscenity or shame, might all be tied into the reasons why such silences may be perpetuated, and why it is difficult to 'break' such silences. The key difference between this 'structured silence' and the previous examples is that this is created,

instituted, enforced, rather than being tied up in personal, felt experiences – being at a loss for words to describe horror, or pain. The issue here is the control of language – while Scarry’s example of pain deconstructing language is torture, which is utterly about the control of language, another’s body and pain (interrogation), the fact that bodies experience pain, that this might be difficult, even impossible to put into words, is not a form of censorship.

The ‘answer’ to this structured silence is usually the call to ‘break’ it: to lift taboos, free the press, free speech, encourage ‘speaking out’, ‘finding a voice’, ‘talking cures’, ‘being heard’. I do not intend to argue against this; though in my next chapter, I engage with Wendy Brown’s position that the focus on the positive aspects of ‘speaking out’ tend not to consider the possibility of *choosing* to remain silent (2005). The issue of choice is integral here – situating these subjects as the ‘loss of language’ implies the lack of choices, and the experience of trauma. My engagement with silence does not aim to set out every silence as positive, but there is no dearth of material on these issues, no small amount of books, articles, blogs, protests, all arguing for the breaking of the silence around a certain issue. But if the ‘answer’ to structured silence is to speak out against it, I want to think about a particular form of ‘answer’, namely what might be called ‘witnessing’. In my previous chapter I posited that the visual is what is fallen back on when there is no speech, though, in ‘bearing witness’ an act of communication is implied. To ‘speak back’ to silencing (I use the verb, rather than the noun ‘silence’, because I believe that it is important to recognise this as an action, a being-made-silent) is usually in reference to what it is that has been rendered taboo, or censored, or is felt as difficult if not impossible to speak about, and this is bearing witness. To bear witness to what is taboo, to what is censored, to what someone has attempted to destroy or distort – to render silent – is to attempt to traverse that silence. No one says that bearing witness, or breaking silence, is an easy thing – but I wish to turn to the question of testimony and bearing witness particularly in cases caught up in discourses of ‘the unspeakability of evil’, and the ‘indescribability of pain’ – cases of human suffering where language is described as losing meaning, and being insufficient.

### ***The Unspeakability of Evil***

I wish to turn now to an article by Leonhard Praeg (2010), whose focus is the experience of the ‘unspeakability’ of evil. Evil becomes defined as being experienced

as an Otherness, one which in particular is manifest through an inability to describe its entirety through language. This closely resembles my discussion in the previous chapter of ‘agnostic silence’ (and in the case of Picard, the epithet of ‘evil’ was commonly associated with specific types of silence), but there is an integral distinction between the silence of the ‘unknown’, or ‘unknowable’ which was my subject previously, and the subject here, where it is experiences of pain or trauma which are experienced as being difficult to put into words by those who have experienced them, and also often by those attempting to discuss them even if they have not experienced them. While initially engaging with the question of the *nature* of evil, this article develops this question by exploring the nature of the *experience* of evil, and the linguistic tropes used to speak about these experiences, and to ‘make sense’ of them.

The first part of this article poses the question of ‘what is the nature of evil’, and contextualises this question in the historical shift from focusing debates around evil’s origin, to focusing on its ‘nature’ (2010: 111). This article is framed within the author’s personal contemplations of the connection between the Rwandan genocide, and the beheading of a passenger on a Greyhound bus in Canada by another passenger. Given that he experienced a similar ‘agitation’ in response to both incidents, Praeg’s engagement with ‘evil’ (a term he is originally wary of using (2010: 108)) takes this experience of agitation as the starting point and recurrent theme in this work (2010: 108-9). Praeg situates his definition of evil as distinctly post-metaphysical, being specifically actions for which human beings may be responsible, and not any form of natural catastrophe, or supernatural power (2010: 110). Despite this, ‘evil’ retains its associations with the theological language in which it was historically used, an issue which will be of import a little later when discussing the uncanny (2010: 112). Praeg’s engagement with evil explicitly draws from definitions which conceive of evil apophatically, here specifically through defining evil as something which “resists thinking while demanding to be thought” (2010: 112). This ambivalence – ‘thinking about the unthinkable’ – ties the definition of evil into privation, which Praeg discusses through St. Augustine’s description of evil not as the opposite of good, but as the *absence* of good (2010: 112). In this understanding, evil is a movement:

We do not defect towards evil. Rather, defection *is* the evil. If we want to know evil we can only aspire to knowing ‘what must be known to be incapable of being known’ (Augustine, 2001: 60). To want to know more

than this – for instance, the cause of our defection from the good – Augustine argues, is like ‘trying to see darkness or to hear silence’, and while ‘we may be familiar with silence and darkness and while we become aware of them by means of eyes and ears this is not by perception but by absence of perception’ (St. Augustine, 2001: 60). (Praeg 2010: 112-3)

If evil and silence are ‘like darkness’, and defined fundamentally through absence, what happens when something or someone is situated in, or *as*, that space? How can a person be situated as evil, or as silent, except to say then that there is something of them which is unperceivable? How can someone be or embody that absence? To situate a being in these places is to situate them as fundamentally strange, Other (because unknowable) – but this movement not only situates evil as ‘un-witnessable’ (the absence of perception), but will also render it ‘indescribable’. The question of how to speak of what escapes understanding is a theme I shall be returning to soon.

The apophatic definition of evil resembles my previous discussion of silence, and as can be seen in the above quote, is discussed using the metaphor of silence (and darkness), but evil is also correlated to silence by being ‘inarticulable’ – something at issue in its ‘unthinkability’, and also in its apophatic definition. Like ‘silence’, ‘evil’ becomes a name which nominates something which, apart from this name, is defined only through negation – creating the conceptual problem of the question of what positive presence can be assigned to anything only defined in terms of what it is not (2010: 113). It is this ‘inarticulable nature of evil’ (unthinkable, un-understandable, unspeakable – known only as unknowable) which Praeg sees as being in conflict with a functionalist definition of evil which seeks to find a role, or a useful outcome, from the existence of evil, or to posit it as a necessary element in the status quo (2010: 113-4). I feel it is important to distinguish the difference between finding a use for evil (in saying that it can result in good – the ‘end justifies the means’), or defining it as ‘necessary’ or integral to the status quo, and separate from this, the attempt to understand ambivalence, and the possibility for new growth in the aftermath of destruction. Praeg quotes Governor Frank Keating after the 1995 Oklahoma Building bombing saying that “[t]he good will generated by this tragedy ... is a door-opening opportunity.” (2010: 114); while Praeg is understandably wary of the move to turn ‘tragedy’ into ‘opportunity’, it is worth differentiating from this the desire to find new potentialities, not *in* ‘evil’, but *after* it. Much of the discourse around reconciliation, and reconstruction after conflict or atrocity depends on this distinction. Separate from



this functionalist conception of evil, Praeg briefly discusses the ‘Messianic’ conception which posits a Manichaen combat between good and evil, and also, the possible hope that the former will eventually triumph (2010: 115). Praeg engages with the functionalist and Messianic conceptions of evil briefly, apart from acknowledging these alternative engagements, he firmly situates his own discussion alongside the ‘inarticulable’, apophatic definitions, which he also sees as positing evil as something ‘liminal’.

Praeg’s engagement with ‘evil as liminal’ draws on the etymological roots of ‘evil’: tracing it back to the Teutonic *ubiloz*’ from which the Dutch *euvel* and German *übel* also originate (2010: 115). The root of *ubiloz*’ means ‘up’ or ‘over’ (as can be seen in the German *über*) – its meaning would have been primarily a sense of ‘exceeding appropriate limits’ (2010: 115). It is this link to limits – to crossing them, or even instituting them – which Praeg connects to liminality (also fundamentally about boundaries). It is through this connection to the liminal that he sets this discussion of evil into the context of other engagements with similar liminal figures – such as the ‘unforgiveable’, ‘absolute evil’, and ‘unpunishable evil’ (2010: 115). Praeg reads other engagements with evil which define it in terms of ‘resisting any final comprehension’ as also rendering evil in terms of the liminal (in reiterating it in terms of being ‘beyond’, or based upon some form of excess) (2010: 115). But Praeg is not providing a wide over-view of theoretical engagements with evil as liminal, but is rather, explicitly trying to focus on the ‘liminal nature of evil’ which “simultaneously posits and traverses evil as that which cannot be thought” (2010: 115). There is import in this attempt to ‘simultaneously posit and traverse’ – as he will discuss later in this article, defining evil not only takes note of a limit that is being crossed (by indicating one’s experience in the presence of evil), but also institutes that limit by virtue of naming it. The ‘traversing of evil’ is the function played not only in its name, but in the tropes employed to speak about it – while enabling a discussion of evil, often through simile, these names and tropes ultimately reiterate the inarticulable nature of evil, even as they attempt to articulate it.

Praeg argues that Arendt’s engagement with evil, specifically in reference to totalitarianism, also defines it as liminal. ‘Radical evil’ is described as inconceivable – Christian theology gives ‘even the devil a celestial origin’ (Arendt quoted in Praeg 2010: 115). A connection is also drawn between the ‘wonder’ which is at the heart of classical philosophy and which drives it, and the ‘horror’ which fuels contemporary

political philosophy (2010: 116-7). Like Praeg's earlier discussion of evil, the 'horror' Arendt is focussing on is also inarticulable, 'speechless':

[T]he speechless horror at what man may do and what the world may become is in many ways related to the speechless wonder of gratitude from which the questions of philosophy spring.... the Greek experience of wonder was rooted in the experience of beauty ... the experience of wonder today ... is rooted in the experience of horror at what humans are capable of, the speechless horror that philosophically must be endured and politically instituted against. (Arendt, quoted in Praeg 2010: 116-7)

This resembles two sides of the sublime. Drawing a distinction between 'Greek wonder' and 'contemporary horror' is not to imply that radical evil has not always been a potential in human nature, or that 'horror' is uniquely 'modern' – what is distinct is the conceptualisation of 'it' in terms of 'radical evil' (2010: 117). It might be worth recalling at this point that in Latin *horror* literally means to 'tremble', or to 'bristle with fear'; and also 'terror', whose root is identical with that of 'tremble', and means to 'shake'. The histories of both of these words links them to 'agitation', the same that is at the heart of Praeg's understanding of the experience of evil.

Working through the experience of evil, Praeg focuses on the limit instituted visually in a text as a '/' – the line between binaries such as immanence and transcendence, law and justice, rationality and irrationality – a line which is not only crossed by 'evil', but also blurred (2010: 118). It is this blurring of the limit as a form of transgression that Praeg places behind the experience of agitation (2010: 118). It is also this 'perversion of the liminal' which creates the possibility for the banality of evil. Sharing its root with 'abandon', 'banal' holds the connotation of being given over to the common community, rather than being under the preserve of a lord – and Praeg's discussion of the banality of evil keeps this etymology in mind when he argues that evil becomes banal as the human condition is experienced as one of abandonment (there is nothing *preserved* beyond human grasp – a return to the 'horrific potential' in Arendt's discussion of totalitarianism) and individuals act as though there are no limitations (2010: 117-8). It is precisely this which causes the agitation which Praeg is positing as distinctive of our experience of 'evil':

It induces in us an *anguish* or *agitation* exactly because it perverts with impunity the very difference the liminal seems to institute between

[binaries].... we may also point to the chilling we experience in the presence of someone who embodies evil .... Is the 'chilling' not an experience of the difference between another's perversion of the liminal and my respect for it? ... Is what most characterizes the chilling not a sense of the immanence of death itself, of somebody 'walking over our graves', the actual experience of being alive and dead at the same time? (2010: 118-9)

The use of the phrase 'someone just walked over my grave' to indicate a sudden, otherwise unexplainable shiver ties back to a Medieval belief that we are connected to the place where our bodies will eventually be buried (burial being the norm) – a person (or in some variations, an animal) walking over that place was said to provoke the sudden shudder in the body, marking the moment when the body, if not the mind, 'recalls' its death. It is the blurring of distinctions (time, space), the removal of boundaries, or to rephrase part of Arendt: the 'offensive senselessness of this world',<sup>24</sup> that creates the horror and agitation that Praeg is situating as characteristic of what we name 'evil'. The sudden uncertainty of rules, of what was previously believed, the lines ( /, the limn) between certain distinctions, gives rise to the fear, the agitation. It is this physical aspect to the experience of evil which is explicitly situated as central to the second part of Praeg's article.

The second part of this article examines what the agitation in the presence of evil is, and what linguistic and theoretical tropes are employed in order to make sense of the experience of evil. Praeg opens with Kant's definition of the sublime as that which simultaneously refuses to be comprehended, and also provokes in us the desire to understand, the same characteristic previously attributed also to 'evil' – it is the movement between incomprehension and the compulsion nevertheless to try to comprehend which Praeg situates as definitive of all things which are liminal:

Only *that* is liminal which induces in us this kind of uncontrollable oscillation between, on the one hand, the recognition that our capacity for understanding is being violated and, on the other hand, an attempt nonetheless to grasp the totality of what violates, by exceeding, the totalizing grasp of our understanding. Such a restless 'movement', writes

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<sup>24</sup> "Our common sense ... is offended by nothing so much as by the complete senselessness of a world where punishment persecutes the innocent more than the criminal ... where crimes do not benefit and are not even calculated to benefit their authors." (Arendt in Praeg 2010: 118)

Kant, 'may be compared with a shaking, i.e. with a rapidly alternating repulsion and attraction produced by one and the same object. This excess for the imagination ... is like an abyss in which it fears to lose itself. (2010: 119)

The experience of agitation is inherent to the encounter of the liminal, but what Praeg is arguing is that this agitation does not only 'mark the limit' in our experience of the limit, but rather that the limit is created as "the result of acts of language, of our articulating in language the experience of oscillating between the violation of understanding and reason's attempt to impose a totality on what violates it." (2010: 120). Figures such as the uncanny are used in order to talk about human actions which are defined as unthinkable, or disturbing; Praeg is arguing that these 'figures', words and images – acts of language and conceptual place-holders – despite being imperfect descriptions, offer a way of 'making sufficient sense of evil' (2010: 120) – sufficient to attempt some sort of discourse, if only for a temporary one. It is in comparing the ways in which language is used to attempt to talk about evil that Praeg begins to draw further similarities between the two very different examples with which he prefaced this article – a genocide, and a single murder (2010: 120).

The linguistic trope that Praeg examines which I shall devote most of my attention to is the use of the 'uncanny' to describe the liminal. Drawing on Freud, Praeg defines this term as a specific type of horror, one that is based on the strangeness or alienation of what is also familiar and recognisable (2010: 120). Once again he returns to etymology to highlight an ambivalence in this concept – as Freud recognised, the uncanny [*unheimlich*] is not totally removed from its opposite *heimlich*, meaning secret, or concealed (2010: 120). Often explained as the 'unfamiliar familiar' or 'familiar unfamiliar', the uncanny is liminal in that it occupies a border-position between the easily recognised and known, and the strange, as well as – drawing on Praeg's definition – resulting in agitation, unsettlement, disquiet. In discussing the uncanny as liminal, Praeg returns to the report of the decapitation on the Greyhound bus which initially provoked his engagement with evil. One of the other passengers reports of the perpetrator that "[h]e calmly walks up to the front [of the bus] with the head in his hand and the knife and just calmly stares at us and drops the head in front of us ... There was no rage in him ... It was just like he was a robot or something." (2010: 120 and elsewhere). Praeg focuses on the use of 'robot or something' as a linguistic means of capturing the ambivalence of this 'person who is not acting like a person' (2010: 120). Stressing that this functions on the simile of 'as if', this phrase

marks the limit implied between the human and the ‘inhuman’, by drawing attention to its sudden blurring in this one individual (2010: 121). The use of simile is what Praeg is focusing on here, specifically the use of similes (‘like a robot or something’) which linguistically enact the blurring or confusion of what is usually conceptually divided:

[I]f I accuse a perpetrator of being an animal or a monster, it is not that I have mistaken a human for a beast or a monster, but that I believe that there are humans who act *as if* they were beasts or monsters, that is, *as if* they were creatures or moral aliens that could not have acted otherwise. (Arnault, quoted in Praeg 2010: 121 *emphasis added*)

And yet we do not ‘mistake’ this individual for something inhuman so much that we do not hold them accountable for their ‘inhuman’ actions. Praeg recognises that there are two different manifestations of the uncanny in violence: in the first, as above, a human is seen to act in an inhuman way; in the second, something which is initially defined as inhuman acts in a way usually associated with being human (2010: 121). What is uncanny in this example of the Greyhound bus murder is not so much the violence, but rather the calmness, the acting without rage – in fact, the acting ‘as if he was human’, or like a human doing something completely banal (correlations to the previous discussion about the agitation in the banality of evil are pertinent here). Violence is often explicated by rage, given the level of violence in this example, the perpetrators’ fury might have made the incident, not less reprehensible, but perhaps less uncanny. But fury, or at least acting with extreme emotion, is often correlated to animality (animal or monster) – it is the calmness of the perpetrator which is correlated to being ‘like a robot’ – like a machine, performing a function, incapable of ‘acting otherwise’.

Returning to the attempt to capture the uncanny in language, the use of the perpetrator’s being ‘a robot or something’ contains within it the simultaneous incomprehensibility and attempt to understand – in assigning a possible likeness to being ‘a robot’, and yet also in mediating that with the ‘something’ which holds the space open as incomprehensible:

We respond to the imaginary infinity which recedes beyond the grasp of our totalizing understanding by nonetheless imposing upon it a figurative... totality; one that allows for a temporary ‘grasp of the totality’

(a robot) while remaining open to the incomprehensible ('or something').

(2010: 121)

It is worth noting at this point that the reiteration of 'something' here functions in a similar way to the 'somethings' in Walsh's analysis – indicating, gesturing, towards a point where language gives out. Here, 'something' points towards an incomprehensibility, an excess, both in action, and in language – there is neither an understanding why, nor how to aptly describe, what has happened. In reiterating the uncanny through the linguistic trope of being like – or even *being*, to shift from simile to metaphor – an animal/monster/machine etc. allows for the limit between familiar and unfamiliar to be re-created, and in the figure of an uncanny individual it is less frightening than for it to have no boundary or clear limit at all (2010: 121). There is a point where the fearful and the supernatural coincide, and another characteristic of the uncanny is its tendency to be linked to old superstitions and stories: "While we assume we have surmounted ... a belief in the daemonic [... t]he uncanny is precisely that experience in which the memory of this association returns to haunt us[.]" (2010: 122). This perhaps explains the prevalence of similes or metaphors of 'monsters', echoing the persistence of things which, despite no longer being strictly believed in, retain powerful connotations and recalls pre-modern conceptions of evil as literally demonic.

Praeg acknowledges that while his initial instinct was to cast the word 'evil' as the 'act of language' which was being used to understand both genocide and individual murder, and which connected them, this does not actually provide a definition for the word 'evil'. While naming the experience of agitation 'evil' functions insofar as it names the experience of agitation – the movement between incomprehension, and the compulsion to 'make sense' – it does fall into the same difficulty that defining evil apophatically does. In defining it as 'the unthinkable which must be thought', evil is constituted in terms of its liminality (in being at the threshold between the unthinkable and our compulsion to think). Praeg finds it useful to reiterate evil in terms of the agitation which he sees as intrinsic to the experience of it because this offers a means of drawing a comparison between what is otherwise very different. But it is the identification of the agitation which precedes the defining of evil – for Praeg, offering any definition is temporary, a tentative means of attempting to "talk about the sublime, reason, understanding, evil and humanity. Beyond that, it can do no more. In fact, the agitation must necessarily fail every attempt to account for itself." (2010: 128-9). This reiterates a silence fundamental to the agitation – namely that it fails to account for

itself. It fails to offer another name except synonyms which reiterate it as uncanny, unknowable, and unspeakable.

The definition of evil as liminal situates it as such precisely because of its connection to language, that is, part of the 'encounter with evil' is not only the agitation it causes, but its inarticulability. 'Something' exceeds, and it is the excess which is gestured towards by the 'something' in the testimony quoted by Praeg. But if there is something inarticulable in evil, and yet evil is nevertheless kept firmly in the domain of the human (human actions, human experience), even if it is described in relation to the inhuman, then a question is raised concerning testimony. How do we testify (presumably through language) to events which we define as evil, if something of evil remains unspeakable? It may seem as though 'evil' is being defined in terms of the unknown (absence rather than loss of language), rather like the agnostic silences I engaged with previously. But Praeg refers to the sudden instability of distinctions, the '/' between categories, a loss of certainty, and this horror's 'indescribability' are experienced as a movement from language, into this space of instability. It is this movement that I describe in terms of loss, something which will become more explicit as I engage with Scarry's work concerned with the experience of pain. But there is another reason why I reiterate this in terms of loss, rather than absence, and that is to do with concepts of 'humanity'. The 'inhumanity' of evil, metaphors of the demonic, of animals, robots, or some other 'inhuman Other' abound when we move into questions of 'evil', trauma, pain – testimonies of people acting in a way, or being treated in a way, that is defined as not-human(e). While metaphors of the inhuman may be a way of gesturing to the liminality of people being described as evil, or touched by evil, it is important to recall that these are *metaphors*, and even when dealing with murder or the death of millions, we are still in the domain of the human.

### ***The Inexpressibility of Pain***

I will now turn more explicitly towards the loss of language, in this case the difficulty of describing pain. The question here is not of an 'abstract' concept of evil, how to define connections between a single death and genocide, but the question of the relation between pain and language. Tracing a line from the 'indescribability of evil' which was Praeg's concern, which was largely a question of how to speak of what horrifies us, and Scarry's question of how to bear witness to pain (one's own, and others'), I shall be moving on to what space is left beyond these two silences for

testimony. I wish to discuss Elaine Scarry's engagement with pain, because it is particularly bound up with questions of language, and also serves to pinpoint another 'silence', this one explicitly tied up with loss. This is not the same as Praeg's issue, because whereas Praeg situates his question as a concern with the conceptualisation of 'evil', Scarry's concern begins with the bodily experience of pain – though both come to settle on the question of how to communicate experiences which resist language.

Scarry moves from the very specific to the general, and begins from a single point: that language, and therefore also the world it creates based on intersubjectivity, is undone or destroyed by physical pain. To be in pain is an intense experience of the body, to be in pain is to be unable to deny to oneself that one is in pain, its 'presentness' in the body can fill up all thoughts until there is nothing else but the knowing of pain (1985: 4). In one's day to day existence, there is little call for experiencing a difference between the self, 'me', and 'my body', except that the 'me' is usually felt as the core, the self that inhabits the body and may be projected out into the world, 'embodied' in one's voice (1985: 49). Through language, the world is constructed with common meaning – the world is humanised, through one's speech one's self inhabits a space far wider than the boundaries of its skin (1985: 49). But pain first reduces the self to the body, and then splits the self and their body. The loss of control over the body is experienced as a sort of self-betrayal, since it is no longer just that 'my body hurts' but that 'my body hurts *me*' (1985: 47 *emphasis in original*). Scarry describes this as the "convergence of murder and suicide" (1985: 53), the body 'guilty' of its own vulnerability to pain. The body becomes both that which all knowing and experiencing and living is based within, and yet also that which is felt to threaten that living: "The body is its pains, a shrill sentence that hurts and is hugely alarmed by its hurt ... The body, this intensely – and sometimes, as in pain, obscenely – alive tissue is also the thing that allows [death]." (1985: 31). The voice is lost, not only in the destructuring of the meaning of language, but in the loss of control over the body which projects the voice – in agony, one cannot compel one's body to silence its screams or to speak when it is physically incapable of doing so. Scarry describes this in terms of the 'shattering' of language (1985: 5), 'language-destroying' (1985: 19), 'world-destroying' (1985: 29) pain.

While to be in pain oneself is to be unable to deny that one is in pain, to be told of another's pain implies a leap of faith, because apart from a wound, or other symptoms, pain *itself* (separate from its symptoms or causes) is not visible (1985: 4). For Scarry there is import in this incongruence – that for the one in pain, that pain is undeniable,



and for someone else, it remains something which might be believed but cannot be confirmed – because this contrast exacerbates the fact that pain also resists language, which would be another way of sharing it, other than making it visible (1985: 4). Scarry writes that: “pain comes unsharably into our midst .... Physical pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it...” (1985: 4). In pain the sounds one makes are less language than the ‘state anterior to language’; the cries made instinctively even before the learning of language (1985: 4). While all languages struggle to describe pain, expressions of pain do vary culturally – as does whether an individual learns to suppress or release sounds in response to pain (1985: 5). It is difficult to describe pain – its intensity and aversiveness – but the ‘problem’ is not with language, it is not that language is ‘inflexible’ or fails, the ‘problem’ for Scarry lies in pain, in pain’s resistance to language (1985: 5). But language is not only a means of extending the self, making sense of the world, connecting with others, it is also something which is made, an ‘artefact’, though only a physical one if it is written down, or otherwise made material (1985: 234). Utterances of language are made by those who speak them – as much as physical objects might be created. The destruction of the capacity to speak, just like any other destruction, comes to have important political consequences – an issue which is central to Scarry’s argument and which will be turned to shortly.

But first I shall touch on why language is destroyed by pain. On one hand, when it is intense, it takes all attention, obliterates all other thoughts, and causes the retreat to the ‘anterior of language’ – to cries and noises – but describing pain ‘after the fact’, or speaking of a persistent but not ‘agonising’ pain, is also a challenge to language. Scarry posits some of the resistance of pain to language in that it is not a feeling which is of, or for, something exterior to the body – it has no ‘referential content’ in Scarry’s terms, and thus remains interior (1985: 5). While pain is often caused by something exterior to the body (a ‘weapon’, or some other injuring object), it is possible to feel pain without this exterior object. Pain simply can *be*, like a headache, without any ‘proof’ except the certainty in the experience of the sufferer: “Though the capacity to experience physical pain is as primal a fact about the human being as is the capacity to hear, to touch, to desire, to fear, to hunger, it differs from these events [...] by not having an object in the external world.... It is itself alone.” (1985: 161-2). It is this ‘objectlessness’ which Scarry sees as being tied to the difficulty of rendering it in language (1985: 162), because apart from the word ‘pain’, the only other ways to describe it are often gestures towards external objects, similes and metaphors, rather than direct descriptions. I have already briefly mentioned the ‘otherness’ of pain – that

even as an intensely interior experience, it is also experienced as an alienation, 'my body hurts me' projecting the pain away from 'me' even though it is utterly inextricable from 'my body' which is also 'me'. It is precisely such an experience of the 'otherness' of pain which is implicit in a quote from Nietzsche, touched on by Scarry as an attempt to 'master' pain: "I have given a name to my pain and call it 'dog'.... It is just as faithful, just as obtrusive and shameless, just as entertaining, just as clever as any other dog – and I can scold it and vent my bad mood on it, as others do with their dogs, servants, and wives." (1985: 11). Certainly an attempt to 'master' (dogs as domesticated, tameable), as is also indicated in the reference to 'servants and wives' – but in naming a pain 'dog', it also separates it from the human-ness of the speaker, makes it inextricable from the animal body – the 'obtrusive, entertaining, faithful, shameless' body.

On the representation of pain, Scarry notes that psychological suffering *is* often represented, for example in the arts, despite also being difficult to express, precisely because it usually does have a 'referential content' – the pain of lost love, mourning the dead, betrayal, all are psychological pains which have an external cause. Attempts to voice physical pain usually resort to metaphors which do conceptualise an external object. Most descriptions of pain rely on metaphors, and similes – 'as if', 'like', 'burning pain', 'cutting pain' (1985: 15). Descriptions of pain always fall into two forms, the first refers to something outside the body (weapon) inflicting injury; the second refers to the injury (wound) caused by something outside the body (1985: 15). The use of the image of a wound is used even if such an injury is outside direct experience – for example, saying that it feels like your head has been struck with a hammer, even if one has never known such an injury to draw a comparison (1985: 15). Of course, this may be the actual cause of injury – the skin might be cut, the bone broken, the speaker might have been hit with a hammer – but not always. Grazes are often described as 'burning', 'stinging', referencing yet other forms of pain. It is the ability to refer to 'actual' weapons/wounds which enables the discussion of a pain which might have nothing to do with it, because weapons and wounds are separate from pain, but they are visible, and this visibility allows for them to exist in the mind in such a way that another person can visualise or empathise with the *pain*, regardless of the cause (1985: 15-16).

It is the political implications of being outside of language which concern Scarry, and which she sees as imperative in any discussion of pain. All implications begin with the premise that what is difficult to represent in language, is going to be difficult to

represent politically, to make a political issue. The ‘problem of pain’ and ‘the problem of power’ intersect with four things: the first is that because of pain’s inexpressibility, and even at times invisibility, one person may be in pain, and another person in their immediate proximity may be completely unaware of it (1985: 12). The second issue is a consequence of the difficulty of expressing pain leading to its political absence – because of its ‘inexpressibility’, even in discourses surrounding issues where pain is central (torture, war), it becomes possible to re-describe or circumnavigate discussing the pain (thus torture is framed as ‘information gathering’, rather than in terms of the pain caused, or war is framed in terms of ‘liberation’, or ‘conquest’, instead of casualties (1985: 12-13). The third issue is that nevertheless there are attempts, however fragmentary, to bringing such experiences into language – arising as a response to pain, and ultimately from the desire to eliminate it. Most strategies for discussing pain refer to the ‘weapon’, or a physical object causing pain, or refer to such a wound as would be caused by a ‘weapon’ (1985: 13). The use of injuring objects as ‘verbal signs’ to describe pain (‘like a knife’, ‘stabbing pain’, ‘cutting pain’) may be a useful way to describe the felt-experience of pain, thus making it conceptually ‘visible’, but it can also have the unwanted side-effect of making pain more ‘invisible’, by focusing on something outside of the body, and therefore not actually the pain: “the image of the weapon only enables us to see *the attributes* of pain if it is clear that the attributes we are seeing are the attributes *of pain* (and not of something else)” (1985: 17). This is problematic when the weapon as symbol of pain is also used to perpetuate power and fear, rather than compassion and empathy (1985: 13). This leads us to the fourth point, arising both out of this possibility of focusing on the ‘symbol’ of pain, rather than pain itself, and also out of the fact that pain is ‘undoubtable’ to the one experiencing it, and uncertain in the one who only ‘hears’ about it (1985: 13). In bringing pain into language, it is necessary for it to be made clear that the point of reference is the body, otherwise the suffering is not actually ‘known’ by another person. In war, the use of language may ‘silence’ the pain of others by using names which remove the reality of bodies and pain: the Battle of Tannenberg being called ‘The Day of Harvesting’, or prisoners subjected to medical experiments being called ‘logs’, or Japanese suicide planes being called ‘night blossoms’ are such examples (1985: 66). Vegetation is often conceived of as immune to pain, and not-sentient; such metaphors thus serve not only to render the injured people alien ‘Others’, but also to conceptually remove them from feeling pain, or even knowing what is happening – this attempts to remove the reality of two traumatic events happening in these acts, both the pain of those who are injured, and also possibly that of those who are doing the injuring (1985: 66). Most of Scarry’s focus on

pain is concerned with torture (the intentional infliction of pain), which she sees as being less about 'interrogation' which is concerned with the control over language/information, and more about power – over the body, the pain, the language and the ability to control it, the bringing about of the prisoner's loss of 'world' (1985: 35). If the pain becomes associated with something outside of the body of the one in pain, then that which causes pain is seen to be more certain, more powerful, than it otherwise would – this is what Scarry refers to as 'analogical verification' or 'analogical substantiation' (1985: 13-14). Power is seen as being more 'real' if it is demonstrated as the power to cause pain. While this 'slipping' from being brought into language and thus also being appropriated by power is a danger, Scarry sees this only as a reiteration of the importance of bringing pain into language, but voicing it in terms that resist power, rather than enforce an image of it.

Among those who attempt to bring pain into language, the first are those who speak for themselves – the testimonies of those who have been in pain, who bear witness to their own experiences. All others are in one way or another bearing witness on behalf of another's pain. Scarry includes the transcripts of trials, medics, those campaigning against suffering (her example is Amnesty International), and also the work of artists, as examples of discourses in which there are concerted efforts to describe pain, represent it (1985: 6-9). I would add to this list, if only to offer academic discourses, Scarry's book itself is such an example. The need to express pain is always political – by which Scarry asserts that it always should aim to prevent the appropriation of pain in political power, and should always aim to make the power to inflict pain something abhorrent, aligning sympathy with the injured, rather than with the one doing the injuring, for whatever reasons (1985: 14). Testimony becomes a means not only of 'talking back' to power or the appropriation of pain, but also a means of bearing witness to humanity's simultaneous vulnerability, and concepts of justice: "Physical pain has no voice, but when it at last finds a voice, it begins to tell a story, and the story that it tells is about the inseparability of [pain, politics, the capacity to create and destroy], their embeddedness in one another." (1985: 3). Ultimately for Scarry, language serves to make the interior lives and ways of knowing and experiences of others visible to us, and the destruction of another's language, what they have said or their capacity to speak, serves to make them – their interior existence, their 'selves' – invisible.

Both Praeg and Scarry are engaging with the question of how to bring the outside of language in, or, how to bear witness (in language) to what is posited as outside of

language. Language is lost, because it is in contrast to the ‘usual’, ‘everyday’ in which language suffices. For Praeg the question concerns horror, with Scarry, pain. Both touch on the experience of Otherness, alienation, isolation that occurs – both the solitude of being outside of language, and the separating out, alienating, those who are seen as inhuman. For Scarry bringing pain into language is a question that begins with the individual in pain, bearing witness for oneself. Praeg’s concern with horror and agitation is from the perspective of bearing witness to others – seeing violence, rather than being in pain oneself. Both are concerned with the bodily – the felt experience of pain, and the experience of agitation – and both situate a destabilising of language in these experiences. For Scarry there is an imperative need to recall the body, the actual experience of pain, if testimony does not do this it runs the risk of representing events *only* in terms of an exercise in power, something which only perpetuates the ‘invisibility’ of pain. But between the difficulty of bearing witness for oneself, and bearing witness for others, the ‘problem of testimony’ is what space exists for testimony between these two. The definition of silence here sets it in opposition to a ‘normal’ state of language, the ability to speak about experience, and the loss of that ability. For someone to be in this space of silence is for them to be utterly isolated, cut off from community.

### ***The Barber of Treblinka***

This section turns to explicitly engage with testimony and silence, beginning with an article by Carles Torner The Silence of Abraham Bomba (2009). A number of silences are present in this article, and through them it is possible to perceive the differences between what is otherwise grouped together. The first part of this article is a close description of several minutes from the film Shoah (1985) – Torner giving both the dialogue and a narrative of what is occurring, and his own experiences watching this. The latter part of the article is Torner’s continued musings on questions of translation, and testimony, and the importance of translating the words of witnesses, making them available. I reference this article because it provides if only a brief glimpse of the distinction between different silences, such as I have been trying to make clear in distinguishing between ‘unspeakable evil’, ‘indescribable pain’, and a wider notion of ‘structural silences’.

We can begin with the silences of Abraham Bomba himself (the silences involved in the testimony given by Bomba, rather than Torner’s commentary). The first is the

circumnavigating of a question: as Bomba relates how he was a barber at Treblinka, and describes the cutting of the hair of the women who would soon be gassed, Lanzmann asks 'What did you feel the first time...?' (2009). Instead of answering, Bomba continues to relate the story – details of how the hair was cut, the instruments used, how many women there were (2009). Bomba is not 'silent' inasmuch as he continues to talk, and his story is not interrupted, but the question goes unanswered. When Lanzmann returns him to the question ('What did you feel?'), he replies that there was no feeling, that "It was very hard to feel anything, because working there day and night between dead people, between bodies, your feeling disappeared, you were dead. You had no feeling at all." (2009). And yet his reticence at answering the question (that he does not immediately reply with 'You had no feeling at all') implies that this 'feeling nothing' is both painful and complicated – an issue borne out in his later silences, and obvious distress during the re-telling of his story.

The next silence in this testimony is a more obvious silence than the ignoring of a question. When relating the incident of another barber who encountered his wife and sister in the gas chamber, Bomba's voice breaks, and he stops speaking. For several minutes during this interview, which are not cut, Abraham Bomba says nothing. When coaxed by Lanzmann, he at first refuses to continue: "It's too horrible ... I won't be able to do it... Don't make me go on please." (2009). Lanzmann both apologises, and insists that he must continue: "You have to do it. I know it's very hard. I know, and I apologize.... Please. We must go on." (2009). What is 'in' this silence is difficult to say – by this I mean that a listener cannot know what is not being said, but that Bomba grapples with what he is not saying. Torner sees much in this silence, in particular he sees solitude:

'I tell you something,' he said. No, it cannot be told. Not from any made-up impossibility, not because language has theoretical limits, not because what must be said seems, when considered, beyond the reach of words. Not at all. What's unspeakable here is [...] extremely concrete: it is he, Abraham Bomba [...] he is the one who cannot speak. He is the one who was forced to silence. He is the one who collapses when he has no more words, nothing to convey what he's lived through: "What could you tell them?..." This is silence, faced with extremity: Abraham Bomba's broken voice. Yet no one can speak in his stead. His solitude is endless. When he spoke before, his voice [...] was already informing us: this man has gone beyond all solitude. But he has gone even farther, [...] he's relived his

actions as the barber of Treblinka [...] And he stopped talking: he was reunited with his inner silence. That memory is beyond reach. He is quiet now, before us. We are quiet with him. (2009)

Torner separates this silence here from 'theoretical' silences, 'the limits of language', and situates it in Bomba's experience – this 'breaking voice', this being 'forced to silence', this 'endless solitude'. In part this passage touches on the experience of 're-living' an experience as one re-tells it – a 're-living' which draws him away from those listening to him (Lanzmann, the cameraman, the other people in the room), into a past that they do not have access to, a memory that they cannot touch (or even imagine unless he speaks of it). Torner phrases this as 'his inner silence', something more often associated with peace, or self-reflection, but here transformed into something painful which he cannot easily share in speech. The solitude of this silence is the barrier it marks between Bomba and those watching him – those who 'are quiet with him', listening. It is this 'solitude', this isolation or separation from others, which silence comes to symbolise both here and in later testimonies also. There is another instance in Torner's article where 'solitude' is mentioned – in the preface to Torner's book, Lanzmann states that "[w]hat I find devastating in your book [...] is your solitude, your way of saying 'I,' of personally implicating yourself—your sincerity." (2009). In placing himself in the narrative – as a witness to Bomba's silence, even at the remove of a television screen – Torner makes his presence explicit. He is there, watching, listening. But writing 'I' also makes the experience particular, his alone, even if it might be shared or reproduced by others, in other times or places. But Torner also speaks in the plural, as one among other viewers – "He is quiet now, before us. We are quiet with him." (2009). But Torner's solitude in saying 'I' is not the same solitude as is present in Bomba's silence.

What leads him into this silence is a question, one which is answered with silence: "I knew them; [...] I lived with them in my street, and some of them were my close friends. And when they saw me, they started asking me, Abe this and Abe that—"What's going to happen to us?" What could you tell them? What could you tell?" (2009). The question of what could be answered in such a situation is left unanswered by Torner, he breaks off his commentary as Lanzmann reiterates the question 'What was his answer when his wife and sister came?'. Torner does not continue from this question – leaving the reader to contemplate it – but in the original testimony the

answer is also silent. The barbers have been told to act as though the women will simply have a shower after their hair is cut, they are not allowed to tell them that they will die soon, or are 'already dead', and so they try to 'do the best ... the most human we could'[sic], and when the barber is confronted by his wife and sister, he does not answer them, but pauses a moment longer over them, he says nothing, and kisses them goodbye (Lanzmann 1995: 103-8).

Torner describes Lanzmann as a 'guardian' of silence, someone who films it, frames it, and 'passes it on' (2009). What he is passing on is something in the silence, and around it – the words that lead into it ('what can you tell them?'), and the ones that lead out. Abraham Bomba's voice breaks, and in his own time he finds it again, although his first words are not ones that the translators can identify:

He wipes his face with the towel. He's speaking at last. At last? He murmurs his words. It's not English anymore. What language is it? I don't understand a thing. Lanzmann doesn't subtitle those words. Why? Aren't they words, like any other? Is it Yiddish, Hebrew? German? Polish? Does Lanzmann no longer understand either? After this uncomprehended murmur, Abraham Bomba takes command. He gives Lanzmann an order, in English now: Okay, go ahead. (2009)

These murmured 'words like any others' except the translator cannot even identify their language, are 'silent' insofar as they do not disclose meaning, but they shift Bomba from his silence, and his insistence that he cannot speak, back into the narrative he was telling, back into the story. Perhaps they are Polish, or Yiddish, or some non-lexical vocables, they are an utterance that disrupts the English of the interview, and come out of the silence which he struggles to break. It is the shift between languages, interpretation and translation – the question of translating silences – which Torner is trying to work through in relation to this testimony.

The interval when Abraham Bomba literally says nothing, the moment when he circumnavigates a question put directly to him, his untranslatable murmurs, and finally the silence of the answer to the question 'What could you tell them? What could you tell?' – these are bound up together, but they are not identical. Separate from these silences are those 'outside' of the testimony: the question of censorship or violent



silencing, the question of translation raised by Carles Torner, and lastly, if only briefly, the silence of listening.

It is because of the unavailability of the film Shoah (from which Abraham Bomba's testimony is taken) in Spain that Torner comes to reflect on the necessity of translation. When the film was first screened in Madrid, the police did not prevent Castilian fascists (wearing brown shirts and swastikas) from handing out revisionist pamphlets, the second half of the film was never screened because of a bomb-scare, and when it was finally broadcast on national television it was at two in the morning (2009). Though not described in such terms by Torner, there is a silencing here, one that Torner is attempting to break. But this silencing is not like Bomba's loss of words, nor the hanging question 'what do you tell....?' – it is conceived of as a silence because what is seen to *counter* it is words, stories, testimony. Although, here, what faces the silencing is the silence of Abraham Bomba.

This is the context which gives rise to Torner's belief in the necessity of translation, the necessity of continuing to 'pass on' testimony even when it consists of silence. Torner screens the film, from a VHS tape, in a classroom, giving simultaneous translation (2009). In doing so, his voice rides over Bomba's, but without his voice the audience could not understand what he is saying. This 'problem' of the translator's voice overlaying the original speaker it also carried to the significance of their silences:

[M]y voice settled on that of Abraham Bomba. [...] Bomba's voice broke. That silence had surfaced, untouchable. [...] I fell silent in turn, lost. My silence settled on that of Abraham Bomba. How to translate that silence except with my own? [...] But his silence and mine had no common measure. What was I doing there, in the dark, trying to translate? (2009).

He is silent because he is a translator, and there were no words to be translated. His uncertainty in the situation circles around how to translate a silence: should you fill it with explanation, and does the translator's own silence come to be measured against the silence of the voice they are translating. But in falling silent he allows his audience to hear Bomba's silence, and having understood what he has been saying up to that point, apprehend this 'breaking' of his voice. This is 'live' translation, where it is obvious to the audience watching a television screen that Bomba stops speaking, that

he wipes his eyes, and shakes his head – they can *see* that he is saying nothing. Written translation is a different issue – where ellipses, or [silence], or other forms of representing gaps might be used. Bomba's silence does not need to be 'translated', because Torner has translated its context – the story that breaks in the middle. It is unclear whether, in the room where Abraham Bomba is giving his testimony (in a barber shop), the other individuals present understand English, or understand the story that is being related in their presence – what meaning they therefore make of his tears, his loss of words.

The last silence present here is the silence of the audience – the individuals for whom Torner is translating, listening to these words, and the moments when there are none.

It was silent, too—a dense silence, a clear sign of respect. It was almost palpable, the way we listened; you could feel it in the air. [...] The silence in the classroom was telling: we had walked through the door of the film with the witness, [...] to that place no one left. Something had been passed on. (2009)

Here the 'dense', 'respectful', 'palpable', 'telling' silence is the silence of listening. It is not any of the previous silences, it is not the loss of language (though members of the audience may well be left not knowing what to say), it is not Abraham Bomba's silence, nor Carles Torner's as he wonders how to translate, nor is it 'silencing'. It is a silence which makes space for Bomba's words, and the moments when he is at a loss for them, where he himself is borne witness to. Torner writes that 'something has been passed on' – something communicated, even without words (perhaps such silences have no foreign language). But in writing 'something', what it is is rendered uncertain – a feeling, the imagining of a memory, some 'knowledge' of events, some story – perhaps something slightly different is apprehended by each listener.

Bomba does not say the word 'evil' in this testimony – what he refers to are the specifics of his experience, the cutting of women's hair in Treblinka before they died. The story he falters in the telling of is of his friend's meeting with his wife and sister – and yet what is evident in Bomba's silence is his own pain, his own grappling with

language. He speaks simultaneously of himself and others, because the two cannot be prised apart in this testimony. Even when saying that he felt nothing while cutting their hair, in this he speaks both of himself, and the women. Bomba speaks of what he 'cannot' do – during his silence he says once or twice that he cannot say more – and yet he does continue to speak (though whether he says all that he was thinking is not something that can be known). Torner turns to the question of impossibilities through the question of the translatable and untranslatable (not only what can be moved between languages, but perhaps also out of silence). But for Torner this is not a question: "We must leave the choice between the translatable and untranslatable behind, and take charge of the exercise of translation itself..." (2009). In response to the question of the untranslatable, one can only attempt to translate.

Between the unspeakability of evil, and the inexpressibility of pain, what is left for testimony? Between the horror at what has happened to others, and one's own pain, if both are difficult to put into words, what can be said? I have been discussing two silences which could be described as a traumatic loss of language – the difficulty of describing pain, and the difficulty of speaking of horror. I distinguish this from 'structural' silences of censorship or oppression, where speech is physically or socially prevented or devalued, where silences are instituted. I have not examined the latter so closely, in part because of the limits of space, and also because these silences are extensively studied elsewhere. Between the difficulty of bearing witness to oneself, and the difficulty of bearing witness to others, how is there testimony? This is in part the question which drives Agamben's Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive (2002), which is why I turn to it now. The 'impossibility' of testimony is a central question to this work; the sense of this 'impossibility' circles around several silences – the silence of the dead and the impossibility of bearing witness to one's own death; the silence of the prisoners identified as *Muselmanner*, and their 'unrepresentability'; and a silence which Agamben posits as being tied up in every act of speech. My purpose in examining this book is not to engage with Agamben's theories more generally, but to work through the particular place of silence in this particular work. In this book he circles around the figure of the *Muselmanner* – the prisoners in the camp who come to symbolise not only utter dehumanisation, but also those who others could not bear witness to, and were incapable of bearing witness to themselves. Drawing on Ryn and Klodzinski's work which focuses entirely on understanding the *Muselmanner*, including offering their own testimony, I work through the extent to which this representation of *Muselmanner* is at times in

contradiction to Agamben, and reflect on what implications this other ‘image’ of *Muselmanner* has for thinking of this ‘silence’.

## ***Silence in Auschwitz***

In order to examine testimony, Agamben interrogates language, or rather, specifically, what it means to have language – or to not have it. Returning to Aristotle’s definition of humans as *zōon logon echōn*, he focuses not on language (*logos*), or the living being (*zōon*), but specifically on *echōn* – on the *having* (2002: 128-9). It is this relation between language and living – the point where the two coexist – that he seeks to further understand: “How can a living being *have* language? What can it mean for a living being to speak?” (2002: 129). Agamben’s response is that in order to be a ‘speaking being’, the ‘living being’ must fall silent (2002: 129). This silence of the living being is created by the desubjectification that occurs when the being enters into language, separating its linguistic self from its living self. He draws out this concept through a discussion of what it means to refer to oneself as ‘I’. Like Walsh, Agamben is concerned with deictic words, which are termed ‘shifters’ in this work – the words which derive meaning from context, such as the pronouns ‘I’ or ‘you’, or indicators such as ‘here’ or ‘now’. These words allow the speaker to appropriate language, but Agamben also translates their reliance on context for meaning as resulting in their having no ‘real’ lexical definition (2002: 115). What he is most concerned with is the pronoun ‘I’, and what it means to associate oneself with ‘I’. He draws on Benveniste to question not only what ‘I’ refers to, but also to what this means for ‘enunciation’ – the taking place of language, the event of speaking (2002: 116). One can enunciate (enter into the act of speaking) only in associating oneself with the event of saying, but not with what is said, according to Agamben (2002: 116). In stepping into language, in uttering ‘I’, the living being is ‘abolished’, leaving only a being which exists in language: “The subject of enunciation is composed of discourse and exists in discourse alone. But, for this very reason, once the subject is in discourse, he can say nothing; he cannot speak.” (2002: 117), presumably because it is only the living being who has experiences, knowledge, something to say. But it is language which offers a way of saying. The living individual sheds themselves of their ‘real individuality’ in order to identify themselves with the ‘I’, which signifies the self which is speaking (2002: 16). Once speaking, this individual is stripped of all extra-linguistic meaning

(2002: 16). Agamben expresses this in terms of it being ‘not the individual, but language’ who speaks (2002: 117).

Once in language, there is nothing outside of it, except the living, and so this is isolated, alienated. In speaking, one accesses the language which nevertheless also contains a ‘glossolalic potentiality’ in it – the possibility of meaninglessness, or babble (2002: 116). One is trapped, between being outside of language and therefore being without speech, or entering into language, but still with the possibility of this language being un-interpretable. It is this separation of the self in the moment it enunciates ‘I’, therefore associating itself with linguistic identity and not with the extra-linguistic being, that Agamben interprets as simultaneous subjectification (the coming into being of the subject in language) and desubjectification (the dissolution of the being which is living, and which remains outside of language). But it is the living being who ‘knows’, and this creates an unsettling contradiction: “a subject [...] has the form of a disjunction between knowing and saying. For the one who knows, it is felt as an impossibility of speaking; for the one who speaks, it is experienced as an equally bitter impossibility to know.” (2002: 123). What we experience as living beings, we know of ourselves, but in language we can never fully apprehend other’s experiences because language cannot recreate experience – there is thus an isolation entangled here, that even speaking, one remains alone.

Experience becomes separated from language. Speaking is both fundamental to being human and that which human beings nevertheless experience as problematic, unsettling. Language is fragile, our presence in language is fragile – and it is this fragility which is part of its basis – we slip between worlds (living and linguistic). Consciousness exists in the disjunction between knowing and saying. ‘Knowledge’, in these terms, cannot be communicated through language, the thing and the name of the thing are not equivalent. But nevertheless we recognise (know again) through language. Language is always approximate – it always gestures, mimes, mimics, rather than simply discloses. But also, because we can conceive of language not-working, surely this also depends upon us feeling that sometimes it is sufficient – it must do, because here I am, writing this, there you are reading, and we both trust we are connected to an intent behind what is being said. There is enough equivalence for us to be able to contemplate the distinction between true and false, and lies. Language gestures, and sometimes we see what it is pointing to. But this is experienced as problematic precisely in those situations when to communicate is felt as an *imperative* – when an ethical boundary is reached, when one’s humanity is questioned, when the

need to bear witness is felt. The need for a listener, for comprehension, to not be alone in the isolation which silence is seen to engender here.

Drawing on religious analogies, Agamben parallels this desubjectification at the heart of speech to glossolalia (*lalein glōssē*), speaking in tongues, in which the speaker neither knows what is being said, nor can they be understood (2002: 114). Agamben draws on a quote from Paul's Letter to the Corinthians: "If I know not the meaning of the voice, I shall be unto him that speaketh a barbarian, and he that speaketh shall be a barbarian unto me." (14:11) (in Agamben 2002: 114). There is in speech something 'barbaric', that is, foreign – the word 'barbarian' originally means someone who lacks *logos*, who cannot speak (Heath 2005: 199). For Agamben the 'barbarisation' of language is the speaking subject's being taken over by another, 'unspeaking' or at least incomprehensible, being – 'a child, angel, or barbarian' (2002: 114). Language continually runs the risk of slipping into incomprehensibility. There is something which intrigues me though, in Paul's description: *barbarity is the position of both speaker of and listener to a meaningless voice*. In being present to, in witnessing an obscure voice, one is a barbarian oneself. This intrigues me because both speaker and listener (and the language between them) are rendered Other. This was a similar issue to what I brought up when discussing animals – and the 'silence' of language before them, because in being outside of it, they do not apprehend the world that we see through it, making humans silent also, since their sounds are not apprehended as anything other than just sound.

And it is at this point that Agamben returns us to testimony, because testimony occurs in the disjunction between the living being and language (2002: 130). It is precisely because there is an irreconcilable gap between *phone* and *logos*, the living and the speaking and the inhuman and the human, that in this gap there can be testimony (2002: 130). Agamben is saying that what is experienced as the loss of language in trauma is actually the coming to the fore of an aspect of Being which is constantly present – being living and being in language cannot be mapped onto one another, and in testimony this is highlighted and also made into an ethical situation, since it brings to the fore the ethical imperative to bear witness, to speak testimony, creating language in that space between what has been said, what is sayable, and what has happened.

I would prefer to think in terms of testimony existing *despite* this disjunction, rather than because of it. The discussion of the 'split' between the 'living being' and

‘speaking being’ – as though this was two separate beings rather than always one – takes the question of how to bring experience into language, and sets it as a fundamental question that is always at issue, in any utterance. There may always be this question of how to map ‘living’ into ‘language’ – how to give it meaning or make it communicable – but it is in testimony that we could say it reaches a crisis. As I have already discussed in reference to Praeg and Scarry, experiences of pain, and horror (precisely instances where we think of ‘*language*’ in terms of being ‘*testimony*’) are bound up with their own ‘indescribability’. It is worth recalling that the word *crisis* is tied up with the point of making a decision (Chambers 2010: 235), and to recall also Torner’s ‘crisis’, that when faced with the question of the translatable and untranslatable, he chose to continue to translate (2009). Faced with Bomba’s testimony, including his silences, and his unknown murmur (‘*barbaric*’ in the sense of foreign, ‘*glossolalic*’ in the sense of ‘meaningless’ to the hearer), Torner translates what he can, describes what he can, ‘passes on’ both the testimony and the question of translation.

Agamben’s discussion of a split between biological existence and a sense of subjectivity manifested in the enunciation of the first person pronoun (I) might not be identical with the ‘mind body split’ (in that it combines some aspects of the mind (knowledge) with the body), but it does create a division and set it as foundational to being human (as opposed to animal). To an extent, Agamben is creating this dichotomy so that he can examine the living being – the human which is stripped of humanity, which is inhuman(e). The human being who is only a living being. To return to Aristotle’s assertion that all animals have Voice, and only humans have Language (and all that Language therefore can create), a question which is perhaps at the heart of all of this discussion, though not rendered explicit, is what is the human Voice? Perhaps the question is what is a ‘natural’ expression – given that even cries of pain and laughter are affected by culture – Agamben is seeking to identify the human Voice, in part to negotiate a far wider pattern concerned with the excluded – with *zoē*, and the *Muselmanner*, which I shall come to shortly – the bare life, which is situated as Other, excluded, and yet is nevertheless what remains when everything else is taken away. Agamben frames this question of the ‘speaking living being’ with his examination of Auschwitz, and the figure of the *Muselmanner* specifically. The relation between atrocity (Auschwitz in the particular) and language, and also between bearing witness (implying speaking of an event) and witnessing (seeing an event), is what leads Agamben to discuss the speaking living being in the first place. It is from his discussion of Auschwitz that he draws his examples for his later discussions, and

which also preoccupies him when he is contemplating the consequences and implications of his work.

Agamben tends to use spatial metaphors to describe many of the concepts that he is working with, the most prevalent descriptors being liminal spaces, non-coincidence, and gaps (aporia and lacuna) – these spaces, and the concept of ‘being between’ recur a great deal in this work. Like silence, these are negative spaces, and much of Agamben’s discussion progresses apophatically – with attention to what *it is not* outlining the space where something *is*. He tends to identify or describe a binary opposition, and to insist on the need to traverse between the two contrasting positions. He describes the ‘aporia of Auschwitz’ as ‘the aporia of historical knowledge’, which is the ‘non-coincidence between facts and truth, between verification and comprehension’ (2002: 12). For Agamben, describing something is fundamentally not the same as understanding it. This is one of the precepts with which he introduces this work – that despite the abundance of material information about Auschwitz, the ‘human understanding’ is harder to determine (2002: 11).

Some want to understand too much and too quickly; they have explanations for everything. Others refuse to understand; they offer only cheap mystifications. The only way forward lies in investigating the space between these two options. Moreover, a further difficulty must be considered, [... m]any testimonies – both of executioners and victims – come from ordinary people, the ‘obscure’ people who clearly comprised the great majority of camp inhabitants. One of the lessons of Auschwitz is that it is infinitely harder to grasp the mind of an ordinary person than to understand the mind of a Spinoza or Dante. (Hannah Arendt’s discussion of the ‘banality of evil’, so often misunderstood, must also be understood in this sense.) (2002: 13)

In this passage, Agamben is arguing for the need to neither presume everything has been (possibly even can be) explained, while at the same time not simply accepting that something is somehow ‘unknowable’. Between self-assured assertions that because something has been described, it has therefore been ‘explained’ or solved, and on the other hand, the creation of what Agamben might term an ‘unsayable’ by insisting that there can be no explanation, no comprehension, no apt description that captures the true essence. Between explanation and mystification, Agamben is advocating a constant criticism of both.



But there is the ‘further difficulty’, which Agamben identifies as the ‘obscurity’ of testimony. His use of ‘obscure’ in this instance is a reference back to the testimony of Zelman Lewental, who describes himself and those who have lived in the camps and worked as part of the *Sonderkommando*, as ‘we, the small group of obscure people who will not give historians much work to do.’ (2002: 12).<sup>25</sup> It is worth recalling that the etymological origins of ‘obscure’ tie it back to meanings of concealment, darkness (Chambers 2010: 719). Agamben interprets Lewental’s use of it in the sense of invisibility (2002: 12), but for Agamben, the ‘obscure’ are no ‘small group’, but are the greater proportion of those who both lived and died within the camp. Testimony is largely produced by ‘ordinary’ people, not philosophers and poets (Agamben’s ‘Spinoza or Dante’). The obscureness of the ordinary, like Carson’s catastrophic speech, unpredictable and uncertain testimony can be both difficult to situate into wider frames of meaning, but it is also these areas of tentative description that disrupt the presupposition that you already know what is being described. This is not to say that it is unknowable, but that catastrophic speech, and ‘obscure’ testimony, force one to confront the unfamiliar, or at least the uncanny. Thinking through this reference to the ‘banality of evil’, it is perhaps useful to keep in mind the etymology of the two words – banal and evil. I already touched on this in my discussion of Praeg. The etymology of ‘evil’ aligns it with ‘utter’, meaning to ‘put outside’, beyond a threshold (as in to utter currency, and speech), to be Other. ‘Banal’ shares its root with abandon, but more specifically, with being given over to the common (as opposed to kept under ban, the preserve of a lord). If the banality of evil is that Otherness should be common, this also is in keeping with the observation of the strangeness of the ‘ordinary’.

The aporia of Auschwitz – of historical knowledge – is the uncertain space that is negotiated between description and understanding. Agamben’s refusal to accept that ‘everything has been explained’ (something he reiterates in his discussion of the

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<sup>25</sup> There are in fact two, contradictory, translations of Lewental’s testimony. The one provided in other sources does not translate Lewental as saying that the small group will give ‘little work to do’, but rather that he hopes that his testimony shall give an insight into his experiences, actively giving researchers material specificities to think through: “No one can imagine the events that occurred, because it is unimaginable to exactly recount our experiences .... However, we – the small group of grey people – will present the historian with quite a task, as well as the psychologist interested in learning of man’s mental condition while practicing such terrible, dirty work. Who knows whether these researchers will ever get to the truth, whether anyone will ever be able to.” (Lewental in Gutman and Berenbaum 1994: 373). Presenting the historian with ‘quite a task’ appears to be the opposite of Agamben’s translation: ‘we... will not give the historian much work to do’.

distinction between juridical and ethical concepts), but equally any tendencies to 'mystify' the situation and render it fundamentally inexplicable, is further expanded in his engagement with the 'unsayable'. His discussion of Chrysostom's 'unsayable' is in response to a letter accusing him of attempting to 'ruin the unique and unsayable character of Auschwitz' (2002: 31), and focuses on the 'unsayable' in terms of euphemism, and its etymological root, *euphemein* (2002: 32). "To say that Auschwitz is 'unsayable' or 'incomprehensible' is equivalent to *euphemein*, to adoring in silence, as one does with a God. Regardless of one's intentions, this contributes to its glory." (2002: 32-3). The aura of the sacred or the profane is one that Agamben is quick to interrogate, as can be seen in his discussions of the danger of instituting a definition of humanity which excludes some part of humanity (the danger of abjecting portions of humanity due to definitions of humanity which rest on concepts of dignity). While Agamben argues that testimony does have to grapple with the limits of language ('the test of an impossibility of speaking' (2002: 146)), he is insistent on the difference of this from 'unsayability', and warns that in "... joining uniqueness to unsayability, they transform Auschwitz into a reality absolutely separated from language ... they break [what] constitutes testimony, then they unconsciously repeat the Nazi's gesture [of silencing]." (2002: 157). Durantaye argues that Agamben's concept of the 'unsayable' is of an arbitrary boundary that effectively perpetuates a silence, rather than examining it, or even engaging with it:

[I]n virtually all of Agamben's works... the Benjaminian project of "eliminating the unsayable" is continued. In [...] earlier instances the concern was a general one: "eliminating" the idea that language carried a concealed secret, a transcendent formula, a sacred kernel that it was humanity's task to uncover. In *Remnants of Auschwitz* what is at issue is the elimination of something more concretely unsayable. For Benjamin, as for Agamben, *the "unsayable" is an illusion fostered by an idea of the sacred*. ... For Agamben, to leave Auschwitz in silence, to raise or lower it to the status of the "unsayable," not only repeats the gesture of the Nazis endeavouring to consign those who perished there to oblivion, but also plays into the hands of those today who would strive to negate the Holocaust. (Durantaye 2009: 294, italics added)

Instituting an 'unsayability' around Auschwitz functions as a form of censorship, as well as colluding in the Nazi project of attempting to eliminate the voices of those killed. In this, Agamben's 'unsayable' is like the 'structured silences' I referred to

earlier, in as much as it is a silencing, an institution of a silence. Here the ‘unsayable’ is a taboo, though one linked to concepts of the sacred, the set apart.

To reiterate, Agamben’s engagement with silence in this context is not the same as my previous exploration of the silence I termed ‘agnostic’, despite the use of religious terms; I do not seek to create ‘an illusion of the sacred’, but to explore the concept of the silence of the unknown. Agamben is engaging with a specific historical event, and with the possibilities of testimony in the case of atrocity; the use of ‘silence’ is situated in this context, and should be distinguished by the fact that what is being engaged with here is the *loss* of language, loss of life or ‘humanity’, not its absence.

### ***Lacuna and Liminal Spaces***

Agamben tends to use in-between spaces to describe a number of his concepts – to some extent he describes testimony apophatically: not primarily through discussing the testimony itself, but in examining the points at which testimony fails – its holes, and limits. The lacuna of testimony, as it is termed in this work, is what Agamben calls the ‘impossibilities’ of testimony – a point from which testimony cannot originate, or where language fails. The first is the impossibility of testifying to one’s own death – the dead do not bear witness. The second is the silence of the witnesses – those who have ‘seen the Gorgon’. The distinction between the inability for the dead to testify, and yet also the difficulty in testifying ‘to the dead’ is at times blurred in Agamben’s discussion, in part because the ‘figure of the dead’ at times encompasses those who are seen as being not wholly alive anymore, regardless of physiological undeadness, and the survivor, the witness, the dead, the drowned, tend to merge.

The first impossibility of testimony is the inability to testify to one’s own death, which Agamben describes as ‘calling into question the very meaning of testimony’ and the ‘reliability of the witnesses’ (2002: 33). This is not because witnesses are lying or unreliable, but because there are limits to what they can bear witness to. Agamben draws on Primo Levi’s testimony to describe the concept of the ‘complete witness’:

...witnesses are by definition survivors and so all, to some degree, enjoyed a privilege .... No one has told the destiny of the common prisoner, since it was not materially possible for him to survive .... I have

also described the common prisoner when I speak of ‘Muslims’;<sup>26</sup> but the Muslims did not speak .... I must repeat: we, the survivors, are not the true witnesses .... We survivors are not only exiguous but also an anomalous minority: we are those who by their prevarications or abilities or good luck did not touch bottom. Those who did so, those who saw the Gorgon, have not returned to tell about it or have returned mute, but they are the Muslims, the submerged, the complete witnesses, the ones whose deposition would have a general significance. They are the rule, we are the exception .... We who were favoured by fate tried, with more or less wisdom, to recount not only our fate but also that of the others, indeed of the drowned; but this was a discourse ‘on behalf of third parties’ .... The destruction brought to an end... was not told by anyone, just as no one ever returned to describe his own death. Even if they had paper and pen, the drowned would not have testified because their death had begun before that of their body. Weeks and months before being snuffed out, they had already lost the ability to observe, to remember, to compare and express themselves. We speak in their stead, by proxy. (Levi in Agamben 2002: 34)

There are no revenants – survivors speak of others’ deaths, not their own. Agamben notes that here Levi is not speaking in the name of justice, or truth, but in the name of lacking testimony – the ‘value’ of testimony is the empty space at its centre, the space where there is no testimony (2002: 34). Agamben introduces the distinction between two words which existed in Latin for ‘witness’, and which describes the difference Levi is alluding to. *Testis* refers to the ‘third party’ in a trial, a witness to an event involving others, and is also the origin of the word ‘testimony’ (2002: 17). The second word is *superstes*, which could denote a survivor, but who because of this is not neutral enough to pass judgement (2002: 17). The witness and the survivor offer two forms of testimony, but when bearing witness to death, there can be no ‘survivor’ testimony. Throughout this book, there is the reiteration of the silence of the dead – regardless of what the dead have seen, in death they cannot speak, and it is in speaking only, and on one’s own behalf, that evidence is taken as ‘true’. It does not permit one’s experience of another’s death as testimony to that death, despite the fact that it remains your own experience, not of your own death, but of another’s. I find this problematic insofar as it creates a silence that need not be there. In separating death

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<sup>26</sup> I will be further discussing the figure of the ‘Muslim’ or ‘Muselmann’ in the next section of this chapter.

out as 'untestifiable', it is rendered similar to Scarry's discussion of the pain of others being something that might be believed, but cannot be known. But both pain and death can be inferred, from bodies, their destruction. In the case of pain, which I discussed with reference to Scarry, it remains possible to attempt to bear witness to oneself, to one's own pain – even though pain borders on the 'indescribable' – it is the point where pain passes over into death that the only witness can be another.<sup>27</sup> The paradox is that in death, it is only by other's speech that we might be borne witness to. We are in another's hands, or in this case, their words.

Speaking by proxy is a recurrent issue in Agamben's engagement with Levi – as is the reiteration of the lack of first-hand testimony of death being intrinsic to what testimony is, and testimony's preoccupation with its own limits. But, drawing on Levi, Agamben explores the concept of the complete witness not as being dead, but in being neither alive nor dead, that is, in being a liminal figure.

The 'true' witnesses, the 'complete witnesses,' are those who did not bear witness and could not bear witness. They are those who 'touched bottom': the Muslims, the drowned. The survivors speak in their stead ... they bear witness to a missing testimony. And yet to speak here of a proxy makes no sense; the drowned have nothing to say, nor do they have instruction or memories to be transmitted. They have no 'story'..., no 'face', and even less do they have 'thought'. (Agamben 2002: 34)

I shall be engaging with this representation of the 'drowned' as without thought, memory, or distinguishing features later in this chapter, but will be focusing at this moment in the shift from the 'drowned' being dead, to being figures of death. There is a distinction between a figure, and what it is encapsulating. It is at this point that we begin to move into the second 'impossibility of testimony' – the silence of the witnesses in the face of death/the dead. Perhaps some of the possible confusion between these two 'impossibilities' of testimony (the silence of the dead, and the silence of the witnesses) arises out of the ambiguity between the difference between witnesses, and those who are bearing witness. To witness is to see (in English, etymologically, it derives from *witan*, to know, understand, or to see (Chambers 2010: 1240-1)), but to *bear* witness is to speak, to testify. The witnesses who cannot bear witness – who cannot carry the narrative of their experience beyond the events, as

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<sup>27</sup> The possibility of someone describing what is happening as they die, to the moment of death, remains a description of pain.

memory and as testimony – are those who have known, but cannot speak, of what they have seen. The second impossibility is the silence of ‘those who have seen the Gorgon and returned mute’, to use Levi’s phrase. To have ‘seen the Gorgon’ implies the witness (the one who has perceived and known), but not one who bears witness – and in this case it is not the dead but the *Muselmanner*, both as ‘mute’ figures close to death, but also the difficulty of bearing witness to them, that Agamben encompasses in this second ‘impossibility of testimony’. For Agamben, testimony exists between these two impossibilities: between ‘the complete witnesses’ and the ‘limits of language’ (2002: 39). Between the ‘everyday’ experience of being unable to describe experience, the crisis of this in trauma, and the point of death where nothing might be said at all.

## *Muselmanner*

At this point I want to focus on the figure that Agamben uses to explore the impossibilities of testimony, namely the *Muselmanner*, those prisoners of the camp who were in the later stages of malnutrition, and who are referred to as ‘living corpses’. Agamben’s second chapter is dedicated to a discussion of the *Muselmanner*, though they are referred to throughout this work. He opens this chapter by describing them as the embodiment of the lacuna in testimony: “The untestifiable, that to which no one has borne witness, has a name. In the jargon of the camp, it is *der Muselmann*...” (2002: 41). While this was not the only epithet<sup>28</sup> in use in the numerous camps, it is the one most commonly referenced in this particular work, perhaps because of its prevalence as a term in Auschwitz, which is the primary focus of Agamben’s work.

I feel that it is necessary to discuss the origin and use of this term, in part because I am uncomfortable with his use of the word *Muselmann* throughout this work – ultimately it does mean ‘Muslim’, and Agamben does not offer any sustained reflection on this in either the historical tradition of orientalism/islamophobia, nor with its situation today. He does mention that the other monikers existed, and also briefly discusses the possible etymologies of the use of ‘*Muselmann*’ in this context, but I do not fully

<sup>28</sup> “Although it was in common use, not all prisoners used this word. They either rebelled against the reality of the camp or they protested against the use of a word from another language and tried to come up with [their own] term. ... Some of these synonyms, at different times and in different camps were: Little Angel [*Englein*] ... Starved [*Hungerleider*], Camel [*Kamel*], ... Cretin [*Kretiner*], Cripple [*Kruppel*], Human Wreck [*menschliches Wrack*], ... Creeping/groveling four-legged creature (creeping animal) [*kriechender Vierbeiner*], Shrivelled Figure [*trockene Figur*]...” (Ryn and Klodzinski 1987: 99)

understand his dismissals, nor the reasons why he hierarchizes them. He dismisses 'muschelmen' – 'shell men', those who have closed in on themselves, or are only an empty shell – as 'rather improbable' despite Levi's use of 'husk men' to describe prisoners also (2002: 45). A correlation is drawn between their tendency to kneel rather than stand, to sway as they stood, clasp their hands over their chests, being reminiscent of 'Islamic prayer rituals'; this is dismissed by Agamben also as being unconvincing (2002: 45). He writes that the 'most likely' reason for the use of '*Muselmann*' is the derivation of 'Muslim' from Arabic, meaning 'one who submits unconditionally to the will of God' (2002: 45). While certainly not excluding the possibility of individuals at Auschwitz either having a knowledge of Arabic, or being aware of the Arabic meaning of 'Muslim' (not only as a denomination for a particular religion), I am struck that *presuming* a knowledge of Arabic as the reason behind the choice of word cannot really be proven. I am also curious as to why the term gained currency ... what were the reasons it was repeated as a suitable moniker, regardless of who first uttered it and their reasons? In Ryn and Klodzinski's article, a number of different monikers are given, and a variety of etymologies for *Musulmanner* are suggested by the survivors, none of whom make any reference to Arabic (1987: 99-100). Regardless of the etymology, the name served to describe these prisoners as Other, strange, and degraded in the eyes of the other prisoners.

I am also intrigued by the other names used to describe these prisoners ... 'mummy-men' and 'living dead' (Carpi in Agamben 2002: 41), 'swimmers' (an interesting counterpoint to 'the drowned'), 'donkeys', 'camels', 'stray dog', 'tired sheiks', 'trinkets' (in Agamben 2002: 44). Most of these names reiterate the Otherness of these prisoners – as foreign, disabled, un-living, objects or animals. Among these different terms for these prisoners, Agamben returns to and reiterates *Muselmanner*, but there is a point where he is not talking about 'real' *Muselmanner* – or witnesses – he is talking about them in the generic, as symbolic figures of human positions – human suffering, the human capacity to speak, to lose speech, and be pained and survive. I will attempt to use the plural *Muselmanner* because Agamben's use of the singular tends to render them into a metaphorical figure, a singular image which is removed from any individual, yet standing for a group. In using a singular 'the *Muselmann*', 'the Muslim', and speaking of what 'he' is, what he does and sees, removed from testimony of any actual individual, Agamben reduces the plurality of the group this is standing for into a single trope. The *Muselmanner* represent the 'untestifyable', the 'drowned', those who have lost the possibility of speaking or bearing witness. In establishing a description of the *Muselmanner*, Agamben draws on a number of

testimonies, including that of Amery, Carpi, Ryn and Klodzinski, and finally Levi (2002: 41-4) – it is however Levi's testimony that he returns to on a number of occasions, and whose descriptions he continues to ponder and reiterate:

All the *Muselmanner* who finished in the gas chambers have the same story, or more exactly, have no story; they followed the slope down to the bottom, like streams that run down to the sea. On their entry into the camp, through basic incapacity, or by misfortune, or through some banal incident, they are overcome before they can adapt themselves.... the *Muselmanner*, the drowned, form the backbone of the camp, an anonymous mass, continually renewed and always identical, of non-men who march and labour in silence, the divine spark dead in them, already too empty to really suffer. One hesitates to call them living: one hesitates to call their death death, in the face of which they have no fear, as they are too tired to understand. / They crowd my memory with their faceless presence, and if I could enclose all the evil of our time in one image, I would choose this image which is familiar to me: an emaciated man, with head dropped and shoulders curved, on whose face and in whose eyes not a trace of thought is to be seen. (Levi in Agamben 2002: 44).

This description of the *Muselmanner*, as an anonymous mass, identical, faceless, inhuman, lifeless, gaze-less, unthinking, unfeeling, and silent, is one that is worth reflecting on. To recall Praeg's engagement with 'evil', this description also describes horror, agitation, an 'image of evil'. 'Evil' here is seen in something frightening, horrifying, even though any blame is removed from the *Muselmanner* and displaced onto whoever has created them. But also it is a description that effaces, or perhaps masks, any story, any name, or engages with them as anything other than all alike, all barely alive. To some extent this resembles the description of the *Muselmanner* which Agamben gives in the closing section of Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life (1998), where he briefly introduces them as a figure of the *homo sacer* within the camp, a figure of life within the biopolitical paradigm. He describes the *Muselmanner* here as ones who:

[N]o longer belong to the world of men in any way; he does not even belong to the threatened and precarious world of the camp inhabitants who have forgotten him from the very beginning. Mute and absolutely alone, he has passed into another world without memory and without



grief. .../ What is the life of the *Muselmann*? Can one say that it is pure *zoē*? Nothing 'natural' or 'common', however, is left in him; nothing animal or instinctual remains in his life. All his instincts are cancelled along with his reason ... we can say that he moved in absolute indistinction of fact and law ... of nature and politics. Because of this, the guard suddenly seems powerless before him, as if stuck by the thought that the *Muselmann*'s behaviour – which does not register any difference between an order and the cold – might perhaps be a silent form of resistance. (1998: 185)

Again the *Muselmanner* are described as being without thought (even, here, without instinct), feeling, memory, speech – but what is this silent resistance that arises from no will, or impulse, but out of indifference? What is the resistance in the incapacity to distinguish any more between the pressing cold, and the violence of the guard; what is the form of life which is *zoē* yet which is not common, natural, animal, or instinctual? Without memory, or grief (is grief a type of pain, or an emotion?) Discussing the *Muselmanner* also occurs in the discussion of the 'appropriate' discipline to discuss *Muselmanner*. Wadislav Fejkiel (a Polish prisoner and chief physician for Auschwitz prisoner infirmary, Block 20 in the main camp in 1944) treats them as a medical situation, created by severe malnutrition; Bruno Bettelheim discusses them as a psychological case, though one with an ethical/political dimension (Agamben 2002: 46-7). For Sofsky, *Muselmanner* "embody the anthropological meaning of power" (2002: 47), and illustrate a third realm, not only between life and death, but in the master-slave dialectic:

The death of the other puts an end to the social relationship. But by starving the other, it gains time. It erects a third realm, a limbo between life and death. Like the pile of corpses, the *Muselmanner* document the total triumph of power over the human being. Although still nominally alive, they are nameless hulks. (Sofsky in Agamben 2002: 47-8)

For Agamben, these varied discussions render *Muselmanner* as a nexus between the disciplines, an instance when they can no longer be separated, but also where the *Muselmanner* cannot be fixed down either:

At times a medical figure or an ethical category, at times a political limit or an anthropological concept, the *Muselmann* is an indefinite being in

whom not only humanity and non-humanity, but also vegetative existence and relation, physiology and ethics, medicine and politics, and life and death continuously pass through each other. (Agamben 2002: 48)

Again, we are given a description that depends on oppositions: the *Muselmanner* are 'indefinite', and thus can encompass opposing tendencies towards being human, and not-being human, life and death, and the disciplines of medicine, politics, ethics. It is perhaps this indefiniteness which allows for the apophatic definition offered by Levi – the *Muselmanner* as defined by their lack of feeling, thought, speech, humanity, individual distinction. But this indefiniteness, this in-between, is not wholly irrelevant to any of the other prisoners (the non-*Muselmanner* inmates) – they too exist as simultaneously medical, physiological, ethical, ontological beings. But it is perhaps precisely the 'indefinite' definition created through apophasis that allows for the discussion of these disciplines – what is a medical, political, anthropological, ethical subject, who is also defined as being 'outside' of these categories: not quite human, not really alive. And perhaps most importantly, what might the *Muselmanner* make of this? This is a question I shall be returning to when I engage with Ryn and Klodzinski's article, which includes the testimony of *Muselmanner* themselves.

I wish to further discuss the use of the *Muselmanner* as a symbol, as a metaphor even, with which Agamben explores Otherness. As a figure of the untestifiable, and with the reiteration of the *Muselmanner's* muteness, they are created into figures of this particular silence Agamben is identifying as being at the heart of testimony. Agamben refers to *Muselmanner* as the 'cipher' of Auschwitz (2002: 48) – an interesting choice of words, given 'cipher's potential to mean a person who is a non-entity, an encoded or secret message, emptiness or the number 'zero', or even Arabic numerals in general, and also, when referring to a musical organ, to make a sound even though the key is not depressed.

Agamben writes of the *Muselmanner* as a cipher three times – first of all, as a negation – a cipher *not* of a threshold of being human, but of the place in which morality and humanity are called into question (2002: 63); secondly as the 'true cipher' of Auschwitz, and the 'core of the camp', the ones that 'no one wants to see', and yet are unforgettable and haunting, and who exist in testimony as its lacuna (2002: 81); and finally as the 'secret cipher' of 'survival separated from every possibility of testimony', the 'invisible', 'bare, assignable, unwitnessable life' (2002: 156-7). A cipher is a person who is unidentifiable, inconsequential (banal), it is an empty digit, a

secret, encoded meaning, a sound whose origin is obscure. To write of the *Muselmanner* as a cipher in this case is on one hand to use them like a code, a bearer of meaning, a symbol – 0 – of a particular lacuna, a particular absence and loss. But then they are also the figure of the banal, the powerless and ‘anonymous’, obscure people ... and a sound that rises up and cannot always be pinned down, nor easily stopped.<sup>29</sup> In being rendered a cipher, like being rendered a metaphor, the *Muselmanner* are separated from actual individuals, and come to represent a variety of concepts. To discuss the extent to which the *Muselmanner* are used as a symbol, I wish to return to the description given by Levi, in which they are described as storyless, anonymous, indistinct from one another, faceless, gazeless, neither alive nor dead, emotionless “non-men who march and labour in silence, the divine spark dead in them, already too empty to really suffer ... if I could enclose all the evil of our time in one image, I would choose this[.]” (2002: 44). It is not difficult to liken this description back to Praeg’s discussion of figures of the liminal – the *Muselmanner* are explicitly situated liminally between life and death, human and inhuman – as a figure of that boundary – a symbol of ‘evil’, or, more precisely, what evil creates.

While Agamben continues to insist that dehumanising the *Muselmanner* calls into question our notions of humanity (a position that I would agree with), he also continues to reiterate the descriptions of the *Muselmanner* which render them in alienating terms. Levi’s description portrays them as ciphers – empty units, people without will or distinction, symbols for the effects of ‘evil’. The repetition of their being a form of animate death, as well as being not wholly human, makes them uncanny – in being between categories, touching but being of neither. Agamben questions these representations only so far as he investigates the terms that they raise – what is meant by a ‘real death’, or ‘really alive’; being ‘human’, or having ‘dignity’. The *Muselmanner* are turned into an empty space, a lens through which other issues are magnified, and transformed. “The *Muselmann*,” Agamben writes “is the guard on the threshold of a new ethics, an ethics of a form of life that begins where dignity ends. And Levi, who bears witness to the drowned ... is the cartographer of this new *terra ethica*, the implacable land-surveyor of *Muselmannland*.” (2002: 69) But it is at this point, where the *Muselmanner* become an allegorical site, a territory, ciphers, that Agamben is no longer looking *at* the *Muselmanner*, but looking at their edges, or through them.

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<sup>29</sup> Once an organ pipe starts to cipher, it can be difficult to interrupt the note.

## *The Impossibility of Seeing*

Visibility and invisibility, and the tracing out of gazes, is particularly prevalent in Agamben's work. The distinction between the witness (who has seen) and one who bears witness (testifies/speaks) is a central theme, as is the 'invisibility' of the *Muselmanner*, and the metaphor used by Levi to refer to the *Muselmanner* as the ones who have 'seen the Gorgon' is also repeated by Agamben. I wish to turn to the 'invisibility' of the *Muselmanner*, what Agamben describes as the tendency of witnesses to avert their gaze from them. A number of testimonies cited by Agamben note the extent to which other prisoners attempted not to engage with, or even look at, the *Muselmanner*: "...the prisoners have always given up speaking to the *Muselmann*, almost as if silence and not seeing were the only demeanour adequate for those who are beyond help." (2002: 63). Discussing a film from Bergen-Belsen, shot by the British after its liberation, Agamben notes the fact that the film focuses extensively on corpses, but turns away from the opportunity to capture images of the *Muselmanner*:

It is difficult to bear the sight of thousands of naked corpses ... those tortured bodies that even the SS could not name.... At one point however, the camera lingers almost by accident on what seem to be living people, a group of prisoners crouched on the ground or wandering ... like ghosts. It lasts only a few seconds, but it is still long enough for the spectator to realise that they are ... *Muselmanner* ... Nevertheless, the same cameraman who had until then patiently lingered over naked bodies ... could not bear the sight of these half-living beings; he immediately began once again to show the cadavers. As Elias Cannetti has noted, a heap of dead bodies is an ancient spectacle, one which has often satisfied the powerful. But the sight of the *Muselmanner* is ... unbearable to human eyes. (2002: 50-1).

These 'ghosts', 'half-living beings' – is their liminality frightening, or are they described as being liminal because they are frightening? Is death less frightening than an uncanny state that is not-quite dead? Agamben begins to provide an answer with the discussion of whether, in gazing on the *Muselmanner*, a prisoner might recognise something that exists also within themselves – gazing not upon something strange and Other, but upon something perhaps too familiar. Agamben writes that the 'core' of the camp is the selection procedure for the gas chambers, the 'non-place where

*Muselmanner* live' (2002: 52), or more precisely, where they die. The *Muselmanner* are a potential within all prisoners, even as their difference is constantly reiterated:

...the prisoner's most pressing concern was to hide his sickness ... cover over the *Muselmann* who at every moment was emerging within him. The entire population of the camp is ... an immense whirlpool obsessively spinning around a faceless center... According to the law that what man despises is also what he fears resembles him, the *Muselmann* is universally avoided because everyone in the camp recognises himself in his disfigured face. (2002: 52)

In gazing on the *Muselmanner*, the prisoners encounter something also that is familiar – their own vulnerability, their bodies' exhaustion and sickness – but can it be said that they see the inhuman? To trace out another gaze, let us shift from what is seen in the *Muselmanner*, and ask what the *Muselmanner* see.

Throughout this work, Agamben has reiterated the silence of the *Muselmanner* – their incapacity to speak, to bear witness to themselves (because none survived), their 'invisibility', the impossibility of others bearing witness to them. This creates them as a figure of the outside of testimony – utterly dehumanised humans who have not only lost their language, but are furthermore excluded from the language of others – an epitome of Praeg's 'unspeakability of evil'. To not even exist in images, which might exist beyond words, furthers their distance from language, because not even the possibility of speaking of an image of them remains. This image – if speechlessness may be an image – does seem to capture some horrific idea of extreme human silence. Except, some *Muselmanner* are testified to, and, furthermore, have borne witness to themselves, their experiences. Agamben closes Remnants of Auschwitz (2002) with a handful of testimonies from *Muselmanner* themselves, which is taken from an extensive monograph by Ryn and Klodzinski. It is this monograph which I turn to now, because it offers the opportunity to engage with testimony which is not concerned with 'interpreting what the *Muselmanner* represent', and which offers a different way of thinking through this silence.

## *The Silence and Speech of Muselmanner*

Zdzislaw Ryn and Stanislaw Klodzinski's article, "On the Border Between Life and Death: a Study of the *Muselmanner* in the Concentration Camps" (1987), is a close examination of *Muselmanner* based extensively on testimony – testimony from doctors' reports, and also testimony provided by survivors, taken either from the archives at Auschwitz, or in response to questions posed by Ryn and Klodzinski as part of their research. Also it is worth noting that Klodzinski is himself a survivor of Auschwitz, and was known to a number of those who have provided testimony. Agamben cites this article numerous times in Remnants of Auschwitz (2002), though a number of his other sources (such as the works of Primo Levi) also mention *Muselmanner*. The testimony rendered in this article is extensive, and is possibly the only source dedicated solely to understanding *Muselmanner* – their physical and psychological condition, their 'causes', their place in the camp, and importantly also their experiences, from their own perspective. This article is not a reflection on the possibilities of testimony, or its paradoxes, as Agamben's work sets out to be. Ryn and Klodzinski examine *Muselmanner* from a number of perspectives, from a medical approach focusing on different causes, and the physical characteristics through which others recognised *Muselmanner*, the ability to withstand 'Muselmanization'. The authors are focussing on the *Muselmanner* in order to understand these individuals and their context, but in so doing are also exploring wider issues within the camp, since despite having not been the focus of much research, *Muselmanner* often made up the bulk of the camp prisoners (a number of the testimonies estimate about 80% of the prisoners at any one time were *Muselmanner* (1987: 103)).

Klodzinski and Ryn's definition of the *Muselmanner* reflects the different testimonies that they are drawing on – from doctors who situate the beginning of Muselmanhood from the time when the prisoners had lost about 1/3 of their normal body weight (Fejkiel 1964, and others in Klodzinski and Ryn 1987: 94), to the perspective of other prisoners who defined it in terms of a mental collapse, even utter loss of morality, or hope (1987: 107 and elsewhere). They are explicitly not considered to be insane – though their loss of 'humanity' remains a common description. The power of hunger is central to many of these testimonies, "this dreadful lord" (1987: 120) which all the prisoners felt subservient to, and which is referred to as "one of the most ... brutal experiences in the camps. Together with the psychological trauma, it is difficult to compare to anything else." (1987: 118). It is hunger which is seen as not only

threatening 'biological life', but also the 'personality and values' and even 'dignity' of the prisoners (1987: 118).

Using numerous testimonies, the picture that is accumulated of the *Muselmanner* and the situation in the camps is varied, and at times highly contradictory. This is perhaps intrinsic to testimony – each individual bearing witness to their own experiences, and those of their immediate companions. How do you establish a 'truth' when accounts given by individuals who were there and who have direct experience – for example of having been a *Muselmann* – contradict one another? I find it interesting at this point to reflect on the etymology of the word 'truth' – and specifically its origin in the Mercian *treowð*. This word would have been closer to what we would call 'fidelity', or 'faithfulness', even 'integrity'. Its opposite was not 'lies', but 'betrayal' – truth/*treowð* implied a promise between two reciprocal individuals, a reflection upon the relation between the speaker and the listener, whether there was trust, whether or not the speaker spoke believing in what they said. The establishment of a 'scientific truth' was not at issue, so much as being a witness (Green 2002: 9-11). It is in the light of this take on *treowð* that I think it is useful to engage with the contradictions between testimonies, not setting them combatively against one another, but allowing both to exist alongside each other, both bearing witness to their (the witnesses) own particularities.

I bring up the issue of truth and contradiction because, as I have already noted, much of this article contains contradictions in the quoted testimony, and one of the strengths of this work is precisely the extent to which it allows such a significant quantity of testimony to 'speak for itself', without trying to explain or dismiss some of the differences. In the various testimonies, the *Muselmanner* are described as being utterly isolated within the camps, and yet also depending on friends, and sharing one another's company; they are described as silent, yet their speech and conversations are also given; they are described as being utterly mentally vacant, and yet preoccupied with food, warmth, memories, dreams; they are described as provoking great cruelty and disgust, but also pity, and compassion. These contradictions are perhaps unsurprising when we recall that it is difficult to generalize about thousands of individuals, and much of the testimony speaks towards specific individuals' experiences – but it is also interesting to note that it adds to the ambiguity of the *Muselmanner*, who are already often described in the contradictory terms of being 'living dead', and human and inhuman at the same time, mentally collapsed, but not insane. The contradictions within the testimonies in this article will be an issue I return

to later, with specific reference to Agamben, and the extent to which this text is both a source for his work, but also in contradiction to him. In contrasting this article by Ryn and Klodzinski (1987), to Agamben's Remnants of Auschwitz (2002), it is worth acknowledging that the first is primarily a collection of first-hand testimonies concerned with the *Muselmanner* in the camp system, and Agamben's work sets out to explore larger issues of 'humanity', 'human dignity', the importance of language in 'being human', and the biopolitical implications of this. The distinctions that I wish to make explicit here are the points in which despite using Ryn and Klodzinski's article as a significant source, the definition which Agamben gives for the *Muselmanner*, the terms in which they are described, and other issues in this work, are significantly different, even contradicted, by Ryn and Klodzinski's article.

One issue that this article has in common with Agamben's engagement is that what is meant by 'humanity' is thrown into question, and the 'inhumanity' of the *Muselmanner* is often linked to their silence. Being alive or being human – or being not quite either – the issue of 'humanity' is central to both many of the testimonies, but also many of the discussions of the testimony. As already mentioned previously in this chapter, it is certainly central to Agamben's engagement with the figure of the *Muselmanner*. Another term used instead of '*Muselmann*' in the camps was '*kriechender Vierbeiner*': creeping animal (1987: 99); as previously noted there were a significant number of monikers, a number of which referred to these prisoners as objects or in terms of being animal-like. In a number of the testimonies the humanity of these prisoners is questioned, or explicitly removed:

...we are all poor creatures, but a *Muselmann* is someone who has fled/deserted their humanity. (Mieczysława Chylinska) (1987: 98)

[They] looked like a shadow of themselves, they were a mere hint of what is human. (Rek) (1987: 102)

These were no longer people, not even animals ... they were corpses who when exposed to food, seemed to react via electrical impulses.... Hunger broke the *Muselman*'s soul... and took away their humanity. (Maria Elzbieta Jezierska) (1987:114)

One would forget that they also felt pain, hunger and abandonment. In the collective mind of the camp, the *Muselmen* were not considered to be



people. They were simply Muselmen, who had completely lost their humanity. (Maria Oyrzynska) (1987: 127)

And in contrast to this, the testimony where the isolation of the *Muselmanner* is what provokes empathy, recognition of something human:

All these groups of Muselmen ... were gentle, quiet and patient... they lived in their own world as if waiting for something, we never discovered what. They were filthy... but they were also disarming in their great, human isolation; I felt pity for them ... I could not reach them, I could not open them and give them strength and the belief that they had a chance of survival and to return home. (Maria Oyrzynska) (1987:137)

Or the following testimony, in which no one in the camp is human any more:

The *Muselmanner* died without a trace of sympathy from the other prisoners, our hearts had become ash.... They died without a cry, but their gaze was upon us, and told us the dreadful truth that whatever pride we, and they, might have in our humanity was lost on entering the camp. (Stanislaw Sterkowicz) (1987: 95)

At times referring to 'soul' or 'pride', at others the fight to survive – the boundaries between human and not-human, animal and not-human – what is meant by 'being human' is changeable in these testimonies. 'Humanity' is a central issue in Agamben's engagement with *Muselmanner*, but while Ryn and Klodzinski's article reproduces testimony which describes *Muselmanner* in terms of being inhuman, they also reproduce other testimonies, including those of *Muselmanner* who had survived, which describe that state of being in less clear terms, and the authors themselves do not posit that the *Muselmanner* genuinely were no-longer human beings.

Perhaps one of the most prominent differences is that from the beginning of Ryn and Klodzinski's work there is the possibility (however slim) of the *Muselmanner*'s survival, and also the possibility therefore of their bearing witness to themselves, rather than only through proxy. It is acknowledged that few survived, but this is not the same as stating that it was *impossible* for a *Muselmann* to survive. Linked to this is also the possibility of *Muselmanner* (survivors who were *Muselmanner*) giving testimony. Throughout Ryn and Klodzinski's article there are testimonies which are

explicitly concerned with the survivor's own experiences in this state. In Remnants of Auschwitz (2002), the possibility of *Muselmanner* speaking, or bearing witness to themselves, is set up as impossible, and the crux of 'Levi's Paradox': the *Muselmanner* are the 'complete witnesses' because they have seen that which is the central concern of all testimony (the point where the human and inhuman become indistinguishable), and yet cannot bear witness, only be borne witness to (Agamben 2002: 82). The only testimony given explicitly by *Muselmanner* in Agamben is presented in the epilogue, and also given as a verification of what it 'ought to refute' (2002: 165). Agamben's presentation of this testimony only at the end of his work, and framing it to be the miraculous presence of an impossibility, is vastly different from Ryn and Klodzinski's article in which the testimony of *Muselmanner* is still insightful, remarkable and precious, but simultaneously present throughout the text. The *Muselmanner* are the subject of study, but they also consistently speak of themselves. It is in this that the more metaphoric aspect of their 'silence' becomes clear – it becomes as much a symbol of their isolation, as a literal description. The ambiguity of the descriptions of them – that their eyes were dull and glowed, that they did not speak and yet they said the following, that they were human and not human – also institutes a 'silence' around these individuals, the question of what they 'are' amidst all these contradictions. The extent to which the *Muselmanner* did speak – even if only in fragments – is an issue that will be turned to shortly. But first I wish to turn to the 'visibility' of the *Muselmanner*, since in Agamben's description they are not only isolated from the linguistic commonworld, but also excluded from visual records, and even the gazes of other prisoners.

In Agamben's discussion, it is stated that a distinguishing feature of the *Muselmanner* was that other prisoners and guards could not bear to look upon them, and furthermore, that there is a dearth of images of them. The two examples he gives are the drawings of Aldo Carpi, and a film shot by the British during the liberation of Bergen-Belsen, which focuses on the corpses, but for a few seconds turns to living prisoners, in or close to the state of *Muselmanhood* (2002: 51). Agamben states that "[w]ith the exception of Carpi's drawings, which he did from memory, this is perhaps the sole image of *Muselmanner* we have." (Agamben 2002: 51). It is the 'invisibility' of the *Muselmanner*, the extent to which the sight of them was 'unbearable to human eyes' (2002: 51) that opens his discussion of Levi's use of the metaphor of the Gorgon. In Ryn and Klodzinski's article, it is reiterated a number of times that there was something startling about the *Muselmanner*, especially their eyes – their eyes were horrific to see, and seared themselves into the memories of survivors. The

prisoners, and their overseers, are often horrified by the sight of them, but they do not all turn away, as evidenced in the testimonies in which prisoners tried to speak with them, or give them something. But images of *Muselmanner* are also mentioned – the drawings by Jerzy Brandhuber, Wladislaw Siwek, and Jerzy Potrzebowski, among others (1987: 91). Roman Grzyb's testimony mentions that there were many drawings and sketches of *Muselmanner* in the camps, and gives detailed descriptions of some (1987: 110). Testimony is given which recalls being admitted to the hospital ward as a *Muselmann*, and being photographed there, and these pictures being part of the Auschwitz archives (1987: 100). *La Deportation* (1985) by André Leroy contains photographic portraits, and also a particularly striking front cover, the image on which is mentioned by Ryn and Klodzinski, in particular for its illustration of the piercing eyes of a *Muselmann* (1987: 91). It is also worth noting that there are several images in *La Deportation* (1985) which are explicitly identified as being 'Les Musulmans' (Leroy 1985: 146-7). There are, also, images done by prisoners while at Auschwitz, and afterwards, which are part of the Auschwitz-Birkenau archives, a limited number which can be seen on-line. Among these images are drawings of corpses, acts of violence, roll calls and work, but also images of prisoners who could be described as *Muselmanner*. It cannot be said that no-one attempted to bear witness to, to depict, these prisoners.

One issue that much of the testimony agrees on in Ryn and Klodzinski is that the *Muselmanner* had striking eyes. Whether they are described as being dead eyes, or ones in which 'the last glimmer of life' remains, the eyes recur as both a distinguishing feature of Muselmanhood, and as being unsettling to witness. I raise this point, both because the haunting nature of the *Muselmanner*'s eyes is touched on in this article, but also because it implies a gaze – not only that of the *Muselmanner*, but also of other prisoners. For the eyes of *Muselmanner* to have been memorable, haunting, other prisoners must first of all have been gazing upon them.

[A]s I spoke to him ... He stared continually into the distance, and only answered in monosyllables. Instead of giving me an answer, he sometimes just waved his hands in a certain way as in total resignation. One only needed to see his eyes, and one knew everything. These eyes no longer begged for anything, they needed nothing, the only thing they told me was: leave me in peace..... [H]e moved himself, but in his eyes you could see the notice of death written within them. (Ignacy Sikora) (1987: 109)

[O]ne no longer saw them as people, they were ... heads with deeply sunken eyes which seemed to look both within themselves, and into the distance.... (Zibigniew Bentkowski) (1987: 111)

The eyes, the eyes! There was a camp expression that said 'he is staring for the priest'. (Lech Bijald) (1987: 111)

The face of the *Muselmann* ... was terribly thin, with deeply sunken eyes. ... This person was still alive, but no longer knew he was alive. He moved slowly like an automaton, my observations were that this was a particular state of agony. (Anatol Adamczyk) (1987: 111)

... only their eyes lit up like wildcats. (Gisges) (1987: 96)

The ways in which the eyes are described – as both dull and bright, alive and dead, turned inwards and looking into the distance – to some extent situates them as uncanny, as being difficult to aptly describe, and by implication (given how important the eyes are in the recognition of a face, and personification of another person) also the uncanniness of the *Muselmanner's* face. In their eyes is read their animality, and their closeness to death, and through both of these their liminality (being seen as neither human nor inhuman, neither dead nor alive). But the ambiguity in their description also institutes a sort of silence, the contradictions of the descriptions making it difficult to pin down. As I discussed previously in reference to Praeg's discussion of the uncanny, and my previous chapter's engagement with the silence of the unknown, describing the strangeness, or ambivalence of something, situates it at the edge of speakability even as it gives it description. But the difficulty in describing the eyes of the *Muselmanner* is not the same as describing them as unwitnessable, or unrepresentable – their eyes are often mentioned in testimony, and it is also the eyes in the photograph on Leroy's (1985) cover that Ryn and Klodzinski draw attention to, but this is also an act of bearing witness that attempts to represent the *Muselmanner*.

The inflexibility of Agamben's position does not fit with the research and testimony in Ryn and Klodzinski's article – while they do not say there is a plethora of visual representations of the *Muselmanner*, this is not the same as rendering them 'unwitness-able' to the point that they were neither depicted in drawings or photography, nor could anyone bear to look at them. While a number of the testimonies describe the extent to which 'functional prisoners' avoided the

*Muselmanner*, or were uncomfortable around them, shocked by the look in their eyes, these testimonies exist alongside those in which *Muselmanner* are engaged with. Not as much significance is given to the eyes of the *Muselmanner* in Agamben's engagement, except in the context of Levi's testimony where the *Muselmanner* gaze upon the Gorgon. It is perhaps an interesting question to pose: both what is it that the *Muselmanner* see through those eyes, and what is it that the other prisoners, and others now who look at these images, see in their eyes. There is an ambivalence in this testimony – in the eyes are both 'the notice of death' (1987: 109), and the 'last glimmer of life' (1987: 112), they are animal eyes (1987: 96), but still human – their eyes are both striking, and difficult to put into words. Perhaps it could be said that in their eyes is focused the ambivalence of the *Muselmanner* – in moving figures the eyes look dead despite the body's persisting life, in still figures who might be mistaken for being dead, nevertheless the eyes still move. Of course, the question of what it is that *Muselmanner* saw through their own eyes is answered in their own testimony of their experiences.

Another difference from Agamben does not concern anything that is fundamental to his definition of the *Muselmanner* as either speechless or invisible, but simply the question of the presence of women. Women, their testimony, their experiences as *Muselmanner*, or descriptions of prisoners being anything other than male, is largely absent from Agamben's book. The *Muselmanner* are virtually entirely male, prisoners are referred to consistently as 'he' and 'men'. In his description of his epilogue he states it contains the 'testimonies of men who survived' (Agamben 2002: 165) – though one of the following is Feliksa Piekarska, a woman (1987: 122). I am aware that this may be an issue of translation, and also that one of Agamben's central concerns in this work is humanity, and what it means to be human, and the use of 'man' to mean 'human' certainly has a long tradition. But the distinction is particularly noticeable in a comparison to Ryn and Klodzinski, insofar as a significant proportion of the testimony that they cite is drawn from female survivors; there is also a separate section which discusses what differences there might have been between men and women *Muselmanner*, what distinction medics, and prisoners themselves noticed (1987: 136). It is not this separate section which I find the most interesting so much as the pervasiveness of women's testimony throughout the article – both men and women are prisoners, become *Muselmanner*, die, or survive, are borne witness to, and bear witness in this text.

I do not know why women's testimonies are so absent from Agamben's book, or see what is achieved by the reiteration of the *Muselmann* (as a figure, not an actual individual) as masculine, I do not see what is achieved by it. One testimony given by a woman in Ryn and Klodzinski's text articulates ideas very close to much of Agamben's discussion of biopower in the camps:

What is a *Muselmann*? Well, that is the peak of your camp upbringing, the ideal that those in power wished to create. A woman was designated a *Muselmann* because she never reacted to what was good or what was bad, in fact she was totally indifferent.... She answered questions with an indistinct growl. Full of horror, Odysseus saw his comrades turned into pigs by Circe, with much greater horror the other prisoners who were still human would observe the *Muselmans*. When you looked at this dull and apathetic face, what could you see that was human? That this pathological being was once a strong, beautiful, intelligent woman, this same unhappy *Muselmann* ... To look upon a *Muselmann* must have given the Germans great joy, more so than looking upon corpses. To kill, that is easy. But to turn a living human being into this state takes a long time, and consequential work, that was the triumph of Auschwitz.... (Sophie Kossak) (1987: 96-7)

This is close to Agamben's reading of the *Muselmanner* – as a figure of an exercise in power over a subject that reduces them to *zoē*, lacking in a sense of good or bad, but only with the sense of pain, or pleasure, who growls rather than speaks, and provokes more horror than looking upon a human metamorphosed into an animal, and more sadistic pleasure than looking upon a corpse. This is of course in contradiction both to testimonies in which the overseers and guards were repelled by the *Muselmanner*, and to Agamben's discussion of the 'spectacle of corpses' being far easier to bear witness to than the *Muselmanner* (2002: 51); but it does explicitly articulate the creation of *Muselmanner* as an exercise in power, and dehumanisation, 'the triumph of Auschwitz'.

Throughout the testimony in Ryn and Klodzinski's article, *Muselmanner* are described as prisoners who, due to hunger, exhaustion, and stress, withdrew completely into themselves, or 'lost their humanity'. It is this 'isolation' and separation from others which is also signified in their silence. It is an interesting question to raise, however, what distinction there might be between *retreating* into oneself, withdrawing, and in

contrast to this, *losing* oneself, or one's humanity. What is lost in this retreat is the connection to other people – in withdrawing into themselves, these prisoners are 'losing their humanity', and who they were previously, in being removed from the community with other prisoners. One issue which I find of particular interest in the testimonies collected here is the significance of the will, and of community, in a *Muselmann*'s survival. If a *Muselmann* found the will, or some desire to survive, and not succumb to the various potential deaths, then they might survive, and if they lost this will, then what could save them was the presence of others who would fight for them, share what precious food they had, help to hide them, help them in whatever limited way that they could. I wish to turn to this issue of compassion. There is certainly viciousness in the camps, brutality, indifference to death, avoidance of the *Muselmanner*, and malice towards them. But, given this context, what can be made of the testimonies of those who survived because of acts of compassion, or the existence of friendships? Agamben critiques Bettelheim's mention of other prisoner's compassion towards *Muselmanner* by effectively arguing that Bettelheim is deluding himself: "[h]ere the principle according to which 'no one wants to see the *Muselmann*' involves the survivor as well... [H]e falsif[ies] his own testimony (all the witnesses agree that no one in the camps 'was good to the *Muselmanner*') ..." (2002: 57-8). Some of the testimony in Ryn and Klozinski resembles Agamben's conclusion: "Muselmen... everyone was repulsed by them, no-one showed them consideration. One would forget that they also felt pain, hunger and abandonment. ... the Muselmen were not considered to be people...." (Maria Oyrzynska) (1987: 127). But others are not so similar. While much of the testimony in this article bears witness to the extent to which *Muselmanner* were treated with indifference, or with brutality, it does not all agree that 'no one was good to the *Muselmanner*'. The testimonies cited earlier with regards to the role that friendships, or individual acts of compassion, might have towards survival do not allow for it to be said that *no one* 'was good' to them. I reproduce the following testimonies in part to illustrate the variety of ways in which other prisoners at times assisted *Muselmanner*, as well as examples of explicit descriptions of acts of 'friendship' or compassion, including instances from testimonies in which the witness was a *Muselmann*.

Friendly feelings were shown in different ways: to protect from the sadistic aggression of the functional prisoners, the acquisition of clothing and a kind word. This was accepted without expectation of a repeat. A similar attitude existed towards those prisoners who gave up a little food. I never saw a woman who was given bread, eat it up immediately. That

she would keep the morsel in her pouch was evidence of her high regard for these life-saving gifts, as well as towards those who gave them. (Mieczysława Chylinska) (1987:127)

That person over there by the wire is a half *Muselmann*, and she managed to run into it [commit suicide] (...) Only tender caresses from their friends and small favours could keep these women alive a little longer. (Mieczysława Chylinska) (1987: 143)

I became a Muselman ... I noticed the general feelings, as well as the indifference.... I was given eleven potatoes.... I did not want to share them because then I would be the loser.... But some small particle of humanity was obviously still left in me, and I took the half-eaten piece of potato out of my mouth, dragged myself back to my group and put them in the mutual pot.... (Genowefa Ulan) (1987: 138)

[D]uring roll call in front of Block 15A I collapsed.... The prisoners who worked in hospital were told to stack the corpses and load them on the wagon.... I began to move while in the pile and was noticed by the working prisoners. Among them was the room elder (prisoner number 555) Jan Pierzchata. He had a dead prisoner in a room in Block 20, so I was swapped with him.... Thanks to the Poles who worked in the hospital block I was able to escape selection.... I was so weak that I would fall down after a few steps.... The rest of the way I was helped by my colleagues who carried me ... Thanks to the help and sacrifices of my colleagues, I was able to survive the state of Muselmanhood.... (Jozef Majchrzak) (1987: 142)

I never observed them [*Muselmanner*] shivering ... This did not mean of course, that they did not need warmth. They would snuggle together and would try and find a place that was not so draughty and a little less cold. (Mieczysława Chylinska) (1987: 115)

I was resident in the 'death block' ... we had to work an extra hour in the camp. This was overseen by Kapo Willy. I stepped in front of him and told him I was totally exhausted and ill and could no longer work. I did this impulsively (he could have beaten me right there and then) and



without logical thinking. But Willy took me to the vacant sick bay in Block 28, which was normally forbidden and against the rules.... my image in the mirror told me how far along I was .... The most noticeable thing was my sunken eyes with their dull pupils, just like I had noticed on the other Muselmen when they neared death. This time I was rescued by hope, in the person of the block elder, Jary Kutschera....Thanks to his help, I was able to survive .... (Edward Ferenc) (1987: 133-4)

While none of the testimonies claim that *Muselmanner* could *expect* kindness from their fellow prisoners (or even, extraordinarily, a Kapo), or that the experience of isolation or abandonment were not common, what the testimonies do bear witness to is the sometimes unpredictable instances when those in the camps did render assistance to others, the importance of friendships, that survival sometimes utterly depended upon such relationships. I have previously stated that the ‘silence’ attributed to the *Muselmanner* is tied up with their depiction as utterly isolated, dehumanised – the testimony here destabilises this isolation, and the silence that becomes linked to it. In Agamben’s descriptions of the camps little reference is made to any sort of connection established between prisoners, ‘functional’ ones, or *Muselmanner*, that others would carry a soup-bowl to a *Muselmann* too weak to stand, or that those who knew German would write letters for other prisoners to their families (Ryn 1987: 140-1). Agamben’s camp is one in which every person lives and works in squalor with thousands of others, watching as most succumb to *Muselmannhood*, then death, and yet they remain utterly alone and isolated.

Language is often described as a primary means of establishing community, as discussed previously in Aristotle’s definition of the distinction between language and voice, it is language which creates community through being the means by which humanity can articulate concepts of morality and justice, and through this, *humanity* itself. As I have already noted about the testimonies in Ryn and Klodzinski, the *Muselmanner* are associated with silence, but they become veritable icons of silence in Agamben’s discussion of them, as I have already explored. For Agamben the *Muselmanner* are both un-witnessable (they cannot be looked at), and cannot bear witness, because they absolutely cannot speak. He draws on Primo Levi’s description of the *Muselmanner* as those who ‘did not speak’: “... the drowned would not have testified because their death had begun before that of their body. Weeks and months before being snuffed out, they had already lost the ability to observe, to remember to compare and express themselves.” (in Agamben 2002: 33-4). He describes the

statement 'I was a *Muselmann*' as being another way of saying 'I, who speak, was a *Muselmann*, that is, the one who cannot in any sense speak' (2002: 165) before the epilogue which contains the survivor's testimonies. Ryn and Klodzinski's article complicates the situation, in both offering testimony which describes the silence of the *Muselmanner*, and also providing their own testimony (which is in retrospect), and testimonies of their speaking at the time.

What can be said about the speech of *Muselmanner*? On one hand, Agamben is correct in identifying them with silence, insofar as much of the testimony describes the quietness of *Muselmanner* – they spoke little, if at all, and the fact that most died does mean that, as with all of the dead, only those who survived can bear witness – though the silence of the dead is not exactly one of 'dehumanisation', it does raise the concept of the imperativeness of attempting to bear witness. But it is the silence, and the speech, of the *Muselmanner* that I wish to examine here.

The Muselmen were totally locked into themselves. They hardly spoke and remained alone with their feelings and thoughts. They sometimes gave the impression that they were no longer living amongst us.... Their faces were either totally expressionless or showed great pain, dark and slightly yellow; their eyes glowed as if they wanted to leave their hollows. (Ernestyna Bonarek) (1987: 115)

[W]e were ordered to take away selected Muselmen... Even though they were alive, they did not react to anything, only those who had suppurating wounds would moan. The others were silent.... I wondered whether she actually knew what was awaiting her. I do not think so. What did she feel at that time? I would never know. We carried her [to the trucks] as carefully as possible in order not to give her any additional pain. (Maria Oyrzynska) (1987: 141)

In these testimonies the 'isolation' brought about by silence or speechlessness is particularly clear – that these prisoners were 'alone with their thoughts and feelings'. The question of how much they are aware is also raised ('I wondered whether she actually knew what was awaiting her. I do not think so. What did she feel at that time? I would never know.'), bringing us once again to the openness of these questions, such as Lopez asked – the question of what an unspeaking being is thinking, feeling, knowing, which without language remains unanswered. These testimonies describe the

*Muselmanner*'s retreat into themselves, and their silence, and such testimony recurs throughout the article. There are also testimonies of other characteristics associated with the *Muselmanner* which I would argue are allied with their silence, for example, Professor Jan Olbrycht notes that loss of hearing, and other forms of perception, were common in *Muselmanner* (1987: 93), which would certainly impair an individual's capacity to respond (if they cannot hear that they are being asked a question), and also a number of testimonies mention the loss of memories, the loss of the ability to read, or recognize faces, or recall names.

The worst was the loss of intellectual powers.... I found a piece of newspaper and tried to read it, but ... the letters simply disappeared before my eyes, and I could not interpret a single word... I had forgotten my father's first name, even with every effort, it was not possible for me to remember him. (Jozef Cieply) (1987:116)

We often had difficulty obtaining the identity of a prisoner. Our questions as to their names, block numbers and name of their commando no longer seemed to enter their consciousness. (Julian Kiwala) (1987: 133)

Or the following testimony, in which a survivor recalls her own inability to understand others, or recognise them, let alone respond:

Out of single flashes of memory I am aware that I was in Block 8 ... It took a long time before the words of Dr. Katarzyna Laniewska and Marysia Watycha became clear to me.... I felt her touch me, and heard her voice .... [no one] from the sickbay thought I would survive.... I only recognised friends for a short period. Certain words did penetrate my consciousness, I remember the following words from Marysia: 'You will not survive *outside*....' I will never forget the feeling as I slowly regained my memories.... it almost hurt. (Mieczysława Chylinska) (1987: 116 *emphasis in original*)

And among these testimonies instances in which the speech of *Muselmanner* is directly referred to, speech which is described in terms of being fragmented, not always comprehensible, and yet certainly present:

I myself was a Muselman, with a height of 181 cm I weighed only 39 kilos ... eventually I began to forget the names of my colleagues, friends and relations. I was afraid of forgetting my own name.... How did the Muselman speak? He used a unique type of jargon, because he was confused he often repeated what was in his head. The sentences were often unfinished, broken, and were illogical. (Roman Grzyb) (1987: 116)

Undecipherable words came out of their mouths, incomplete sentences about their homeland, or the possibility of seeing their families. (Konrad Szweda) (1987: 132)

I was able to observe that they separated themselves from those who were not Muselmen, but they did not avoid one another. One saw them in small groups ... It would happen that one or another would take out some food from their pouch in order to feed another. I had the impression that it was enough just to be close to their colleagues, they had no need for conversation. Should a word pass their lips, it was generally short sentences describing basic necessities such as: 'drink', 'give', 'I cannot', 'sit down', 'I don't want to', or descriptions such as: 'Mama', 'sister', 'it hurts me here' 'he hit me', 'it was them'. (Mieczysława Chylinska) (1987: 114).

But what is the gap between these instances of fragmented speech, and complete silence? As I have already stated, that the *Muselmanner* said little, or tended to talk about food above anything else, is not the same as being silent. Again we come to the ambivalence in these testimonies: that the *Muselmanner* are described as silent, and yet their speech is given. *Muselmanner* survive and bear witness, and their words from the time are also borne witness to. In the above testimony of Mieczysława Chylinska, the *Muselmanner's* speech is fragile, simple, but is nevertheless present. But I am struck also by another piece of testimony which she gives:

A mirror of the inner life ... that was the face and in particular the eyes ... [in which there was] the silent accusation.... Until this very day I am troubled by these memories of the Muselmen .... I cannot forget their eyes, these staring and sunken eyes, that reflected the state of their lives, the complete hell of the unbelievable camp experiences ... Also the memory of their bloodless lips, which were always half open haunts me –

perhaps in expectation of a spoon of camp tea, a small crust of bread, or perhaps because of the cry of protest stuck in their throats? Because it was difficult for them to speak? Is it really necessary to continually speak? The silence of the dying people was enough to remind one of the hopeless looks and the words that were forever locked in death. (Mieczysława Chylinska) (1987:155)

This testimony opens out one of the questions of the ‘silence of the *Muselmanner*’ – on one hand the silence of the dead, the silence of all those who went passively to their deaths, and on the other, the question ‘Is it really necessary to continually speak?’. Also, the unanswerable ambiguity of their half open lips: asking for a crust of bread, or to protest. Aristotle’s language demands words that speak of justice and injustice, the *Muselmanner* here speak of pain (‘it hurts me here’), help (‘sit down’), relation (‘sister’), it is perhaps what Aristotle or Agamben might call ‘voice’, because much of it expresses the bodily. But this is, not only here, but more generally, raising the question then of what parts of language are permitted to be language? What forms of speech count? What do the *Muselmanner* need to say, in order to be speaking? The actual testimony provided here functions as a form of ‘breaking silence’ by bearing witness, even to the unknown (what did they understand, at the end?), but it also raises the question as to whether the ‘silence’ of the *Muselmanner* was literal, or a symbol of their isolation – and how utter that isolation always was. But there is also great import in Mieczysława Chylinska’s questions: “their bloodless lips, which were always half open haunts me – perhaps in expectation of a spoon of camp tea ... or perhaps because of the cry of protest stuck in their throats? Because it was difficult for them to speak? Is it really necessary to continually speak?” (1987:155). Rather than the tongue, here is an open mouth which balances between the question of taste (tea) or speech (protest), and the issue of the difference between the difficulty of speaking, and the necessity of speaking, is made explicit. What would a *Muselmanner* need to utter, in order to be ‘human’? Were the other prisoners, also starving and in danger of death, less ‘dehumanised’?

The extent to which the humanity of the *Muselmanner* was questioned by some of this testimony has already been discussed, but Agamben explicitly states that it is unethical to take a position which would exclude the *Muselmanner* (or any human) from any definition of humanity (Agamben 2002: 64) – but it is also the rigid ways in which Agamben continues to describe them, as by definition incapable of speaking, utterly indifferent and passive, living corpses, that no one could even bear to look at, which

perpetuates this dehumanisation. Agamben may be trying to argue that even the utterly dehumanised human, one who may be beyond any form of 'dignity', or language, who is capable of thinking only of themselves, must be accepted as being human. This is an important argument, but he bases it on a figure he selectively creates.

Agamben has cited Ryn and Klozinski's article throughout his book, yet apart from the specific sections which correlate to his other assertions, he does not refer to any of the parts which contradict what he is saying elsewhere. On one hand it is possible to question just how central some of the discrepancies are – he is making a point about dehumanisation, and arguing for an evaluation of ethical paradigms which might exclude sections of humanity based on their definitions of what it means to be human. But why, in the doing of this, is it necessary to create a picture of *Muselmanner* in such un-moveable terms? That none could speak, no one ever attempted to show pity, there are no images of them, none survived. Ryn and Klodzinski's article presents a far more complicated picture of the *Muselmanner*, precisely because it allows for contradictory testimonies to sit alongside one another from the outset, permitting some ambiguity, and because it allows for the statement 'I was a *Muselmann*', or even 'I am a *Muselmann*' to not be intrinsically contradictory, or paradoxical, from the outset. It destabilizes some of his paradoxes, such as the statement of the *Muselmanner* as the complete witness, that to which only others may bear witness, as only ever *silent* witnesses. The actual testimony of these people (because in the end we are talking about people, about individuals, and groups) does not easily fit with some of Agamben's conclusions or assertions, partially because these are so rigid. He does not allow for any ambiguity, there is only speech, and silence, only functioning prisoners and the walking dead. They are described in terms of being animal, and not-human, and also as being alone, and shot through all of this, they speak, they gesture, they keep company, they are recognisably human. And, as Mieczyslawa Chylinska asks, is it necessary to continually speak? To ramble constantly would equally seem insane. Imprisoned and facing death – either through hunger, disease, or extermination, they are also caught between the questions of what testimony there is when it is difficult to speak of one's own pain, and difficult also to bear witness to others'. In these testimonies it is evident that even recalling thoughts could be difficult, in this state where they even could forget their own names, and not understand a word being spoken to them. Losing the ability to read, and speaking in fragments, might seem like a loss of language, but if there is anything that should be clear in this testimony, or from that of Abraham Bomba, it is the importance even of fragments, even of silences.

Discussing the representation of pain, Scarry insists on the need to recall the bodily in testimonies of pain, precisely so that it is not appropriated as a display of power by those inflicting the pain. Agamben's engagement is certainly examining the *Muselmanner* in terms of power, though in order to critique it, render its effects horrific. To focus only on testimonies which give close descriptions of the suffering of the *Muselmanner*, focussing only on the bodily, also runs the risk of emptying the image of 'power', that is, the power which creates them disappears, becomes invisible – the difference between the cold and a beating a matter of degrees of pain, rather than agency or malice. I am cautious in rendering *Muselmanner* as a symbol, even one that attempts to 'think the unthinkable' in Praeg's terms, as a way of apprehending the fear of dehumanisation, the fear of 'evil'. But in Levi's description of the *Muselmanner*, their 'emptiness' removes them from suffering – their pain is circumnavigated:

[T]he *Muselmanner*, the drowned, ... non-men who march and labour in silence, the divine spark dead in them, already too empty to really suffer. One hesitates to call them living: one hesitates to call their death death, in the face of which they have no fear, as they are too tired to understand.... if I could enclose all the evil of our time in one image, I would choose this image which is familiar to me: an emaciated man... in whose eyes not a trace of thought is to be seen. (Levi in Agamben 2002: 44).

Though in this, it is not the *Muselmanner* who are 'evil', but rather are figures of what 'evil can do'. Is this comparable, in Scarry's terms, to beholding an image of the wound, recalling the body, keeping the pain visible? And yet there is no pain in this passage – neither thoughts nor feelings, no fear, no understanding, only emptiness. This raises the question of what empathy there is to be had with a being who seems to feel no pain – for Agamben this is an ethical challenge. But the testimony from Ryn and Klodzinski's monograph is contradictory, even in itself. When testimony speaks of specifics, when the picture is contradictory, then what we are dealing with is not 'a figure', not a symbol.

And what of silence? This silence from which people wish to escape, this 'dark' silence of being unable to speak of pain, of horror, silencing, and the silence of death. It is perhaps one of the most prominent images of silence, perhaps precisely because of the connotations of horror that it carries. I find it interesting that there are water metaphors in these testimonies – being submerged, flowing, drowning, resurfacing. I think this is not entirely separate from the fact that underwater we are deafened,

breathless, speechless; it is uninhabitable, its own type of wilderness – as a metaphor it draws on all these associations to set apart what these testimonies are attempting to bear witness to. But this is about testimony, about words that come out of, or perhaps *after*, this silence. I wish to finish with a passage from Paul Celan’s “Bremen Speech”:

Only one thing remained reachable, close and secure amid all losses: language.... But it had to go through its own lack of answers, through terrifying silence, through the thousand darknesses of murderous speech. It went through. It gave me no words for what was happening, but went through it. Went through and could resurface, ‘enriched’ by it all. In this language I tried ... to write poems: in order to speak, ... to find out where I was, where I was going, to chart my reality. It meant movement, you see, something happening, being *en route* .... A poem, being an instance of language, hence essentially dialogue, may be a letter in a bottle thrown out to sea with the ... hope that it may somehow wash up somewhere, perhaps on a shoreline of the heart. In this way, too, poems are *en route*: they are headed toward. Toward what? Toward something open, inhabitable, an approachable you, perhaps, an approachable reality. (Celan 1999: 34-5)

Language must go through both silence, and its own utterance (murderous speech – when language also becomes threatening). The word ‘enriched’ is in quotes – he is cautious of it, much like Praeg is cautious in attributing good outcomes from any evil. Perhaps ‘enriched’ is not the word, but he is trying to say something about the language which survived for him. That there are any words, after none, is something precious? Language goes through its own lack of answers, its own lack of words – or rather, we go through. The survival here is the person – who goes through, who goes under, and surfaces – and tries to find something to move towards, a shoreline, the openness, another person. He survives, and continues to speak, to write – though it is interesting to think of what Celan does with silence and empty space and fragments and strange, unfamiliar phrases in his poetry. As I have said, this silence of the loss of language is a silence from which people wish to escape, and yet there is that question: is it necessary to continually speak? When Abraham Bomba falls silent, he also refuses to carry on speaking (“Don’t make me go on please.” (in Torner 2009)), and it is pertinent to think of the significance of refusal. Outside of this silence which is the loss of language, what does it mean to *refuse*, to choose to say nothing?



In this chapter I have focused on the association between silence and testimony. Given the difficulties in describing one's own pain, and that of others, and what provokes horror in us, the question of how to bear witness to atrocity is raised. In these contexts, silence is defined in contrast to being able to put ones' experiences easily into words, though the association of language with humanity, and thus silence with 'dehumanisation' and metaphors of 'animality', runs the danger of conflating this silence with the one discussed in the previous chapter. Some of this conflation derives from the association between 'evil' and 'Otherness' – that those who act in ways that provoke horror are described in terms of being un-human, different from 'us'. As became clear from the discussion of testimony, what is at issue in the silences in this context (of those bearing witness, as well as to those being borne witness to) is solitude or isolation – that in silence these individuals are 'cut off' from human community. It is the extent to which the 'reality' of the *Muselmanner's* silence, and utter isolation, is destabilised by the testimony which makes it clearer that these descriptions are not only functioning literally, but also symbolically – that it is the isolation of death, pain, 'dehumanisation' that is being symbolised by this silence. In these testimonies was also raised the beginnings of the questions which are the focus of the next chapter – namely, what happens when silence constitutes a refusal to speak, or the choice to keep one's thoughts, feelings, or self, to one's self.

# Chapter Three

## Silence as Willed Separation

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### *Choosing Silence*

In both Chapter One and Chapter Two, the silences that were being discussed were explicitly separate from the possibility of choice. In the first instance, silence was given as the absence of language, and thus was not a space that any being had been ‘displaced’ into, but was instead a normal state of being – in this case the state of being animal, in contrast to being human, where language was presupposed. In the second chapter, the silence being discussed was ‘human’, insofar as those who were silent were human, and their incapacity to speak (at all, or only about certain things) was represented as a loss of language, or a displacement into a space of silence – a displacement which became associated with ‘dehumanisation’ and isolation from the human community. It is from this point on that the silences which are being discussed retain their relation to agency – that is, being silent is posited as a possible choice, rather than an imposition. On one hand this might be described as not wholly removed from language, since one retains the potential to speak, but this still remains an instance of refusing to enter into a dialogue or a discourse. In examining themes of silence, or secrecy, I wish to make it explicit that I am not promoting a ‘culture of secrecy’, or any forms of deception, or means of controlling, constraining, or condemning expression. This is not a justification or excusing of censorship or violence, or forms of ‘silencing’. But what I am trying to explore here are issues of what might tentatively be described as ‘integrity’, or senses of ‘privacy’. When what we say is judged, or deployed against you, or does harm, or simply is not something that we wish to say – what responses are available? If you are not permitted space, how does silence create some? While not issuing a blanket praise of secrecy, what powers exist in it? What possibilities does it open, what is its strength?

The dichotomy set up between silence and isolation, and language and community, is at play in the heart of many discussions of secrecy. Secrecy is aligned with silence because what is *kept secret* is conceived of being silent, unspoken, removed from everyday conversation, something which remains un-communicated. But it is through an exploration of secrecy that it is also possible to start thinking through the possibility of agency – the choice to remain silent, and in this case a ‘willed alterity’ – the desire and act of keeping oneself separate, or other. In this respect I will be examining both ‘secrecy’, and also ‘privacy’, since the two concepts touch and become complicit in each other.

Silence acts as a barrier – in the absence or loss of language those who are silent are seen as separate, isolated in themselves, and from others. The separation from others that is often seen to be inherent in silence is evidenced in some of its associations with solitude – an issue I raised previously in reference to Sara Maitland, and which was also raised in the previous chapter on testimony. But in the concept of agential silences this is not an issue of alienation, but of the decision to create such a barrier, to use it, to desire to withdraw from others. It also does not imply isolation or solitude as being ‘utterly alone’ – secrets can be held in a community, or between a handful of people, and while this is not always a positive circumstance, it does demonstrate the extent to which secrecy, and even privacy, is not only about a single person being separated from all others. Questions of individuality, and community will be ones which I return to throughout this chapter, as I discuss the concept of the choice to be silent, to keep secrets, to be separate. Beginning with Sissela Bok’s work on secrecy, I shall also be discussing Wendy Brown’s engagement with silence as a form of resistance, and examining Oscar Wilde’s short story “The Sphinx without a Secret” in relation to the concept of privacy. At the end of this chapter I shall be drawing on all of these concepts to engage with the silences in Shirin Neshat’s film Women Without Men (2010).

## ***The Necessity of Secrecy***

I wish to begin with Sissela Bok’s definition of ‘secret’, if only because it allows me to place it close to silence, and because while she is sometimes cautious of the effects of secrecy, Bok simultaneously sees it as integral to maintaining an independent sense of self. This not only renders secrecy as important to one’s sanity, but also utterly banal –

an aspect of everyday life in which we do not constantly say whatever is on our mind to whoever is present. Bok's definition of 'secret' requires it to be something which is intentionally concealed, something which is defined by the keeper as needing to be kept separate from others (1984: 5). The secret is kept hidden physically if it is an object, but is always something which is not spoken about with whoever is outside of the secret. Thus secrecy always implies a certain silence. The number of keepers, and the numbers of people who are excluded may vary, but the *intentional* concealment of this thing or information is what defines it. Bok does not include unintentional deceptions as forms of secrecy (1984: 6), nor does she include the unknown (something as yet undiscovered, outside of human knowledge) (1984: 8). This is a specific definition, and not one that is identical to the ways in which 'secrecy' may be used in general discourse. But secrecy is tied up with many other issues, rather than just a division of knowledge, as it is linked to the reasons why knowledge might be set apart: "...the concepts of sacredness, intimacy, privacy, silence, prohibition, furtiveness, and deception influence the way we think about secrecy. They intertwine and sometimes conflict, yet they come together in our experience of secrecy and give it depth." (1984: 6). In this understanding, secrecy becomes a term which includes far more than 'just deception', or something associated with the sacred, or the unknowable, but becomes integral to questions of the division between the Self and Others.

Briefly glossing different etymologies for 'secret', Bok touches on the different meanings that it has taken, its different associations, with the sacred, the private, and with the deceitful. Our word for it comes from the Latin 'secretum', which derives from a word meaning to sieve or set apart, something gestured towards in definitions which focus on 'secrecy' as an act of hiding, separating something (1984: 6). But another Latin word for secret was 'arcanum', which held a sense of the sacred, or mysterious, a correlation which is both very old and still familiar (1984: 6). The sacred and the secret have often been associated with each other, and the need to prevent certain violations and create boundaries to protect the sacred adds to the association between them. Privacy has also been connected to secrecy – the German word *Heimlich* originally meant the home, and also the intimate, something to be kept away from strangers, and out of this, eventually also 'secret' (1984: 7). The connection between the private and secrecy is something that I shall touch on later on in this section, and as Bok recognises, it is one of the areas of secrecy that people generally do not see as negative, but even as essential (1984: 7). Bok also connects secrecy to the Greek work *arretos* – a word that has come into my discussion before; meaning

silence, it originally meant ‘unspoken’, but with time it also came to mean ‘unspeakable’, ‘prohibited’, sometimes even ‘abominable/shameful’ (1984: 7) – perhaps the inverse of keeping something sacred surrounded by secrecy. In this there is the assumption that secrecy holds within it something shameful. It is from here that Bok recognises that secrecy is also likened to many forms of deception – for example the Swedish word *lönn* links secrecy to lying – but Bok argues that it is important to distinguish ‘secrecy’ from ‘the secret’. Protecting the secret may require deception, lies, but Bok reiterates that it is important to keep in mind that it is possible also for there to be no bad intention in secrecy, and the examples given here include voters casting their ballots (1984: 7). Bok is not establishing ‘one true definition’ for the secret with this examination of different associations of ‘secrecy’, but rather trying to make the scope of it clear, and not to confuse one with the other. There are dangers in many of these definitions, as Bok acknowledges – it is very common to conflate the secret with the deceitful, and with the corrupting and alienating (1984: 8), but linking it with the sacred risks casting all secrecy as intrinsically precious (1984: 7). This is a point that is equally important to be kept in mind in discussing silence so that the issues that it is associated with do not monopolise all that it might be – to be either fundamentally tied to oppression, or the sacred, limits how either of these might be discussed. Bok’s discussion of the need to be wary of using either of these as the definition by which to measure all others is very close to my own engagement with silence:

The concern with evil secrets arouses conflicting responses: the desire to leave them undisturbed and so avoid the suffering they might release, or on the contrary, to bring them into the open .... The latter aim ... is often expressed in terms of healing and sunlight and fresh air being brought to secrets that would otherwise fester and infect. Both aims have their place, whether in religious or therapeutic practices, or yet in politics or in criminal investigations. But to allow them to influence the definition of what is secret risks casting a pall on *all* that is kept secret, including much that stands in no need of being [revealed and cured]. (1984: 9 *emphasis in original*)

I am particularly intrigued by two quotations from this work, one from the beginning, the other from the end – in them she sums up what she makes of secrecy, but also limns the breadth of the scope of what and why secrets are kept:

Through the study of secrecy, we encounter what human beings want above all to protect: the sacred, the intimate, the fragile, the dangerous, and the forbidden. (1984: 281)

In thus exploring secrecy and openness, I have come up against what human beings care most to protect and to probe: the exalted, the dangerous, the shameful; the sources of power and creation; the fragile and the intimate. Such an inquiry must of necessity be incomplete. (1984: xvii-iii)

In these quotations she captures the ambivalence of secrecy, an ambivalence present throughout this work. What is kept secret is important to the secret keeper, or else the reasons for keeping this secret are held to be important. Bok describes secrecy as something intrinsic to being human (not as definitive, other creatures conceal), something which is very familiar to most if not all individuals. The familiarity of secrets also renders them far more social than they may at first appear – despite being the choice to keep something separate, even if from only one other person, secrets exist in a social, communal context, outside of which they do not make sense (we do not keep secrets from no one). Even if the basic instinct in keeping secrets hinges on some separation, the existence of secrets depends upon a social relation:

Any inquiry into the ethics of secrecy must consider the conflicts that we all experience in making such choices: between keeping secrets and revealing them; between wanting to penetrate the secrets of others and to leave them undisturbed; and between responding to what they reveal to us and ignoring or even denying it. These conflicts are rooted in the most basic experience of *what it means to live as one human being among others*, needing both to hide and to share, both to seek out and to beware of the unknown. (1984: xvi *emphasis added*)

As Bok points out, debates surrounding secrecy arise precisely out of this question of ‘*what it means to live as one human being among others*’ – much as the questions surrounding silence also ultimately circle around the question of language and community, being human and being among others. Bok acknowledges that we are increasingly living in a society where questions proliferate over privacy, what information is available about individuals to companies, to governments, and over the ethics of surveillance, and that a discussion of secrecy needs to take this into account.

Although written in the mid-1980s, Bok's discussion is far from outdated and perhaps even more pertinent now.

While much of this work is dedicated to examining instances where silence and secrecy are problematic and become tied up with the abuses of power (secret societies, government secrets etc.), Bok is careful to consider what might be called the banality of secrets – the everyday foundations of keeping oneself separate from others simply through the act of choosing what one does not speak about. Bok's definition of secrecy rests completely on the key point of 'intentional concealment' – the conscious decision to separate between what is hidden and what is revealed (1984: 14). For Bok it is important not to narrow this definition by defining secrecy as always linked to deception, or shame, or inviolable holiness; defining it in terms of 'intentional concealment' recognises just how broad a scope secrecy might cover (1984: 14). In situating secrecy as an issue of everyday life, Bok is placing it as a fundamental issue between people, one that is constantly negotiated. As a way of highlighting the extent to which even someone who believes secrecy to be always suspect nevertheless also relies upon it, Bok imagines a number of different, fictitious, societies – where no one can keep a secret from anyone else, or where only one person can keep secrets and all others are transparent to them, or where no one can fathom anyone else (1984: 15-16). The discomfort that contemplating these situations provokes begins to reveal the extent to which having some control over what another person knows about us, or simply having some separation from the world around us, is experienced as extremely important (1984: 18).

Bok situates the need for boundaries as integral for sanity, whether this is articulated in terms of the need for privacy, for some interiority, some separation from the 'outside' world, between Self and Other (1984: 20). Bok's engagement with secrecy is about recognising that boundary; though she is not attempting to justify alienation, or vilification of the Other, or to naturalise the transposing of the separation between Self and Other metaphorically on to larger-scale Selves/Others, such as national, racial, or religious communities. Her statement that secrecy is necessary for sanity must be taken in the light of her definition – that this is not about deception, or violence, though she acknowledges that this is about power, and thus becomes tied up with abuses of power in many discourses. Bok asks whether, if it was not possible to resort to secrecy, or to silence, would physical violence or physical separation be the only means of self-defence against power (1984: 18) – with the possibility of secrecy, power is not only a matter of might. In discussing the overlap between secrecy and privacy (an issue I

shall return to later), she points out that this need for separation between the self and other as a matter of sanity, is not an issue of 'having something to hide', but simply that need for withdrawal: "Where ordinary forms of withdrawal are forbidden, circuitous or disguised methods take their place, even for persons who have nothing to hide." (1984: 13). What secrecy guards is not only 'secrets about the self' but what Bok sees as a more fundamental experience of separateness:

Human beings can be subjected to every scrutiny, and reveal much about themselves; but they can never be entirely understood ... completely transparent either to themselves or to other persons. They are not only unique but unfathomable. The experience of such uniqueness and depth underlies self-respect and what social theorists have called the sense of 'the sacredness of the self'. This sense also draws on group, familial, and societal experiences of intimacy and sacredness, and may attach to individual as well as to collective identity. The growing stress in the last centuries on human dignity and on rights such as the right to privacy echoes it in secular and individualized language. Without perceiving some sacredness in human identity, individuals are out of touch with the depth they might feel in themselves and respond to in others. (1984: 21).

Conflicts over secrecy circle around issues of power – be that between individuals and the state, or between family members, or in codes of conduct in the military, government, or in journalism, or in mental health or medical contexts – this power being specifically that which hinges on the control over information: "To have no capacity for secrecy is to be out of control over how others see one; it leaves one open to coercion." (1984: 19). For Bok, secrecy is a hinge at the heart of communal life – it is how individuals can influence the 'transactions' between themselves and others they are in contact with (1984: 20). Focussing only on communication as the basis of community ignores the extent to which this communication is not simply an unstoppable flow in all directions, but is varied, changeable – secrets are revealed and kept, shared with some, to different degrees, depending on levels of trust, or even their need to know (1984: 20). Secrecy is at the heart of community, but remains ambivalent, both necessary and open to abuse – though its necessity Bok sees in unequivocal terms:

Secrecy is as indispensable to human beings as fire, and as greatly feared. Both enhance and protect life, yet both can stifle, lay waste, spread out of all



control.... And each can be turned against itself; barriers of secrecy are set up to guard against secret plots and surreptitious prying, just as fire is used to fight fire. (1984: 18)

In separating secrecy or silence from a correlation with darkness – a darkness which must be pierced with perceiving light or language or knowledge – enlightened, illuminated – by using fire as a metaphor for secrecy, Bok instead draws secrecy and silence into ways of knowing, ways of understanding and being. The fire metaphor is being used here to explain the ambivalence of secrecy, like fire, as something which is both necessary and potentially dangerous, something which may be difficult to control, but the negotiation of this danger is also fundamental to being with others. Bok's engagement explicitly allows for the possibility of silence and secrecy to be both a banal form of being, and also a means of defence and protection necessary even to everyday life. I wish to turn now to Wendy Brown's engagement with silence which also renders it as a possible form of resistance to dominant discourses.

### ***Silence as Resistance***

In this section I wish to look at Wendy Brown's examination of silence as a potential form of resistance to oppression, though not a form of freedom from it. Her engagement is specifically in the context of feminism, and while acknowledging the importance of consciousness-raising, and other forms of 'breaking silence', she also warns against the 'fetishizing' of this 'breaking', since the entry into discourse also permits the regulation of those new discourses and of the individuals who have spoken. I find her discussion useful in that it recognises the potentials for silence, and does not utterly divorce silence from the realm of discourse, though it is also wary of over-praising the potentials of silence.

She opens her discussion with a critique of the assumption that silence and speech are opposites, two halves of a binary, an assumption which she notes is common throughout a number of discourses, though she focuses on debates around censorship (2005: 83). Brown questions the assumption that 'truth' and 'lies' can be mapped onto 'speech' and 'silence' respectively, that a silence broken reveals the 'truth', that silence is negative until it is broken: "Silence, both constituted and broken by particular speech, is neither more nor less 'truthful' than speech is, and neither more nor less regulatory." (2005: 83). Silence and speech interact with one another, and appear to

give shape to each other, but are also both forms of discourse insofar as both can be telling or communicative, and both can withhold information: “[s]peech harbours silences; silences harbour meaning.” (2005: 83). Within silence there remains the potential for so many different forms and topics; in Brown’s terms, this is ‘the promise of full representation heralded by silence’ (2005: 83), perhaps the illusion that if only silence were broken, everything would become clear and comprehensible. Speech may ‘break’ silence, but every particular act of speech also ‘silences’ other possible speeches. What then of silence, if it is not the opposite of speech, but can carry meaning, and if speech may withhold, and both be forms of freedom or power?

In opening a debate into the potential in silence to be a form of power, or a form of freedom, Brown also explicitly acknowledges the importance, both to individuals and as part of a political movement, of entering into discourse, ‘breaking silence’, and finding ways to articulate hitherto excluded forms and subjects of expression:

[I]nsurrection requires breaking silence .... Even dreams of emancipation cannot take shape unless the discursively shadowy or altogether invisible character of those subjects, wounds, events, or activities is redressed, whether through slave ballads, the flaunting of forbidden love, or the quantification of housework. Nor are the silences constituted in discourses of subordination broken forever when they are broken once. [...They] must be assaulted repeatedly with stories, histories, theories, and discourses in alternate registers until the silence itself is rendered routinely intelligible as a historically injurious force. (2005: 84)

Refusing censorship, challenging dominant discourses, and constantly challenging them, is both vitally important to Brown, but also forms part of her critique: what she seeks to question is precisely the dominant discourse of the presumed correlation of speech to truth, and silence to oppression and censorship. In trying to find a path between a demarcation of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ mapped onto speech and silence, Brown’s essay explicitly sets out to be “neither a defence of silence nor an injunction to silence”, but to “interrogate ...the implicit equation between speech and freedom entailed in contemporary affirmations of breaking silence.” (2005: 84). Brown’s concern is that ‘breaking silence’ has become *fetishized*, to the point where it is presumed to be self-evident that being in silence is negative, and entering into discourse will be liberatory (2005: 84). What she is setting out to explore is whether in

questioning these presumptions, silence can be considered to be a way of eluding forms of power, and have a political value as a form of resistance (2005: 85).

Using the example of censorship, Brown argues that both the position that advocates for it (as in examples of hate-speech, or pornography) and those that oppose it (advocating complete freedom of expression), presume that voice equates with visibility and that both of these constitute a form of freedom (2005: 86). The difference resides in the conception of 'repressive' speech as that which puts forward others' points of view or 'truth', which is experienced as limiting or damaging to those who do not speak (as in arguments against the dissemination of pornography or the censorship of hate-speech); and in contrast to this, 'expressive' speech as that which creates alternative discourses, which makes 'our' 'truths' 'visible', and liberates a previously silenced speaker (2005: 86). Despite these being opposite sides of an argument for or against censorship, Brown argues that both are alike in many of their presumptions: "Both equate freedom with voice and visibility, both assume recognition to be unproblematic when we tell our own story, and both assume that such recognition is the material of power as well as pleasure." (2005: 86). And both also fail to discuss the extent to which being in discourse, being visible, is also to be open to constraint (2005: 86). It is in light of this that Brown is cautious, even suspicious of what she describes as the contemporary tendency of confession – the profusion of publicly available personal details. Contrasting a number of very public discourses, namely the amount of personal (traditionally private) information put into circulation about public figures (celebrities, politicians), and on the other hand the possibilities of the same amount of information being available from individuals throughout society (the "catalogues of sexual pleasures to litanies of sexual abuses, from chronicles of eating disorders to diary of home births and gay parenting" (2005: 85)), Brown argues that these discourses can both depoliticise the latter, and tend not to question or challenge underlying issues, or reflect on the extent to which these discourses can both 'chain us to our injurious histories' but also create the possibility of 'further regulation of these lives' (2005: 85).

What Brown wishes to open is an ambiguity in silence, silence as a place of potential non-visibility to power, as well as an ambiguity within discourse as a place of regulation as well as potential freedom. Explicitly drawing on Foucault, Brown seeks to highlight the ambivalence of both being within speech (discourse) and also outside of it. It is in light of this that she briefly quotes Foucault's discussion of the ambivalence within discourse:

Discourses are not once and for all subservient to power or raised up against it, any more than silences are ... Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it. In like manner, silence and secrecy are a shelter for power, anchoring its prohibitions; but they also loosen its hold and provide for relatively obscure areas of tolerance. (Foucault in Brown 2005: 86)

While acknowledging that silence is also at times the preserve for power – that the right not to divulge information, or not have to give account, is also a privileged position – silence can also be a shelter *from* it (2005: 86).

Brown counterpoints the discussion of silence as a shelter from power with the issue of entry into discourse as an act of violence, rather than liberation. Referencing being ‘brought into discourse’ (rather than entering willingly or on one’s own terms) Brown touches on Foucault’s concept that subjects (such as male homosexuality) which are rarely spoken of are excluded and often taboo, but this exclusion from discourse simultaneously opens up an “ambivalent ‘freedom’ contained in the silence or ‘secret’” (2005: 86). Brown’s contemporary examples include the discussion of M. Jacqui Alexander’s exploration of the emergence of public discourses around lesbian sexuality in Trinidad and Tobago in such a way that criminalizes it (2005: 86-7). Preceding the 1986 Sexual Offences Bill of Trinidad and Tobago, ‘lesbian’ was not a legally recognised category, and its emergence into legal discourse functioned to condemn and stigmatise individuals (2005: 86-7). While Brown recognises that being excluded from legal discourses, or being represented within them in terms of taboo, abjection, or the need for regulation, are both in their own ways oppressive; and that “while to be invisible within a local discourse may occasion the injuries of social liminality, such suffering may be mild compared to that of radical denunciation, hystericization, exclusion, or criminalisation.” (2005: 87). Being in silence is not an ideal position, for Brown, but that is not the same as it consistently being worse than being in discourse, being brought into the public realm, openly discussed, if that publicity and discussion is violent: “... just as silenced discourses may contain elements of freedom, places unnoticed and hence unregulated by powerful interests, so their disinterring... can signal the end of their existence as a preserve for freedom.” (2005: 89). While using the terms ‘silence’ and ‘secrecy’, Brown is cautious in the specific definition of what she is exploring. The ‘silence’ she is examining, following

Foucault, is not precisely 'not-speaking', or 'secrecy', but forms of discourse which exist outside of regulatory, or disciplinary forms – Foucault's examples being discourses outside of science, law, psychiatry, medicine – as well as areas within these discourses which remain unregulated (2005: 87). If discourses contain silences, as well as limning them, then these silences are also a part of discourse, rather than only the 'outside' of them, and following on from this, silences are not necessarily 'more free' from power, because they are like speech (discursive), nor are they automatically capable of offering protection. But, as Brown keeps returning to, silences do often function as a refuge<sup>30</sup> (2005: 87-8).

Some of Brown's discussion of silence is figured in the form of a critique of the assimilation of what were oppositional discourses into the dominant ones in such a way as to silence alternative perspectives, a discussion she extends to confessional discourses (2005: 90-1). Her critique of these discourses centres not only around the extent to which 'confessing' discourses of gender, race, sexuality, or other identities, not only 'regulates the confessor', but also risks being taken as the 'truth' about the entire group (2005: 91). While certainly not advocating that there should be no discourses about race, or gender, Brown does seek to promote reflection on what happens to these words, this information, and how "...the work of breaking silence can metamorphose into new techniques of domination, how our truths can become our rulers rather than our emancipators, how our confessions become norms by which we are regulated." (2005: 91). Writing specifically on feminism, she argues that:

[T]he porn star who feels miserably exploited ... invariably monopolizes the feminist truth about sex work ... eating disorders have become the feminist truth about women and food, and sexual abuse and violation occupy the feminist knowledge terrain of women and sexuality.... even as feminism aims to affirm diversity among women and women's experiences, confession as the site of production of truth, converging with feminist suspicion and de-authorisation of truth from other sources, tends to reinstate a unified discourse in which the story of greatest suffering becomes the true story of woman.... The adult who does not manifestly suffer from her or his childhood sexual experience, the lesbian who does not feel shame, the woman of color who does not primarily... identify with her marking... these figures are excluded as bona fide members of

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<sup>30</sup> Brown briefly mentions the Fifth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution as an example.

the identity categories that also claim them. Their status within these discourses is that of being 'in denial', of suffering from 'false consciousness', or of being a 'race traitor'. This is the norm-making process in traditions of 'breaking silence', which, ironically, silence and exclude the very persons these traditions mean to empower. (2005: 92)

While I think this is an important observation, and one that I would agree with in a general sense, I would argue that Brown is also generalizing about there being a unified 'feminist truth' about these issues. These issues (sex work, sexuality, eating disorders, sexual abuse) are hotly debated within feminism (for example, sex work in terms of a profession in needs of more legal rights, rather than criminalisation), rather than issues on which 'feminism' (as a unified position?) has a fixed opinion or truth. But also I feel that this discussion of the extent to which dominant discourses silence alternative positions is one that has already been touched on (though here Brown is looking at discourses silencing 'their own members'), and begins to serve as a repetition of the discussion of speech as either expressive or repressive that was referred to earlier.

To move on from the monopolisation of truth, Brown also examines the extent to which to constantly reiterate a trauma does not always allow for the sufferer to move beyond it. Describing this constant reiteration as 'being ensnared "in the folds of our own discourses"' (2005: 92), this not only does not allow for a 'moving-on' from trauma, it also results in the speaker being constantly and consistently associated with and identified through this trauma, rather than having an identity that is separate from, or more than it (2005: 92). I feel that this argument is also related to her discussion of what she terms 'diarrhetic speech' (2005: 95) – the excessive proliferation of published popular/populist opinions and information, the 'glorification of banal personal experiences and unschooled opinions' (2005: 95). Like her description of reiterating trauma, this speech does not serve to move beyond an individual's experience.

Ours is a time of diarrhetic speech and publication – from the unfathomable amount of technical, political, commercial, and personal information that travels the Internet to the opinionated ignorance that animates much of A.M. talk radio.... notwithstanding or perhaps in proportion to the rise of illiteracy and aliteracy in the United States, today anyone's political opinion is worthy of the radio waves, and everyone's

personal life is worthy of television exposure, a memoir, and of course, a blog. (2005: 95)

Brown is suspicious of this ‘diarrhetic speech’, and draws comparisons with the tendency in European fascism to glorify the ‘common’ – common individual, common experience, common knowledge – and to critique the extent to which this profusion of information displaces an engagement with world events and ‘learned reflection’ (2005: 95). This is her main critique of much of this ‘diarrhetic speech’: that it is largely confessional and it is neither reflective nor aims at establishing social connection: “Most of this speech confesses, pronounces, declares, and practically none of it is aimed at establishing community with others or with working through experience or transforming understanding.” (2005: 96). It is in light of this that she calls this ‘noncommuning speech’ a symptom of anxiety:

[T]he heavily defended creature conveys through this noncommuning speech, this tenacious dwelling in his or her own experience and opinion, a kind of rampant individual xenophobia that itself must be read as a terrible fear of disintegration or dissolution through connection, as the anxiety of an already profoundly weakened or disintegrated subject. (2005: 96)

I find myself in conflict in regards to Brown’s description of ‘our time of diarrhetic, noncommuning speech’. On the one hand I know the frustration of encountering prejudice, bias – misogyny, racism, xenophobia, homophobia, superstition, and misinformation – as well as the sense of being drowned in the same, seeing it in comments on news pages, talk-shows, blogs, or in vox-pop that appears in the news or in advertising. But at the same time I feel that there is an equally dangerous, elitist, tendency in questioning who has a right to speak of politics, have their words televised, have a blog, whose life story deserves to be recorded. Well-educated does not automatically or ‘naturally’ translate into liberal viewpoints, and any deferring to ‘learned reflection’ must take into account the history of privilege and exclusion (of the economically disadvantaged, of women, of individuals defined through the colour of their skin, or cultural background) that is so tied up with access to education. I am also cautious of removing this speech from community – acts of confession seek to be heard, recognised; political opinion is rarely isolated; nor is racism, sexism, or homophobia found only in lonely individuals, and these pronouncements can also be proselytising, which is certainly aimed at persuading (transforming understanding) and

creating a community. I also wonder at her choice of the word ‘creature’, with its connotations of animality, to describe these individuals speaking ‘noncommuning speech’; this recreates the binary of humanity – those creatures, whose voices speak only of pain and pleasure – and those people that speak in political, useful, educated ways. Whose voices, whose lives, are important, or trivial, what should be spoken of and what should remain silent? And who judges these demarcations? Brown raises this point without advocating any kind of censorship, but her position does seem to be fairly disparaging.

Implied in the previous discussion is that there is a space where there is no, or no longer, privacy – that private information, private lives and opinions, are now available to the public. It is to Brown’s engagement with privacy that I am now turning, and it is one of the stronger parts of this essay. This is partially a return to the idea of the ‘ambivalent freedom in silence’, the double-edged sword of invisibility in which the individual is excluded from discourse, and thus liminal, and yet because of this also freed from some forms of regulation. It is in light of this that Brown critiques the amount of ‘private’ information which is brought into the public sphere, either as part of an act of ‘breaking silence’ or just as part of ‘diarrhetic speech’:

When all such experiences are put into discourse – when sexual, emotional, reproductive, and artistic lives are all exhaustively chronicled and thereby subjected to normativizing discourses – might this imperil the experiences of autonomy, creativity, privacy, and bodily integrity so long denied those whose subjugation included, *inter alia*, sexual violation or other deprivations of privacy?... Do we presume we have nothing of value to protect from public circulation and scrutiny? Are we compelled to reiterate the experience of the historically subordinated: to be without a room of one’s own, without a zone of privacy in which lives go unreported, without a domain of creativity free from surveillance – this time by our own eyes? (2005: 95)

The freedom of privacy here is the freedom from surveillance, from regulation, but is also a form of integrity, a protected space, a space in which creativity is possible. I shall be returning more explicitly to the issue of privacy later in this chapter, but for now I wish to dwell on Brown’s argument that it is worth reflecting on the value of privacy, especially in contexts where privacy has historically been a privilege. This is an inverse of the usually posited argument that it is a presence in the public sphere (so



often also correlated to having a public voice, even to Aristotle's 'language' as opposed to 'voice') that is the privileged position. But Brown's argument recognises that even those who have often been confined to the private sphere have not had privacy within that sphere, have often not owned it, or been able to control it. The ambiguity of this silence though is evident in Brown's examination of Patricia Williams' phrase 'manumitted into silence', in which silence is both a freedom, a right to be granted, but also something in which she can become trapped: "no longer a subject of coerced speech, no longer invaded in every domain of her being, yet also not heard, seen, recognized, as a speaking being in the public or social realm." (2005: 97). It is the ambivalence of this silence of privacy, this 'crossed' space (2005: 97) – perhaps like the private sphere an ambiguous space which is both privilege and prison – which Brown continually returns to, reminding the reader that the freedom it offers may well be a position of 'freedom from', rather than a 'freedom to' (2005: 97).

It is important to Brown that we distinguish between the 'pleasures and freedoms of silence', the choice to remain private, on one hand, and on the other the 'habituation to being silenced', the tendency to remain silent because other options are not, or do not appear to be, viable (2005: 96). Both may appear the same – it may be difficult to tell in any given example whether one is choosing to say nothing, or one is used to saying nothing. Also Brown wishes to keep a clear distinction between choosing to remain silent, as a way of 'keeping one's own counsel', or opening up the possibilities of other options other than those presented, and on the other hand the use of silence as a form of passive aggression (2005: 96). *Freedom* for Brown requires both speech and silence, forms of speech which are neither confessional, nor regulatory, and silences which are neither aggressive, nor habitual, but which are a form of integrity (2005: 96-7). She is ultimately arguing that silence is more a form of *resistance*, rather than a form of freedom – thus the 'refusal to speak' is one which is claiming power, which is responding, and refusing a demand that one give information, make something public, refusing colonisation, assimilation, or some form of betrayal, but in Brown's terms this is a method that is 'deployed from below' rather than being evidence of liberation (2005: 97). Silence in this case is 'not yet freedom', *not yet* because it is a response to power, not yet 'making the world' (2005: 97).

Brown's argument is a very important one: 'freedom from' is not the same as 'freedom to', and the freedom in silence is a 'crossed one', an ambiguous one. I do not aim to argue against these points, but I do wish to take up the parts which she is cautious of, the notes on which she does not wish to end, and expand on them. These points are

precisely ‘the pleasures and freedoms of silence’. Brown is very cautious against over-valuing silence, or to give silence as a form of resistance more weight than she thinks it deserves. I can see her caution in glorifying or lauding silence, especially given the dangers of the choice to remain silent slipping into censorship, and discourses around ‘appropriate forms of speech’; but I think that her caution also leads her to step around the question of secrecy, rather than examining it, for fear of ‘taking it too seriously’, giving it too much weight, and risking it appearing as a form of freedom rather than a form of resistance.

Both Brown and Bok conceive of silence in these contexts as depending on choice, on the will to keep oneself separate, and a position of power. The question of whether silence may be a form of freedom, and not only a means of resistance, is one that I wish to return to. In Bok’s formulation, secrecy – which I take to be a form of silence – is not in opposition to community, but is integral to it, nor is it a position of weakness, but explicitly tied up with power. Bok also acknowledges that silence can be a pleasure, but the pleasure is, in her definition, the pleasure of having power over another, a situation which must be treated as suspect (1984: 34). Her silence has come to be defined in opposition to oppressive discourses (particularly clearly in Brown’s discussion), or in opposition to intrusion. What comes to be posited in silence is again a separation, but this time in terms of independence, rather than isolation. It is important to think about the pleasures that might exist in secrecy, to contemplate if they are only about having power over others, or the power to separate oneself from others. Or can secrecy offer a space of separation in which other pleasures can exist?

### ***The Sphinx Without a Secret***

I wish to continue my discussion of silence and secrecy in the context of a narrative, Oscar Wilde’s short story “A Sphinx Without a Secret”, first published in 1887, and now usually published with Lord Arthur Saville’s Crime and Other Stories (in Wilde 1994). This short story has not inspired a great deal of discussion (especially in contrast to the extent to which his other works are examined). It is very brief (a little over two thousand words), and is thin on aphorisms. I have chosen this short story because the narrative is not about a secret which seems to be weighing down the person who keeps it, nor is it really about the ‘grand moment of revelation’, but retains an ambiguity throughout its narrative. This ambiguity is useful to my discussion because it does not represent secrecy as either something that must be broken, nor as

something which must be kept – secrecy becomes a danger whichever way it is represented (as needing to be inviolate, or needing to be broken). What this ‘ambiguous’ approach allows is the possibility of examining something less visible than the ‘big’ secrets, and to think also about the points where what we might call ‘secrecy’ and ‘privacy’ touch. Despite being written and set in a different time period to our own, I believe that many of the issues surrounding the secrecy that is the subject of this narrative remain both of interest and pertinent to thinking through these questions now.

Because this short story is one of the less familiar of Wilde’s narratives, and because the details are important to my discussion, I will briefly summarise it. While in Paris the narrator (an unnamed man), encounters an old friend, Lord Murchison (Gerald), who he describes as having been known for always being frank and telling the truth. Perceiving that his old friend seems to be unsettled and to ‘be in doubt’ (1994: 205), the narrator assumes that Lord Murchison’s doubts must be caused by a woman. This guess proves to be correct, Lord Murchison having come to believe that he cannot understand women, and that he cannot love where he cannot trust. When asked to explain he produces a photograph of a woman and asks the narrator “What do you think of that face? ... is it truthful?” (1994: 205). The narrator judges the woman to have some secret, but cannot tell whether it is good or evil. Gerald goes on to explain that he saw this woman first in a carriage stopped in traffic, and was struck by her face, and later encountered her at a dinner party, where he learned that she was Lady Alroy, ‘a widow with a beautiful house’ (1994: 206). When he mentioned having seen her previously, she told him to keep his voice down, as though this was something secret, and later when he asked if he may visit her the next day, she acted as though she wanted no one to overhear her agree to the meeting. When he called she was not at home, so he left a note, and when they next met she was amiable, but tells him if he wished to write to her, he should address the letters to ‘Mrs. Knox, care of Whittaker’s Library, Green Street’, and said ‘there are reasons why she cannot receive letters at her own house’ but does not say what they are (1994: 206). As Gerald saw her more often, he fell in love with her, but she was always shrouded in an ‘atmosphere of mystery’ (1994: 207). He wonders if behind this mystery is an affair with some man, but reasons against it, because ‘she looked so unapproachable’ (1994: 207). Just when he decided to ask her to marry him, he discovered what he believed to be the secret. While taking a short-cut through ‘shabby’ Cumnor Street, he saw Lady Alroy, heavily veiled, hurry to a house, and let herself in with a key. He found her handkerchief dropped on the doorstep, but decided against spying on her. When he met her that evening, she greeted

him saying that she had not been out all day. He confronted her with the handkerchief, and demanded to know what she was doing at the lodging house. When she questioned what right he had to know, he claimed the right of someone who loved her, and wished to marry her, and told her that she 'must' tell him the truth. She wept, but insisted that there was nothing to tell him, and when he demanded to know who she was meeting, she insisted that she went to meet no one (1994: 207). Gerald insulted her, and left the house and when she sent him a letter the next day he returned it unopened, and left the country for a month. When he returned, he saw her death from a sudden illness mentioned in the newspaper. When he finally went to the house on Cumnor Street, the 'respectable-looking' landlady recognised the photograph he showed her, and was unaware that the woman in the picture was dead. The landlady insisted that Lady Alroy rented the drawing room, but never met anyone there, and always came alone (1994: 208). When asked 'what one earth did she do' in the rooms, the landlady answered that she read books, and sometimes drank tea (1994: 208). Gerald asks the narrator: "Now, what do you think it all meant? You don't believe the woman was telling the truth?" (1994: 208). The narrator says that he does, and that he believes that Lady Alroy 'was simply a woman with a mania for mystery', and that she created this aura for herself in order to pretend to be a heroine, though she was in reality 'merely a Sphinx without a secret' (1994: 208). Reflecting on the photograph, Gerald says finally 'I wonder?' (1994: 208).

A tension is set up at the beginning of the story between Gerald's truthfulness, and his 'belief', particularly in institutions and received wisdom (1994: 205), and in contrast to this the 'un-understandability' of women, or more precisely the ambiguity surrounding Lady Alroy. This is hardly a new dichotomy, for example in Aristotle's "Pythagorean Table of Opposites", the Female is defined as being "curving, dark, secret, evil, ever-moving, not self-contained, and lacking its own boundaries" and the Male being in contrast "straight, light, honest, good, stable, self-contained and firmly bounded" (in Carson 1995: 124). Secrecy in Wilde's narrative is contrasted with honesty, though as Bok recognises this is conflating why secrets are sometimes kept (dishonest reasons) with secrecy itself (1984: 14). But let me turn to Lady Alroy's secretiveness – it is a general aura around her, made explicit in Gerald's description of the 'atmosphere of mystery' (1994: 207), as well as implicit in the description of her 'vague eyes' and that she "looked like a clairvoyante" (1994: 205), as well as her slow movements, and tendency to speak quietly, added to her appeal to Gerald not to speak so loud (1994: 206). Her aura of mystery is also created in her association with the moon – she enters the room "looking like a moonbeam in grey lace" (1994: 206) and in their final

confrontation she wears a dress of “silver tissue looped up by some strange moonstones that she always wore” (1994: 207). The moon’s correlation with the clandestine, with darkness, with changeability and the female is a common trope. It is also associated with madness (the French word *lune* being the origin of the word ‘lunacy’), an issue approached with the narrator’s conclusion that she has a ‘mania for mystery’ (1994: 208). This mysterious aura is also implied in the narrator’s epithet for her: ‘the Gioconda in sables’ (1994: 206). Her Mona Lisa smile is ambivalent, relying a great deal on what is projected onto it for its meaning – something made explicit by the narrator when he describes her photograph’s smile as “far too subtle to be sweet” (1994: 205) and that her “beauty [was] moulded out of many mysteries – the beauty, in fact, which is psychological, not plastic ...” (1994: 205) – that is, her beauty depended on what others thought they saw there, not on physicality. There is a distinction that needs to be made, though, between this ‘aura’, her ‘secretiveness’, and her ‘secret’. Her moonstones and penchant for grey, or indeed the slowness of her movements, are not acts of deception. The reasons why she uses a pseudonym at a public address, or why she tells Gerald not to speak so loud (her secretiveness), may well be separate from ‘the secret’, if we are to take that to be the room in the house on Cumnor Street, or the reasons why she goes there.

In his examination of this short story, Bashford writes “a sphinx is supposed to pose a riddle – to *be* a riddle – and to conceal an answer, but here we have a sphinx *without* a secret.” (2007 *emphasis in original*). This simultaneous ‘having’ and ‘being’ a riddle or a secret, has the effect of emptying the sphinx of its identity if it lacks this secret. There is a parallel here with Lochrie’s discussion of women as both bearers of secrets and being seen as ‘being secrets’, being unknowable or mysterious, even to themselves (1999: 9). It is worth noting that in Wilde’s novel The Picture of Dorian Gray, Harry defines all women as ‘sphinxes without secrets’ (1994: 143), as does Lord Illingworth in “A Woman of No Importance” (1994: 476). The sphinx is not only a symbol of secrecy – a riddle, a problem that must be solved, something that must be undone – but also of women, of hybrids (woman and animal), of the exotic. But the sphinx was also deadly, and like the Gorgon, needed to be vanquished by a hero – all of this background symbolism serves to add to the representation of Lady Alroy as a ‘sphinx’, given that she may well be posing no riddle, nor engaged in anything illicit. Calling her a ‘sphinx’ may add to her aura, but it is not an epithet that she chooses, or uses for herself. I feel that there needs to be a distinction made between *having* and *being* – between being secretive and being a secret – and the contrast of this with being understandable, being trustworthy, or truthful. Lady Alroy lies when she says that she

has not been out all day, but there is something offhand in it – as soon as she knows that she was seen, she is truthful (if we assume that she genuinely never meets anyone at Cumnor Street).

So much of the judgement levelled at Lady Alroy is superficial, by which I mean it is based upon surfaces – from a photograph of her face ('is it truthful?' (1994: 205)), to the narrator's conscious acknowledgement that the mystery in this face is 'psychological', to her act of veiling herself and going to Cumnor Street. The instance when she might fully explain and speak for herself (the letter which she sends to Gerald the day after they argue) is rejected, never opened. Even the conjectures of the narrator as to why she acted in the ways she did (that she was pretending to be a heroine) are removed from Lady Alroy herself – the entire narrative is from the perspective of two individuals who remain 'outside' of her world, able only to judge from appearances, and their own imaginings. There is a silence in this focus on exteriors – the invisibility of Lady Alroy's motivations, her perspective. As I have noted in my previous chapters, in the face of silence, the visual becomes a point of reference, all that there is to go on. Unless she discloses her own thoughts and reasoning, all that Gerald has to go on is what he can see.

The secret is consistently referred to in the singular – "Why did chance put me in *its* track?" "You discovered *it* then?" (1994: 207 emphasis added) – and it is also assumed that the house on Cumnor Street is *it* – or rather what shelters or hides *it* – it being presumed to be an affair with a man (1994: 207). The possibility that Lady Alroy might have other secrets is not particularly part of the narrative. The two 'answers' to the riddle of this room, and to Lady Alroy's actions, are set so as to be on one hand a confirmation of her having a secret (Gerald's supposition that she is having an affair with a man), and on the other, an emptying of her secrecy to the point that her 'secret' becomes that she has no secret (the narrator's answer: that she is pretending to be a heroine, a sphinx, when in fact she has nothing to hide). Nils Clausen offers another possibility through an interpretation of this story in the context of Wilde's personal life – Clausen's solution being that Lady Alroy is actually meeting a woman at Cumnor Street, and that the narrator, realising this but empathising with her situation because of his own homosexuality (his reason for being in Paris in the first place), offers Gerald the 'secretless' answer in order to keep his friend in blissful ignorance (in Bashford 2007). While this is an interesting interpretation, it does not add to my discussion of secrecy – because, if we presume both Lady Alroy and the landlady are lying, there may be any number of possible illicit liaisons that could be imagined; but I am more

interested in considering the implications of Lady Alroy being there alone, of her doing ‘nothing’. In thinking about this ‘nothing’ however I am not taking the position of the narrator – I am not presuming that she has no secrets, or that her *sole* motivation throughout all of this has been to create an aura of mystery, or to engage in an elaborate fantasy (‘to imagine she was a heroine’ (1994: 208)). The narrator concludes that “[s]he took these rooms for the pleasure of going there with her veil down...” (1994: 208), but rather than focus on everything that occurs outside of those rooms, I wish to think about what is inside them, these rooms which neither Gerald, the narrator, nor the reader, ever sees. Ultimately the reader cannot ever know for certain – we are never given her reasoning, her explanation or perspective – but I would like to consider the ‘nothing’, and consider it to be consequential.

Gerald seems to find it difficult to conceive of there being ‘nothing’ behind all this secrecy – when Lady Alroy says there is ‘nothing to tell’ (1994: 207), he does not believe her; when told that she came to the rooms alone, and never met anyone he is incredulous, and struggles to think of “[w]hat on earth did she do here?” (1994: 208), when stating that the landlady says she only read, or drank tea, he formulates his question to the narrator in the negative: ‘You *don’t* believe the woman was telling the truth?’ (1994: 208 emphasis added). Perhaps even the narrator does not really think about this ‘nothing’, insofar as he dismisses it as being beside the point – the point being outside the room, going there veiled. They both presume that it is desire for some pleasure that brings her to Cumnor Street (either to meet someone, or for the thrill of mystery) – so what pleasures does she take there? According to the landlady, the pleasures of being alone, reading, sometimes drinking tea. The landlady does not seem particularly suspicious of her, what does she understand which Gerald grapples with? What freedoms does this room offer her? What books does she read? What does she think about while she drinks tea? These are all things which we cannot know.

## ***A Room of One’s Own***

I wish to briefly introduce Virginia Woolf’s work *A Room of One’s Own* (2000) in order to think further about Lady Alroy in Cumnor Street. Though originally written in 1928, it sustains a prolonged contemplation of the interrelation between women and privacy, including during the era in which Wilde is writing, namely the late nineteenth century. Woolf examines the reasons why historically there have been fewer women writers, situating this in the context of women’s lack of autonomy. Through focussing

on everyday life circumstances, her varied discussion of women as writers returns time and again to the point at the heart of her musing, which is that in order to write a work of fiction, a woman must have money and 'a room of her own' (2000: 6 and elsewhere). At the heart of her discussion are two issues, both of which are forms of withdrawal – the first I might gesture towards with the term 'anonymity', and the other the issue of privacy. Woolf is examining on one hand all that has prevented women from publishing – both the social, material reasons (such as lack of education), as well the judgement and censure which would discourage a woman writing even if she had the means (2000: 56, third chapter, and elsewhere). In discussing anonymity, Woolf writes that both in terms of published works signed 'anon.', or the use of (male) pseudonyms, women are often behind this un-naming (2000: 50-2). To a certain extent this intersects with issues of modesty – of not wanting to be talked about, 'publicised' (2000: 52) – anonymity is a 'refuge', and one not entirely separate from issues of chastity (2000: 51). Modesty of dress, the hiding or veiling of the body (figuratively here behind the concealment of a female name), conflated also with what might be written, and even the act of publishing in the first place: "[a]nonymity runs in their blood. The desire to be veiled still possesses them." (2000: 52). This impulse to hide, or at least to institute boundaries, is an issue that I will return to. I am struck by several passages in particular where both the different standards of moral judgement are made clear, but also the simultaneous confinement to the private sphere without much privacy:

Jane Austen hid her manuscripts or covered them with a piece of blotting-paper .... one may say that Pride and Prejudice is a good book. At any rate, one would not have been ashamed to have been caught in the act of writing Pride and Prejudice. Yet Jane Austen was glad that a hinge creaked, so that she might hide her manuscript before anyone came in. To Jane Austen there was something discreditable in writing Pride and Prejudice. And, I wondered, would Pride and Prejudice have been a better novel if Jane Austen had not thought it necessary to hide her manuscript from visitors? .... If Jane Austen suffered in any way from her circumstances it was in the narrowness of life that was imposed upon her.....we must accept the fact that all those good novels, Villette, Emma, Wuthering Heights, Middlemarch, were written by women without more experience of the world than could enter the house of a respectable clergyman; written too in the common sitting-room of that respectable house .... At the same time, on the other side of Europe, there was a



young man living freely with this gipsy or with that great lady; going to the wars; picking up unhindered and uncensored all that varied experience of human life which served him so splendidly later when he came to write his books. Had Tolstoy lived at the Priory in seclusion ... he could scarcely, I thought, have written War and Peace. (2000: 67-71).

Writing in a common room, a piece of blotting paper serves instead of a locked door, though it hides the manuscript it does not prevent interruption. There are a number of different tendencies intersecting here – the making public of a piece of work, the keeping private of the author's identity, the freedom from gendered criticism or disapproval that this might promise, the lack of privacy within the private sphere – a double movement both out towards the world, both in writing and being published, and alongside that a need to withdraw, reach for the blotting paper. But anonymity in this case is a simultaneous visibility and invisibility – the work (however practically conceived of as a means of earning money, still an intimate thing) is published, visible, open for all forms of criticism – the pseudonym or 'anon.' is a veil over a real person who is still there.

In contrast to this withdrawal into anonymity (the urge to perhaps mediate that visibility in a culture where women are strictly judged) there is a different form of withdrawal, namely privacy – the private room. Throughout A Room of One's Own Woolf describes this privacy as the possibility of working without interruption, of being allowed to work on writing as an important concern, rather than something done on the side of all domestic duties (2000: 57). It becomes by the end of the book not only a room, but a room with a door with a lock (2000: 103), which becomes a symbol: "a lock on the door means the power to think for oneself" (2000: 105), as well as a material reality. What is the material reality of a locked door (to which you have the key)? The ability to determine this boundary, to enforce it, to have this space in which one can create, experiment, to create a space of autonomy in which one might not be censored. Many of the women Woolf mentions do not have precisely what she says makes writing fiction possible (namely an income and privacy), and this serves to make their writing fiction more remarkable, but it does not alter the point that she is trying to make: not that it is impossible, simply so much more difficult. This is perhaps clearest when she turns everything around and points out the mirror image – not why so few women had been published writers, but what is distinctive about the renowned male authors is precisely privilege: their education, and stable income (2000: 105-6).

But how does this relate to “The Sphinx Without a Secret”? In many ways it seems to be at odds with it, perhaps at a very fundamental level: Lady Alroy is never described as writing anything, or creating anything, and in this room she only reads, or drinks tea. Furthermore, Lady Alroy has the privilege of privacy, and wealth – she is a widow, it seems without children, she has a house to herself, her own time, without obligations to other members of the family, or house-work duties. It is worth noting that this does render her position particularly privileged, in her time. Why does she love secrecy, or the aura of mystery that is created by this? We start to see here the intersection between a woman as a secret thing (woman as hidden, cloistered, separate) and a woman’s secrets (which has the aura of the sexual). Because she is secretive, Lord Murchison doubts her. He believes she must have a secret, and that secret must be something ‘worth keeping secret’, like a lover – not a room, in which she sits alone. But this room is somewhere where no one can find her. When first entertaining the possibility that she is having an affair, Gerald muses: “Sometimes I thought that she was in the power of some man, but she looked so unapproachable, that I could not believe it.” (1994: 207). Her *unapproachability* – not her *irreproachability* – draws attention to distance, rather than judgement. It is because she keeps herself apart (from him, as well as others) that he originally decides that she is not involved with another man, although it is this same distancing, separation, that he comes to see as suspicious, when he sees it less as modesty, and more as deception (the reference to her veil, and the rooms). It is not clear if she has even been using her own name when taking this room, the landlady certainly never mentions it, just as she was unaware that Lady Alroy had died, and given the instance of the letters we know that she was given to using a false name. Lady Alroy has also chosen anonymity – the false name which has neither her title, nor her last name (presumably her husband’s). Walking out heavily veiled also serves to render her anonymous. She has a name – a name that is recognised and presumably well-enough respected – but chooses to divest herself of it at times. It is possible that her “beautiful house on Park Lane” (1994: 206) is much like her name – something which she chooses to escape from. Both her title, her name, perhaps also her property, could be presumed to have come from her husband – divesting herself of them, and taking up different names, different spaces, is also a means of creating, originating something, even if it is only the pseudonym ‘Mrs Knox’, and the drawing room in Cumnor Street. At her Park Lane home she is known, it is where she may be found if someone were to look for her, as Gerald does. No one knocks on the door at Cumnor Street looking for her, until he goes there after her death.

I do wish to wonder whether this room with a locked door is important for reasons beyond the possibility of rendering it a space in which someone might write, and whether as simply a space in which being alone might have some value. Woolf sees in the locked door the symbol for independent thought. What is there, in that room where she sits alone, or reads? A space that she is free in? What Lady Alroy rents are drawing-rooms, it is perhaps interesting to recall that the 'drawing' is a contraction of 'withdrawing', tying up this space as both a room where guests might be received (and therefore relatively public), but also as a space for 'withdrawing' from the rest of the house. The landlady does not imbue Lady Alroy's 'doing nothing' in these rooms with the same suspicion as Gerald – he hates the mystery, sees it as 'keeping her from him' like a barrier, and as potentially reprehensible; he insults her when he thinks that she is lying. Though she does lie when she says, in passing, that she hasn't been out all day, but equally she does not deny it when she knows that she has been seen (1994: 207). I think it is interesting that she questions his right to know her reasons for being at Cumnor Street. While it is possible to interpret this defensiveness as a sign of guilt, it also marks both the possibility of her awareness that 'doing nothing' might not be believed, but also her awareness of the importance of this demand: 'what right have you to question me?' (1994: 207). It is both defensive, and a genuine question – he must make explicit why he wishes to know, or what claim he might have for deserving to know, because ultimately she is not *obliged* to tell him, for all his insistence that she 'must' (1994: 207). He repeats the accusation (she repeatedly denies it), but he does not repeat the appeal for her own explanation, and the readers certainly are never given it. The readers do not know what she thinks. We do not know more of her history, or her present thoughts. The one chance where we might hear her explanation – the letter – is rejected by Murchison. If she sat there alone, what was she thinking? Perhaps it does not matter – it is not clear if her thoughts matter so much as her actions to Gerald. What is held as reprehensible is the possibility that she was meeting a man. This is what is especially prohibited. She sits alone, reads, drinks tea. What is secret are her thoughts, she is not hiding a secret affair, but she does remain hidden by the narrative from the readers, but also perhaps hides herself from the world.

## ***Privacy***

Woolf is concerned with the need to create a space for creativity, but I wish to take the issue of privacy further, particularly the privacy of reading. Patricia Spacks, in her work Privacy (2003), makes the pertinent point that when talking about privacy it is

important to disentangle some of the dichotomies which usually define what is meant by 'private'. Is it to be contrasted with the 'public', and yet not be the same as the 'domestic' – does 'privacy' entail solitude, or the exclusion of only specific others (2003: 1)? For Spacks, 'privacy' is not equivalent to the 'private' which is contrasted to the 'public':

The subject of privacy ... often demands focus on the ways people expose and guard themselves in relation to limited numbers of others. Within the private life – the life of people operating in the family, or in relatively small communities of friends – many forces impinge on the privacy of individuals, their capacity to protect themselves from other people's desire to know about them or to insist on their participation in social activity. (2003: 4)

What is of interest to Spacks is the 'dynamic of retreat and self-protection' (2003: 4) in privacy, the ways in which individuals separate and guard themselves against others. As was evident in previous chapters, there is a separation implicit in silence, silence is seen as creating a space, a boundary – in the previous chapter this was identified as a negative isolation, here such a separation holds other potentials.

The word 'private' derives from the Latin word signifying 'deprived', usually meaning 'deprived of public office', being excluded from the public sphere and being "cut off from the full and appropriate functioning of a man" (2003: 2). Spacks is intrigued by the changes that have led to the evolution of this concept from being a state of deprivation, an exile from being in a political community (the state of women or slaves), into what it is now: a privilege of having control over one's space, body, information, a legal right (2003: 2). Privacy is no longer a deprivation, and quoting another commentator, Spacks notes the contrast to other forms of separation: "alienation is suffered, loneliness is dreaded, ostracism and isolation are borne with resignation or panic, while privacy is sought after" (Weinstein in Spacks 2003: 2). Spacks describes this as turning privacy into something desirable, it certainly renders it something that is chosen, rather than something that is 'borne', 'dreaded', 'suffered'. But it still remains in contrast to the 'public', and to 'community': "What our forebears considered a danger, we assume as our due... That fact in itself suggests our distance from an earlier ideal of communal responsibility and support." (2003: 2). But as I have already mentioned, the pivotal point in modern privacy is the choice of it – privacy is chosen, it is not a form of forced isolation (2003: 8). Spacks also makes it

explicit that privacy is also contingent on what we tell to whom, in what circumstances, what information is available to others about us, and their relation to us, all these affect whether we think of the sharing of information as a breach of privacy (2003: 3).

There is something very important in the shift from privacy as deprivation to privacy as something desirable, even a legally protected right, and Spacks' discussion of some of the debates at play in this shift are interesting. The difference between privacy as deprivation, and privacy as something desirable, maps onto the representation of silence as deprivation in the previous chapter, and its shift in meaning here. As Spacks points out, discussions of privacy in eighteenth-century Britain often did not start from the presupposition that privacy was a good thing, but from the perspective that it was dangerous to the social order, and particularly to individuals (such as women and the young) within that order (2003: 5). It was seen to encourage secrecy, a means of hiding 'thoughts, feelings, imaginings', that is, being a type of hypocrisy (2003: 5). Spacks points out that this does not mean that privacy was not sought after in this period, or valued, perhaps especially by those who had little of it (2003: 5-6). It is the point where Spack's discussion of privacy merges with secrecy that I find most useful to my discussion of silence. There is a distinction between what might be called 'physical privacy' – being physically alone – and what Spacks refers to as 'psychological privacy' – which she defines as a "kind of privacy that entails self-protection of a sort not immediately visible to others" (2003: 7). This 'self-protection' implies a keeping-one's-self-separate, or more particularly a specific part of one's self, and it is the possibility of this separation, this secrecy, this barrier, which is seen as dangerous or threatening: "Privacy, whatever its definition, always implies at least temporary separation from the social body. To seek or advocate it therefore entailed a degree of threat to the values of a society still hierarchical and still retaining ideas about the importance of the communal." (2003: 7). It is within these discourses around privacy that Spacks situates conflicts as to what extent social rules should govern individuals, the ways that individuals can negotiate those restrictions, what is valuable in solitude or independence, and what might be dangerous and how to control individuals who 'internally absent themselves' (2003: 7-8). Valuations of privacy can be linked also to valuation of individualism, but Spacks situates 'privacy' as the place where tensions between 'society' and the 'individual' are played out (2003: 8).

Representations of privacy should be situated alongside, but also distinct from, representations which highlight the importance of the social – Spacks references both

Richard Sennett's The Fall of Public Man (1977) which criticises what he sees as the general decline in participation in the public sphere and civic responsibility; and also Habermas (Spacks 2003: 8-9). While both of these writers also value the private sphere, Spacks makes it clear that examining privacy, or valuing it highly, is not the same as de-valuing the importance of community, or society – privacy is normally a temporary state (one that is not a permanent withdrawal or exile), and does not imply a complete separation from others (2003: 8). What has been seen as dangerous in privacy is precisely the independence, the separation, entailed, and the implications of this – as Spacks notes in the concern registered by some over the shift from reading aloud to a group to reading alone (as literacy became more common): “...the possibility of feeling and thinking without witnesses readily evoked danger. Especially when commentators imagined young people or women reading alone, reading in privacy, they often imagined dark contingencies: uncontrolled, uncontrollable fantasies<sup>31</sup> leading inevitably to disaster.”(2003: 10). This might seem an over-reaction to contemporary individuals, in a society where reading aloud is largely consigned to children – but I find it useful to reflect on the extent to which this separation, this withdrawal is represented in such negative terms in a way that is similar to silence. The desire to communicate is taken to be fundamental, to be deprived of it is oppressive, trauma may be marked by the loss of it, and to shift towards the choice to remain silent is seen as being potentially threatening (if it is to be taken to be a form of resistance, or passive aggression), much as what might be concealed in privacy or secrecy is given an aura of suspicion.

Spacks notes that privacy is often assumed to be a form of protection, defence against a particular gaze, or a metaphorical/societal one, but in being a form of protection it also becomes a form of ‘enablement’: “...if privacy implies freedom *from* – from watchers, judges, gossips, sensation-seekers – it also connotes freedom *to*: to explore possibilities without fear of external censure.” (2003: 14). In “The Sphinx without a Secret”, much of Lady Alroy’s actions imply someone watching, a voyeur, an eavesdropper: her concern at being overheard (1994: 206), her refusal to receive letters at her house (1994: 207), her veil and the only time she is described as moving quickly (1994: 207). Whether someone is watching is beside the point of whether she seems to feel herself as being watched (whether this is an act, or whether she is genuinely anxious and extremely private is perhaps one of the central questions). But I wish to turn to Spacks’ examination of reading as a form of privacy, and what is enabled by this reading.

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<sup>31</sup> This is comparable to Lord Murchison’s response to Lady Alroy, when he presumes that her secrecy conceals an affair.

Spacks also recognises the tendency to figure privacy as a 'withdrawal' – that is not only simply a boundary, but in effect a movement away from others. Quoting Chartier, she also recognises that the 'withdrawal' in reading is not only a withdrawal from the public sphere, or public responsibility, but also withdrawal from the 'private sphere' of a family, or others inhabiting the same space – "In retreat, the individual is free, master of his time." (Chartier in Spacks 2003: 28). But Spacks sees more than a defensive move into privacy, more than a desire to be separate from others – it is in privacy, and a privacy that she does not separate from reading to oneself, that she situates a similar potential that Woolf sees in the symbol of the locked door, namely the possibility of 'independent thought':

[T]he power of books to arouse, involve, and enlarge the imaginations of those who partake of them; ...we understand new aspects of ourselves as a result of reading novels, and the new forms of self-imagining immediately affect our perceptions of the world outside ourselves. We pay attention to new things, in new ways. I associate such imaginative transformations with privacy because they are unique to each individual who experiences them, unknowable to others unless the possessor decides to communicate them, and quite possibly at odds with communal assumptions. They belong to the realm of self-enclosure and of potential resistance that we connect with privacy. (2003: 28)

The value in private reading is both the separation from the world, and also the changing of the self, that it entails – for Spacks privacy is a form of resistance, a space in which an individual may transform in a way undetermined by others around them, a space in which one's thoughts, and one's actions may remain '*unknowable to others unless the possessor decides to communicate them*' (2003: 28) – a space in which someone might be in possession of their silence. By this I mean that silence is not an imposition, but is chosen, or 'possessed', taken on; it is the choice whether or not to communicate what they are thinking which renders this silence as something which they are in control of. Spacks is arguing that it is when we are alone that we learn how to be ourselves (2003: 29). But this is not in complete segregation from all community – when reading there is a connection, a communication between the writer, and the reader, and also other readers of the same text – though each individual may, and will, read a text in different ways, understand it and use it differently, the privacy of reading is a negotiated space, not where *everything* is excluded, but where what or who the individual is in connection with is in their control.

Little is said about what Lady Alroy does in these rooms, except that she is alone, drinks tea, and reads. Which books, if they are books, are not known, but perhaps the import of this should not be either trivialised, or presumed to be sexual. As Spacks succinctly puts it: “The idea of privacy always carries about it some aura of the erotic.” (2003: 13); but I think it would narrow the possibilities of what privacy enables, even in terms of resistance in a particularly legislated society, to presume, as Lord Murchison does, that privacy *must* hold something sexual or illicit, or that secrecy or silence hold something shameful or deceitful. The two versions both circle around the word ‘simply’ – the landlady’s insistence that “She simply sat in the drawing-room, sir, reading books, and sometimes had tea.” (1994: 208) and the narrator’s conclusion that: “Lady Alroy was simply a woman with a mania for mystery .... She had a passion for secrecy, but she herself was merely a Sphinx without a secret.” (1994: 208). Perhaps it is worth recalling the words which Wilde puts into the mouth of Algernon Moncrieff in “The Importance of Being Earnest”, that “[t]he truth is rarely pure and never simple” (1994: 362) – the ‘simple’ answers, or being ‘merely’ anything, both serve to reduce whatever Lady Alroy is doing, or is. Spacks sees in privacy – both physical privacy and the privacy of reading which creates a psychological boundary – a space for individuation, for someone to be themselves, to know themselves (2003: 29). Lady Alroy keeps her secrets – accepting that she went to read or drink tea does not divulge her invisible thoughts, and it is perhaps this which unsettles the end of this short story, and makes Gerald unwilling to accept the ‘merely a secretless sphinx’ solution – knowing that she did ‘nothing’, does not ‘reveal’ her. Not that a person can *be* ‘a secret’ in the way Bashford describes the sphinx – both *having* and *being* – and I suspect the narrator and Lord Murchison see Lady Alroy in this light also. But her secrets – her privacy – are kept, as there is not enough known to either ‘undo’ her, or even guess at what she was thinking. Her ‘doing nothing’, ‘seeing no one’, as Walsh points out in his discussion of ‘something’, preserves a space inside that negation, one that remains un-described. She remains ‘unfathomable’ in the sense that Bok writes of all human beings – individuals remain at a certain point un-understandable; all thoughts, feelings, motivations are not known even by the individual themselves all of the time, let alone being clear to others (Bok 1984: 21).

This might seem like an unlikely choice for an argument which is not trying to argue that silence and secrecy are fundamentally destructive (even if it is chosen), given the fact that Lady Alroy dies, and from a romantic perspective this might appear as a tragedy. But her death remains accidental – a sudden illness – and there is no evidence



that it is caused by the previous events. I would argue that focusing on her secrecy, and her subsequent death as to a certain extent enforcing the permanence of that secrecy, both obscures the fact that the schism between these two characters also depends on Gerald's rejection of her denials as outright lies, and his rejection of her letter (followed by running away to Norway for a month), effectively refusing to *listen* to her. The narrative puts far more attention on Lady Alroy's secrets – her choice to retreat or withdraw – than on Gerald's refusal to listen, which is itself, a form of *silencing*, but not an act that he takes responsibility for, or reflects upon its significance.

This narrative concerns the secrecy of a single character, but in order to explore these themes of silence as the choice to withdraw, as privacy, or a form of resistance, I shall engage with a more complicated narrative, namely with Shirin Neshat's film Women Without Men (2010). This narrative allows me to explore a wider variety of silences, in context with each other, and with other forms of silence – such as silencing – and the possibilities of change held within self-reflection.

## ***Women Without Men***

It is not uncommon when discussing silence in terms of representations of women to correlate silence solely with oppression. However, it is also worth examining the circumstances in which silence may also be interpreted as a response to oppression, that is, as a flight from power. Silence may be agential, and may be a form of resistance insofar as it creates a space of privacy into which individuals with few other options can retreat. I shall be examining Shirin Neshat's film Women Without Men (2010), and the extent to which it engages with the silencing, and silences of, the female characters at the heart of the narrative. I am constrained to a certain extent by the fact that I can only work from the subtitles for this film to understand the dialogue (and no subtitles have been offered for the few occasions when characters sing); in relying on a translation of the words I am cut off from an engagement with subtleties of meaning which are only in the original language (Farsi). But I hope that because I am looking at the instances when the characters do not speak, namely, when they are silent, that my engagement does not suffer too much from working from translation. Neshat's film is an adaptation of Sharnush Parsipur's novel of the same name, but I wish to make it explicit that it is Neshat's film, and not the novel, that I am engaging with. The narrative is significantly different between the two versions, but it is the

extent to which silence comes to be far more present in Neshat's narrative which makes the film a useful vehicle for my discussion.

The narrative is set during the summer of 1953, in Iran just prior to the coup against the democratically elected Prime Minister Mossadegh. It follows four women, touching on their everyday lives, how three of them come to live together, and how they come to separate. Farrokh Legha (called Fakhri), is an older woman who buys a wild garden with a house at its centre, outside the city in Karaj. She is unhappily married to a general who would like to take a second, younger, wife. Zarin is a prostitute who is retreating into herself, and runs away from her brothel after having visions of men without eyes or mouths. She enters the garden and is found there by Fakhri and the gardener. Munis is almost thirty, and is largely confined to her home by her brother, Amir. She leaps off the roof of the house, is buried in the garden by her brother, but returns to life and becomes involved with pro-Mossadegh protestors. Faezeh is her friend, who unlike Munis has little interest in politics, but is secretly in love with Munis' brother. It is she who disinters Munis when she returns to life, but when she follows Munis through the streets, she is raped by two men. Munis leads her to Fakhri's garden, and leaves her there.

These women's stories are set against the backdrop of the civil unrest and eventual coup d'état against the democratically elected government of the Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh, a coup which was orchestrated and funded by the intelligence agencies of the United States and the United Kingdom. Yet to a great extent these events exist on the peripheries of these women's lives; they intersperse the narrative through the broadcasts from a radio turned on in a car, or playing in the corner of a room, or through the demonstrations on the streets which confines some of the women still more to their homes. This highlights the extent to which these women are separated from politics, but also to the effect of this separation: not all of the women are seeking involvement, the reasons for the demonstrations seem far away from the concerns of their everyday lives.

A consequence of my focus on the narrative and its silences is that there is less attention paid to an examination of historical context, both in terms of post-colonialism, the political situation in Iran in 1953, the ramifications of the coup d'état, but also in terms of many of the issues surrounding women within Islam which are prevalent within contemporary discourses. Shirin Neshat has lived in exile from Iran since she was seventeen, and most of her work has been exhibited or screened in the

United States and Europe, her work is necessarily in dialogue with these different discourses, as well as Western feminism. It is for her work as a visual artist that she is most well-known, rather than as a director – I engage with some criticisms of her photographic images and installations in my next chapter where I explore her piece Turbulent (1998). My use of this film's narrative is not contingent on its 'realism', or accurate depiction of women within Islam generally or Iran specifically. These are important and convoluted issues, but I do not have the space to enter into an in-depth discussion of them, or this film narrative's relation with them. Much of my discussion of this narrative will focus on the garden as the embodiment of silence, and also as a space of alterity that these women escape to. The narrative sets out a division between the public and the private spheres, a division in which the women are separated from the public, and while confined in the private sphere, have little control over their lives within it. The garden comes to function as a third space, which is neither public, nor the confinement of the private. The garden functions as a metaphor for the political situation, the democratic government of Mossadegh which comes to be over-thrown, but it is its embodiment of these women's situations (the politics of their individual situations) which is the focus of this section.

## ***Silencing***

Despite my focus being on the choice to remain silent, it is important to acknowledge the different silences within this film narrative – and the contrast between the *silencing* of the characters, and their acts of choosing silence. Silence is often reiterated as a form of isolation, or exclusion – something which I have extensively discussed previously. If language founds community it is therefore integral to a concept of the public sphere. Silence becomes a symbol of confinement for Munis: from the first time we see her, she listens attentively to the radio, and its continuous broadcast of the political situation. It is not only Munis' connection to the events of the on-coming coup, but also ours; the broadcast allows the audience to place the private lives of these women into a historical narrative which they are largely excluded from. For Munis the sound of the radio (the broadcast voice) is a symbol of the world outside the house her brother has forbidden her to leave, the radio's thrum breaks the silence of this house. It is her link to the demonstrations on the streets, and the political activism that she would like to be involved in. It is also the 'silencing' of the radio by the military which marks the failure of the demonstrations against the coup in this narrative; soldiers storm the 'Radio Iran' offices, and while broadcasting

soon continues, it is a different voice, speaking in different terms, very much as Brown observes of censorship, the voice is both expressive and repressive in this instance (2005: 86). She turns up the volume of the radio to drown her brother's chastisements and demands, and it is the radio that her brother breaks to force her to listen to him. The radio thus becomes a way of silencing her brother, in the first instance, and it is the radio that is silenced when her brother wishes to pull her away from outside events, and demand that she should focus on the domestic sphere, the house, cooking, her need to find a husband, her need to 'be decent'. Her confinement is further reiterated in his threat to break her legs should she attempt to leave, a reinforcing of the threat of confinement, and also of 'stillness'. It is worth recalling the etymology of silence ties it to motionlessness, to be stilled is not only to be prevented from moving, it is also a command to be quiet.

When her brother leaves, and Faezeh comes to the house, we find Munis attempting to fix the radio, to re-connect to the broadcast. This implies she has not started to cook, as her brother asked, though she does serve tea to Faezeh. In the company of her friend she does perform this domestic role, and also goes about the garden watering the flowers. Her rejection of her brother's demands is not identical with a rejection of the domestic, but of the demand that she do nothing beyond it. Though Munis does not answer her brother Amir, there is a recognition of the impossibility of refusal in her silence. She might not say anything, but she cannot say no.

This 'impossibility of refusal' is experienced also by several other characters: Fakhri does not contradict or offer her own opinion in public against her husband, General Sadri, and in private is not permitted to object to his desire to take a new wife. Fakhri is privileged in comparison to the other women, her freedom of movement and the possibility of engaging in educated and politically aware circles is something she appears to take for granted, though it provides a distinct contrast to Munis' situation. It also distinguishes her from the character Zarin, though Zarin is another example of the impossibility of refusal. A prostitute in a brothel, she is chastised for 'keeping her customers waiting', and the Madam's calling to her, over and over, punctuates the scenes in which we first encounter Zarin. Despite being directly questioned, Zarin never answers. Zarin's silence pervades the narrative of the film, there are few occasions when she is seen to speak, and in these she either whispers, or is too far away to be heard by the audience. Neither Munis, Fakhri, nor Zarin answer when a demand is made of them, though their silence is not a refusal of these demands, it is an act of defiance: they refuse to act gladly. It is a response from a disempowered

position, it is passive aggressive. As already noted, they are not permitted to refuse, but their silence does become a 'speaking back' to a figure of power. It marks their unhappiness, and while Amir, or General Sadri, or Zarin's Madam, are not overly concerned with what they feel about the demands, the women's silence remains exhibitiv. It may be argued that an act of expression which goes unnoticed has failed to be a 'true' communication (a tree falling without noise because none witness it) but in most of these cases these women's silences are not unnoticed, nor are they actually ignored. Zarin's Madam continues to call out her name, both Amir and Sadri become angry when no reply is made. Their anger marks their reading of these silences as unacceptable responses, as submissions that are nevertheless tinged with defiance.

The silence of Faezeh is less obvious than these previous examples, as she apparently never speaks of Munis' suicide, does not name her own rape, nor does she ever tell Munis' brother Amir that she loves him. Her silences trace out taboos, marking their preserve through what is seen, or known, but not spoken of. While 'silencing' might be an auditory image of constraint, it also comes to stand for other forms of oppression. When Zarin scrubs herself raw in the public bath-house, the other women fall silent: they neither speak to her, nor to each other any more, and a child fixedly watching Zarin is pulled away. Silence is tied to visibility, or rather, concealment, through this sequence, just as other silences have also included a 'turning away' of someone's face, or turning their back. Despite this correlation to silence as an attempt at diverting a gaze, Zarin is starkly visible throughout this sequence: she is naked, watched by the other women, and despite the gloom and steam of the bath-house, she remains in the light, in contrast to the shadow around her. The women's silence circles around the sight (it cannot be her voice since she says nothing) of Zarin, painfully anorexic and scrubbing at her skin until she bleeds, unsettling and rupturing their conversations. She also unsettles any presuppositions about representations of women in a bath-house, a highly exoticised and eroticised theme common throughout orientalist art. Neshat's depiction not only confronts us with children and women of all ages, but also with the figure of Zarin, a woman bathing, which interrupts the trope of passivity and 'female beauty' with her frenetic movement and her evident pain.

This is not the only silence which preserves the unsettling or taboo within it. Faezeh turns her back while her grandmother muses on whatever might have happened to Munis; her silence about Munis' death maintains it as a secret, keeps it unknown. This is subtly different from when Munis finds her after her rape, when she averts her gaze and says only that she is 'too ashamed'. In the latter, Munis knows what to read in her

friend's un-speaking, it is precisely through her silence that Faezeh gestures towards what has happened. A similar gesturing occurs when Fakhri tells an old friend that she no longer writes poetry, and sings 'sometimes, but only for herself'. The silence of her creativity points towards her dissatisfaction, her loss of what used to inspire her, though again, in not speaking against her husband, she is left saying nothing at all about causes, only symptoms (an analogous pattern to Faezeh naming her shame, but not what is behind it). In these examples, silence is a signifier, pointing towards the presence of some constraint, something marking off areas of speech as unacceptable.

The women's silences also function as a metaphor for a larger 'lack of voice' both in and about Iran (little attention is often given in the West to the significance of 1953). Neshat dedicates the film to those who have lost their lives for freedom in Iran, including up to the Green Revolution in 2009. As the demonstrations are broken by the military, Munis says: "in all this turbulence and noise, there was almost a silence underneath. The sense that everything repeats itself over time: hope, betrayal, fear.". In this underlying silence there is the apprehension that 'everything will repeat'; it would be hopeless, and yet it includes the possibility of hope. This is not the only 'cycle' in the narrative, though the others are more often visual: Munis jumps from the roof both at the beginning, and the end of the film; when Fakhri first comes to the house and garden it looks as though it was abandoned after a party (wine glasses still rest on the table, plates are visible) and after Zarin dies, she is last seen walking into the garden, leaving the house behind her much as it was when she first arrived. The 'silent sense that everything repeats' – what is this underlying silence? Something at the edge of knowing? An almost instinctual way of knowing? The waiting silence is not ultimately about futility, but the possibility that cycles also permit change.

### ***Flights from Power***

While silencing certainly marks forms of oppression in this narrative, I wish to further examine silence as a form of resistance – the argument brought forwards by Wendy Brown that I examined at the beginning of this chapter. The silences in this film are communicative, they both derive meaning from and add significance to their contexts. They function as replies and refusals and are often coupled with gesture: Fakhri and Munis turn their faces away when they are shouted at, Zarin physically pushes away a woman trying to help her in the bath-house, Faezeh often cries when she says nothing (of Munis' death, of her own rape, or at the end when Zarin dies). Brown's

engagement with silence draws on Foucault to touch on the relation between speech, silence, and freedom. Taking a phrase from Foucault, she notes that silence may be “a shelter *for* power”, but also expands the question, asking whether or not silence may also be “a shelter *from* power”(Brown 2005: 86). Foucault’s silence in this instance is not the loss of speech, nor an instance of secrecy, but the empty spaces within and outside of discourses of power. Brown argues: “If, as Foucault insists, freedom is a practice (as opposed to an achievement, condition, or institution), then the possibility of *practicing* freedom inside a regulatory discourse occurs in the interstices of a given discourse, as well as in resistance to the discourse.”(2005: 88). I have already touched on silence as a response that simultaneously accepts and refuses a demand, but it is not such a silence that Brown is focusing on. She briefly acknowledges that silence is a powerful gesture of passive aggression (2005: 96), and while this is also a form of resistance, it is more the interstices in discourse that she is interested in, rather than individual acts of silence. Brown’s exploration is useful here because it allows for silence to be wilfully entered into, and also a position of power: when soldiers interrupt Fakhri’s party, their commander’s silence marks the fact that he is not obliged to explain, or give account of himself, and less so when it is a woman who questions him. When Fakhri identifies herself as the owner of the garden, his response is to ask where her husband is, and it is only when one of her male guests identifies her as the wife of General Sadri that the officer gives her a response, though still no real explanation. The commander’s response to her is determined by her relations to other men (her guest’s identification of her, and her husband’s position, defining her own place), and while this alters his courtesy towards her, it does not change whether he divulges any information. But what I wish to focus on in thinking through this film is this ‘practising’ of silence as a ‘shelter *from* power’, rather than an exercise in already established power such as the commander’s silence seems to be. I wish to think through this concept of ‘sheltering silence’ as a ‘flight’ from power, as a movement, as well as a destination. To this end I shall be figuring silence in terms of escape, withdrawal, and sanctuary.

There is an ambiguity in the word ‘flight’: it carries connotations of both the freedom of flying, and the defensive response to danger. It touches on both the joy and anxiety of journey, escape, exile. It allows both for coercion, to be forced to flee, and also for choice, the dream of flying. In referring to silence as a flight from power, I seek to explore silence as a response and as resistance to constraint. I shall begin with Munis, in part because the narrative of the film begins with her suicide, and because the ‘deathliness’ of silence is something that I have touched on previously – it is related

not only to the fact that the dead cannot speak, or move, but because all the focus on speaking in terms of social visibility and presence also likens silence to a social non-presence or death. In the opening scene, we see Munis pacing slowly on the roof of her house, and hear the sounds of a distant demonstration, and also the call to prayer. Her leap resembles an attempt at flight, and she tells us: "Now I will have silence. Silence, and nothing. And I thought the only freedom from pain is to be free from the world." This already sets out a relation between the flight from power (pain) and an attempt at freedom, and the freedom in abandoning the world of pain to escape into death, silence, the unknown. The film eventually situates this scene after her brother has demanded that she remain in the house, and forbidden her to leave with Faezeh. When Amir and Faezeh find her body, she is lying, unveiled, in the street beyond their garden wall. But what is Munis' flight? Her leap from the roof does not immediately take her any further than just beyond the front door, when her body is found she is quickly brought back inside, and buried in the garden wrapped in a chador (full-length veil). But her death does provide her with an escape: both immediately in circumnavigating her brother's threats of hurting her by putting herself 'beyond injury'; but also subsequently, when she comes back to life and is disinterred by Faezeh. Munis leaves the house and enters the world beyond, and (presumably since her brother believes her to be dead) she is not pursued, and she also appears to be invisible to most other characters. Again, it is the voice of the radio which draws her, and followed by Faezeh, she goes to a café full of men in order to listen, a place which her friend tells her she should not enter since "That's not a place for women!". While Munis appears to go unnoticed, sitting as though transfixed to the broadcast, Faezeh is seen hovering in the doorway, and her presence there is what attracts the attention of the men who follow and rape her. Munis manages to transgress boundaries – the high wall of her house, the door to the 'men's space' of the café, life and death, in a way the other characters do not, or perhaps cannot.

It is Munis' invisibility in this second life which gives her the freedom to move about, to observe and listen. Though it was the desire to be free to *listen* which drew Munis into this flight, to be part of the events unfolding in the streets, her second life does not appear to give her more of a voice for herself. She says very little, though she continues to listen and observe; the audience hears her thoughts as she watches a demonstration, the roar of the crowd muted behind Munis' musings that she has come back "not just to watch but to see; not just to be but to act." When she does participate in the chants her voice cannot be distinguished amongst all the others. One of the silences Munis reaches for when she leaps is the removal of her brother's voice, which



cuts through the radio, and threatens her with violence, and ties her to the house. The silence she escapes into, the invisibility of her second life frees her to be in the world. But she is not like others who are in the world, like Faezeh who is seen in the doorway, nor like the young man who encourages her to get involved with the resistance movement, who argues politics on the streets while giving out pamphlets, or speaks in secret meetings. Munis' flight from the roof, like her silence as she looks away from her brother and turns up the radio, is an attempt to escape from him, and the confinement he represents. While being defiant, it is not entirely equivalent to liberation: silence is her movement away, her separation, it takes her into the world, but does not give her a strong presence there.

The 'flight' of silence acts also as withdrawal. To a great extent this fits with the representation of language and speech as being linked to visibility, presence and power, and silence to the inverse, though, I would argue, what freedom there is in invisibility should not be ignored. The extent to which silence comes to be a flight from the world is embodied in the character Zarin. She is by far the mutest of the women, she often averts her eyes from her customers in the brothel, and from the other women in the bath-house. She runs and creeps when she wanders the streets, and crawls through a gutter in the wall of Fakhri's garden in order to enter. This is in contrast to Faezeh, and Fakhri, who enter through the front gate. She is anorexically thin, and at the bath-house she withdraws from being touched. She runs away from the brothel because one of her customers appears suddenly to have no eyes or mouth, only a blank, though it is one of the few instances when she appears to look directly at any of the men who have visited her. Sightless and speechless, it is however not only the man who is rendered invisible (featureless) and mute, but Zarin. She cannot be seen, or spoken to, and she does not speak. Her only presence to a man who cannot see or speak to her, and to whom she does not speak, is whittled down to touch, and she generally keeps her own hands away from others, when she does not recoil from them. She runs from the city after wandering into a funeral, passing by a group of ululating women, and coming across a room full of men in prayer. It is unclear if, when they rise from their bow, all the men see her, or if what she sees is a crowd of blank faces before she runs. We only see the men from behind once they have risen, though a film installation 'Zarin' which Neshat displayed at the Gladstone Gallery October 15 through November 12, 2005, included the praying men with blank faces, and also with crowds of men on the street, also without features. Silence is a retreat for Zarin, a segregation of herself from other people around her. The faceless men, and the distress she exhibits in the bath-house, indicate the extent to which her experience of the world

is tinged with pain. When Fakhri's party interrupts the quiet of the garden, Zarin appears to experience pain at the sound of all the guests in the rooms below, to suffer at the presence of their voices. Silence is an escape for Zarin, but it is also a sanctuary, insofar as it is a flight away from the world, creating a space of self-imposed exile, and separation. I noted there is an ambiguity in 'flight' – as both freedom, and to be fleeing, so too is there such an ambiguity in these themes of exile, withdrawal, separation. It is perhaps tempting to draw analogies to Neshat's own relation with her country, with her own relations to exile, freedom, sanctuary, 'flight'.

The concept of silence as sanctuary is visually captured in Fakhri's garden outside of the city, to which Faezeh and Zarin come to escape. There are differences in how each of them comes to the garden, which is not only their different narratives up to that point, but also differences in class. Fakhri is chauffeur-driven to the garden, and purchases it as her own. Faezeh is led there by Munis, who leaves her at the gate before returning to Tehran. Zarin crawls through a gutter in the wall, following a stream of water. Though the garden is ostensibly Fakhri's property, it does come to function as a shared space, and as a space in which each of the women there may attempt to find what their flights into silence were reaching for.

## ***The Garden***

In an interview, Neshat describes the garden as "a place of exile; a place that these women could escape to ... to be temporarily at peace. A shelter, a place of security, a new beginning, a second chance." (Neshat in Guerrasio 2010). The ambivalence between exile and sanctuary mirrors that in the two meanings of 'flight'; the garden is an ambivalent place in this narrative. Neshat notes that the garden is neither geographically consistent, nor wholly separate from dream: "[t]here was a desert, and then there was this lush green. It was like the garden had no walls once they entered ... we were playing with these paradoxical spaces; like heaven or like hell, but nothing that belonged on earth ... maybe this is a place where all the women are dead." (Neshat in Guerrasio 2010). Faezeh wanders around the garden in her dreams as well as in her waking hours, encountering both Munis' voice, visions of herself, and Zarin. The audience is not shown what Zarin sees in the garden, if she sees anything other than the trees; though she lies in the water, and on the ground, a physical proximity which neither Fakhri nor Faezeh emulate, it is difficult to read what these gestures signify, apart from perhaps a felt or desired closeness with the garden itself.

Here, I wish to return quickly to some of the issues touched on at the beginning of this thesis, specifically Aristotle and his description of language founding the human community. In his formulation, while all animals have ‘voice’ (*phônē*) to express pain and pleasure, humanity has language (*logos*) which can speak of justice and injustice, and found a community based upon this qualification of what constitutes a ‘good life’ (Heath 2005: 10). The silence of animals, of unspeaking nature, creates a metaphorical wilderness beyond this ‘City of Men’. As Heath notes in a discussion of this passage, to be human is thus conceived of as necessarily being *politicon zōion*, ‘a creature of a polis’, to be outside the city of humanity and language you must be ‘either a beast or a God’ (Heath 2005: 10). I am intrigued by the garden in this film, and the extent to which it is not simply a wilderness of silence into which these women have withdrawn themselves, away from all society, but instead a liminal space *between* the city and the wilderness of the desert. Neshat notes that the topography is inconsistent, but the narrative presents us with an approximate landscape of a lush orchard bounded on one side by a wall separating it from the road, and on another it comes suddenly to an end as it faces a desert that reaches to the horizon. When Faezeh comes to the garden, she wanders out into the edge of the silent desert, but is drawn back into the garden by the sound of a woman singing, the singer turns out to be Fakhri. The garden has become overgrown, but it retains traces of human habitation: a mossy table amid the trees, the straight lines of the acequia, and the house at the centre. The garden is very quiet, when Zarin is lying in the pond of water we can hear her breathing, though the sounds of the trees and birdsong also come to mark the garden, giving it an auditory presence. Neshat mentions this as a conscious decision: “we ... made it silent with just natural sounds because we thought even the garden had a voice of its own.” (Neshat in Guerrasio 2010). The garden’s ‘voice’ is audible in silence, it is given a specific presence in the narrative of the film, a presence marked especially by the absence of other people – the noise of the crowds in Tehran never come here. I mentioned earlier that Neshat speaks of this as a place where the women are dead: one of the guests at the party asks others how Fakhri could have left the city for a place so lonely, and “left her husband, and her life”. If the women are ‘dead’ in the garden, it is because they have separated themselves from life: from their lives in Tehran, and also from the events unfolding there, the demonstrations, the coup d’état. Their separation from the political events are more an unexpected coincidence, rather than the intention, of this separation. The ‘lives’ they ‘leave’ are not ‘life’ in a biological sense, but a specific ‘way of life’ – Aristotle’s *bios*, a way of life lived by humans, in a cultural, political, linguistic framework. Not that these lives disappear

when they are in the garden: they do not cease to be the people who they are, influenced by the histories of their lives, and the political and social world enforced outside of the garden. But the garden is a sanctuary from those 'lives' that they have lead, and opens the possibilities of other ways of living.

Like Munis' death (and recall that Munis is buried and returns to life in her own garden) the garden in Karaj does not ultimately confine the women, it is neither city nor desert, but it is also neither the public, nor the private spheres they have left. To stay with this theme of the garden as a space in which the women are 'dead', I wish to refer to back to Brown's essay on silence. She juxtaposes Primo Levi's use of the metaphor of 'drowning' to describe the alienation from familiar language he experienced on entering Auschwitz, with Adrienne Rich's line "Your silence today is a pond where drowned things live" (Brown 2005: 93). Levi's use of 'drowned' relates here to the experience of being alienated from familiar language, for "being at sea in words that do not communicate and by which one cannot communicate." (Brown 2005: 93). Reflecting on Rich's line, Brown places the stress on the last word, '*live*', to situate this 'pond' of silence as a space in which the drowned *survive*, despite their apparent death, their submersion. This is not an ungrounded interpretation. In Rich's poem, the drowned do seem to be living: "I fear this silence, / this inarticulate *life*. I'm waiting/ for a wind that will gently open this sheeted water/ ... show me what I can do/ for you, who have often made the unnameable/ nameable ..." (Rich 1974: 147-8 *emphasis added*). It is the addressee's silence which teems with drowned things, unarticulated; but equally it remains within their power to 'name the unnameable'. This silence might frighten Rich, but Brown asks: "What if silence is a reprieve from drowning in words that do not communicate or confer recognition, that only bombard or drown?" (2005: 93), recognising that language does not only 'found community' but also polices it, and in such a situation silence offers a place to hide. If the women are 'dead' in the garden, they are in a place where such 'dead' might live, or return to life from, such as Munis does, and also, it might be argued, Faezeh.

I have previously touched on Anne Carson's essay "The Gender of Sound" (1995), and its examination of how women's voices are compared to animal sounds, or to sounds which a man would never make. Much of this comes down to the conflating of the sound of women's voices with the uses of the voice, and the correlation of women's sounds to lack of control, to the exhibition of emotions (Carson 1995: 119, 126) rather than an expression of thoughts. Calls to modesty dictate not only what should be hidden of the body, but also regulates women's speech (Carson 1995: 129).

All of the women weep at some point in the narrative, though Munis cries only once, and at the very end, over the death of a young soldier. The crying is often unaccompanied by words, though it is also communicative, demonstrating pain and grief. None of the male characters ever show such emotion, they themselves are presumably confined by the same rules of propriety which compels them to refrain from such displays. The devaluing of women's voices, and their use to communicate emotions, serves as a form of silencing, by de-humanising them. The exhibition of emotion through women's voices or acts becomes blurred in the narrative of the film, since the demonstrations on the streets are also exhibitiv, but can still be distinguished as distinct from the ululations performed only by women, both at the funeral that Zarin wanders into (the men are praying silently in a separate room), and at the wedding preparations that are almost exclusively female which Faezeh encounters when she returns to Amir's house and unearths Munis. While women are shown at the demonstrations, there are certainly more men present, and Munis is the only woman present in all of the covert revolutionary activity. But this also reinforces the division between the correlating of women's voices to emotions (to the ritual cries at the funeral and wedding), and men's voices to thoughts (political demonstration). To an extent this mirrors the division between *phônê* and *logos* set up previously: the voice expresses pleasure and pain, and is linked to the speechlessness of animals, but speech expresses the just and unjust, and is foundational to being human.

But it is not only women's voices that are likened to nature, but also their bodies. Amir explicitly makes this correlation, inquiring how old Faezeh is, since "a woman's body is like a flower. Once it blossoms it soon withers away". Though not included in the narrative of the film, in the book Fakhri's husband tells her that after menopause, she is unlikely to 'enjoy a garden' (Parsipur 2009: 62). Less explicitly than this, all of the young women wear clothing patterned with flowers. Munis' dress is patterned with blossoms and leaves, Zarin's chador is pale blue with small buds, most of Faezeh's dresses, even her nightdress, are patterned with flower prints or embroidery. The dresses given by Fakhri<sup>32</sup> to Faezeh and Zarin are also flower-printed. While this might also be an issue of historical and cultural accuracy (the possibility of the prevalence of flower-patterned material in women's fashions), this also reinforces the association of women, and their bodies, with flowers, if only as a common metaphor or euphemism. Zarin appears surrounded by flowers in Faezeh's dream, and is seen

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<sup>32</sup> We see Fakhri give Faezeh a dress with blue flowers to wear at the party, but I am presuming that the other dresses worn by both Faezeh and Zarin have been given to them, since they arrive with nothing but the clothes that they are wearing, and Zarin abandons her blue chador outside the wall.

planting tiny paper flowers in the desert. Munis waters the flowers in her garden in the city, and the other three are, for much of the narrative, living in the garden in Karaj. While this ties the women to the societal clichés of being ‘like flowers’ (to blooming and withering as a way of conceiving of aging, or fragility, or the importance of visual – physical – beauty) it also links them to the garden, not in being ‘like nature’, but being alive, *living*, but also to being silent, a form of life which is still, and voiceless.

Water has a significant presence in this narrative: aside from Zarin’s compulsive scrubbing in the bath-house, she trails a stream of water into the garden, and once there, immerses herself in the pond. Munis submerges herself in the well in her own garden immediately after Faezeh has unearthed her. In both instances, these women are compelled to be in water – not merely to drink it, or wash their hands, but to be completely submerged. To be under water is to be partially deafened, the water blocks out the sounds from outside the water, or distorts them, but also amplifies sounds from beneath the surface. Water thus simultaneously silences, and opens the possibility for other sounds. It is perhaps for these reasons that Rich uses a pond to signify silence, a silence in which drowned things live; I have noted in my previous chapters that the use of being under water as a metaphor for silence seems fairly common. I am provoked into wondering what Zarin hears (aside from the garden’s voice and her own breath) when she is floating in the water. Zarin comes to be closely linked to the garden, as I have already mentioned, she lies in its waters, and on the ground, and Faezeh sees her wandering among the trees in her dreams. When Fakhri and the gardener first find Zarin, she is in the pond; though Fakhri may legally own the garden, Zarin found her way in first. In Faezeh’s dream, Zarin sits at the edge of the desert, surrounded by vermillion flowers, and in the waking world the audience sees Zarin planting tiny flowers made of folded paper in the sand (paper is after all, a product made of trees). Fakhri mentions how incredible it is that the flowers in the garden should suddenly flourish, just as Zarin is getting better – a correlation of flowers being like a woman, rather than the other way around. But the tree which comes crashing down through the window of the house is also linked to Zarin, she was not in the room, and appears unsurprised at what has happened, and yet it seems impossible that she could have physically pulled down the branches. The garden reflects, embodies even, Zarin’s states, her flourishing, her anger, and finally her sickness.

The garden is symbolic of a retreat from the world, shelter or flight from power, a silent space, a place to be Other, other than what one was outside. But it is also a

space of potential growth, transformation, creation. In "In Search of Our Mother's Gardens" (1994), Alice Walker's response to Virginia Woolf's A Room of One's Own, she situates the space of a garden as an analogue to Woolf's lockable room, but a space which is simultaneously also the thing being created in its own space. Walker's mother does not write anything, but she does make a garden; this garden in which she, despite being "so hindered and intruded upon in so many ways, [can still be] an artist..." (1994: 408). The garden is her mother's space, she does not refer to anyone else going about the necessary watering, replanting, pruning, digging (1994: 408). The garden is both space and what is created there, a space in which, and over which, her mother has control, and freedom: "it is only when my mother is working in her flowers that she is radiant, almost to the point of being invisible – except as Creator: hand and eye. She is involved in work her soul must have. ... She has handed down respect for the possibilities – and the will to grasp them." (1994: 408). The garden in Karaj also offers a space for creation for the women in this narrative – Zarin's paper flowers, Fakhri's singing, Faezeh's exploration of herself. Each of the women come to the garden for different reasons, and what role it serves for them is also different. Despite the title, the women are not seeking permanent segregation from men. Munis explicitly desires to engage with the men involved in the resistance movement, and in other, physical, 'male spaces', the street, the cafés. Fakhri and Faezeh also do not see the garden as a place of permanent removal from society. The garden itself is not wholly devoid of men: the gardener is inextricable from the garden, he says he has been there as long as he can recall, he is Fakhri's initial guide, and it is he who opens the gate for Faezeh. He is, however, remarkably quiet in comparison to the other men in the narrative, and remains placidly in the role of a caretaker, both of the garden, and also of Zarin, when she is first found. Zarin does not shrink from his touch when she wakes. For Fakhri, the garden and the house in its centre is a space of her own, away from her husband, and his constraints, a place where she might reclaim what she wants to be. She begins to sing again, and is called upon to sing at the party for her guests. Both as a mother figure for Zarin and Faezeh, and as hostess of the party, she has an authority and inter-connection with others which she lacked at the beginning of the narrative. If she finds these things in the garden, she wishes to re-enter the world beyond with them. The purpose of the party, of bringing so many people from the city out to Karaj, is precisely so they might see Fakhri, and what she has made in this place. Ultimately, what she wants to regain is the presence eroded by her husband's dismissal of her because of her age. In the end she does not win the man she loves, he chooses a woman who is younger, foreign, and

blonde. Though she is changed by the garden, the world beyond has largely remained the same.

Faezeh also undergoes a transformation in the garden, though unlike Fakhri, she did not set out seeking to be changed. When Munis leaves her at the gate, she tells her that she will be safe here, though Faezeh's first wanderings through the garden are obviously anxious. The garden sounds quieter, her footsteps and the sounds of her breath and her whispered praying, marks the extent to which she does not initially feel safe in the strange space of the garden. Unlike Fakhri, who does not even always wear a head-scarf outside the house, or Zarin, who abandons her chador (full-length veil) before crossing through the wall, Faezeh does not remove her chador even when she is inside the house. She wears it even in her dreamlike visions. I would argue that this is not solely about her original trepidation in the garden, but also a defensive reaction in the aftermath of her rape: the chador serves to create a boundary between her and the world. The garden also serves such a role, but it is not only a sanctuary that Faezeh finds, even if that is what she entered for. We see her praying in her room, still veiled, until she sees the gardener pruning bougainvillea beyond the window. When she slams closed the shutters she not only shuts out the world, but shuts herself in with her memories and dreams. In the darkness she confronts Munis' voice calling her name, and her own remarks about Amir's new bride not being a virgin. She runs through the orchard, chasing after another woman we presume to be Munis, she comes across herself, being raped. She sits among the trees, without her chador, and sees Zarin watching her. She follows Zarin, and we see her waking back at the house. She leaves the house in her nightdress, with her hair down and un-braided, and she goes out into the garden. After these scenes, she no longer wears the chador, even at the party, and afterwards, when she walks back down the road toward the city. Faezeh stumbles upon herself in the garden, and while the dream sequence reiterates her trauma, the aspects of herself that she seems to have found by the time she leaves are not ones of either shame or fragility. She also encounters herself in a mirror, brushing her hair, but then pausing to contemplate herself, to take off her shirt and touch her breasts, and to firmly meet her own gaze in the glass. When Amir appears at the party, he is shocked not only by the guests, but by Faezeh's transformation also. He asks: "What have you done to your appearance? Where is your veil?" when she makes no answer, he continues "I can't believe you have ended up in a place like this. Who are all these decadent people around you? Are you still praying?" He asks her age, and also proposes to her, telling her not to worry about his first wife, she'll be like a servant to her. Faezeh refuses him, and also says how grateful she is to see how lucky



she has been. She does not make any mention of her rape, or why she left the city, she allows Amir to trace all her changes to the garden. In this she begins to create a narrative that acknowledges not what has been forced on her, but what she has chosen to do. After Zarin dies, Faezeh returns to the city. Why, for what, is not disclosed, but she chooses to go.

For Zarin, the garden provides a permanent separation; she demonstrates no desire to leave the garden, except to venture out into the desert, to retreat further into silence. Fakhri's decision to open the garden for the party causes her to relapse into her silent sickness. She goes out into the garden to lie under the trees; the narration muses: "What is it about people that their hunger, their desires, seem to eat everything: the light, the air, the quiet. Now the orchard was turning, breaking under this great weight as if it fell ill, and there was no retreat, no rest any longer." For Zarin, silence, and the garden, are a cloistering from the world from which she does not wish to return, there is nothing in the world beyond the garden that she longs for, and when the 'outside' intrudes in the forms of Fakhri's guests and later the soldiers, she physically suffers from the voices and sounds. If it is the world that causes her pain, its intrusion into the garden pushes her to a physical death. The images of her suffering – expressed not only through the garden but through apparent physical pain – provokes the question of what is the cause of her pain: the presence of strangers, of men, their intrusion into the garden and house, or the sounds of them, which is all she has contact with, but also what she cannot escape.

## ***Self-Reflection***

Neshat says of the character's preoccupations with their bodies that "[t]hey're very narcissistic things, yet very human." (Neshat in Guerrasio 2010). This creates a tension between the characters' focus on themselves, and the extent to which this focus is considered familiar and comprehensible. But what is this narcissism, and the humanity within it? The women's relations to their bodies are often of vulnerability: to violence, broken legs, rape, judgement, being too old, not a virgin, not blonde. What then is the significance of their narcissism? Narcissus died and metamorphosed into a flower after becoming too entranced with his reflection; in this context the myth speaks towards the danger of being re-formed into an object if one becomes too focused only on one's appearance. I have already noted that the women are linked to flowers, verbally and visually. But what of their reflections? Zarin appears very

concerned with her body, she spends time in front of mirrors in the brothel, applying lipstick, and perfume. Her compulsive bathing, her starvation and self-harm also gesture towards a preoccupation with her body. Fakhri also sits before the mirror in her bedroom, though in this instance to remove lipstick. Her appearance always speaks towards a meticulous care towards her hair, her makeup, her clothing. As she walks up a staircase to meet an old friend, she is surrounded by mirrors, reflected many times over. Does their preoccupation with their reflections, their appearances, reinforce and render them complicit in the judgement on their bodies, turning them into flowery objects even in their own eyes? Yet both Zarin and Fakhri use mirrors not only to look at themselves, but to gaze over their shoulders, to watch men who are in the room behind them. It is also through mirrors that the viewer sees Amir's bride, and Faezeh praying. These mirrors do not only reflect the body, but *expand* vision, allowing one to see in ways you otherwise could not. In calling them 'narcissistic things' all focus is honed on their vanities, at them seeing only their bodies when they look in a mirror, rather than the possibility of seeing more than this. Liana Badr writes about the pressure to avoid 'mirror-gazing':

[M]y mother warned me against standing for too long in front of the mirror... desire is a dangerous thing for a girl in our society, as is exploring the coverings which shield the body from the eyes and words of others that can so easily enclose it in their grasp... [the mirror's] cold eye has stared relentlessly at human beings and their bodies ... and, more dangerously, it has stared at their souls as well... For how can you communicate with yourself if not through some sort of mirror? ... The mirror has a deadly charm... tempting you to look at yourself and examine how you relate to the world... (Badr in Faqir 1998: 27-8)

This recognises the ambiguity of gazing at oneself, the narcissism or vanity, the 'dangerous desire' and the need for modesty, to hide from eyes and speech which can *touch*, grasp. But also the gazing *into* oneself, contemplating beyond the visible, and entering into a dialogue about one's place in the world. Faezeh certainly does shield herself for much of the film, and yet also encounters her reflections in her dream-visions and in the mirror, encounters which lead her to self-reflection, her evaluation of her world, her luck, and ultimately her own agency in regards to her body and actions. What do Fakhri and Zarin see when they gaze into their mirrors? They watch over their shoulders without directly looking, they not only see themselves, but themselves-in-the-world. And much of this takes place in silence – they do not speak

when they meet their own eyes in the mirror, or use the mirror to look into places their eyes cannot see, the dialogue with themselves is one that no one else hears. Badr's comments about the mirror runs parallel to Spacks' engagement with privacy:

I associate... imaginative transformations with privacy because they are unique to each individual who experiences them, unknowable to others unless the possessor decides to communicate them, and quite possibly at odds with communal assumptions. They belong to the realm of self-enclosure and of potential resistance that we connect with privacy. (2003: 28)

The mirror is a private space in this narrative because in it these characters confront themselves, not out of vanity or out of concern for the superficial, but in order to look deeper, to be able to 'meet their own eyes', in order to reflect on what the mirror reflects: themselves, and the world around them.

## ***In Private***

So far I have been writing about silence in terms of flight, and of the garden as offering a physical manifestation of such a space. The issue that this has been circling around is privacy. As I discussed in relation to "The Sphinx without a Secret", by 'privacy' I do not mean confinement to the private sphere, though apart from Fakhri, the women generally are excluded from the public, but my point in focusing on privacy is that it is not equivalent to domesticity. I began my engagement with this film by discussing silence as signifying oppression, and also a flight from power, removing oneself from a dialogue one cannot otherwise control. This is a form of privacy. The etymology of privacy links it to deprivation, to being without, or removed from the public. But I think it is worth distinguishing between 'privacy' and 'privation' in their modern uses. The flights taken by these women, their silences and quiet places, reach towards having a space (even if its borders are co-terminate with the boundaries of their bodies) in which they might be separate, 'free', authoritative – that is, that they might *author*, and be responsible for what goes on around them. The narrative ends with Munis' fall from the roof, and it is ambiguous as to whether this is a return to the first time she jumped, or if she has jumped again – the first time fleeing the confines of her house, the second perhaps the failed revolution, both situations in which she has no right to choose. As she falls, she muses: "Death is not so bad. You

only think it is. All that we wanted was to find a new form, a new way. Release.” She could as well be referring to the failed revolt against the coup d’état, as each of the women’s flights away from the lives they lead at the beginning of the film. It is with this in mind (the desperate attempt to find a new form, another way of being) that I wish to return to the idea of privacy.

In remaining silent, these women keep their words to themselves, and while quietness is also tied to issues of appropriate speech and modesty, there is significance in the choice to separate oneself through silence. Wendy Brown writes that subjugation can be seen as a deprivation of privacy (Brown 2005: 95), to be surveilled, judged, and importantly, to be complicit in judging oneself and others. Faezeh judges Parvin for the rumour that she is not a virgin, and chastises Munis for saying it might not be important. Amir calls Munis indecent for ignoring him. Fakhri’s husband mocks her for flirting ‘at her age’. The women’s verbal silences are a ‘keeping to themselves’, Munis’ activism is a defiance of confinement, and the retreat to the garden is an escape from the world which judges and compels them to judge themselves. Lochrie draws on MacKinnon’s argument that women are kept private, but often do not have their own privacy – this is the important distinction between *being* or *having* a secret, or privacy, in the first one is set aside, in the second, one has set aside a part of oneself (Lochrie 1999: 138). Munis is confined to her house, and her brother struggles to understand her ‘restlessness’, but she is not keeping a secret, even if he sees her moods or actions as unfathomable. Faezeh does not disclose that Munis has killed herself, or that she came back to life – the latter could be argued to provide Munis with the freedom of not-being-looked-for by her brother. It also does not appear that anyone other than Munis knows that Faezeh was raped, this ‘secret’ enabling Faezeh to choose for herself whether or not to disclose it, even to the other women. Zarin’s unpredictability is also tied to the fact that she does not talk about her thoughts, even if they are made manifest in the garden: she says nothing, secreting herself in silence, even from the other women. While Zarin sinks into silence, Faezeh finds in the privacy of the garden a new way of being with herself, and a new relation to the world.

### ***Shared Solitude***

Brown argues that, while there is an urgent need to bear witness to discrimination, fetishising the breaking of silence does not allow for the recognition of the desire for

privacy, especially given a situation when privacy may be experienced as a way of resisting oppression. And yet, while silence may be a form of resistance in specific contexts, it does not ultimately represent freedom from that oppression: "...silence is a response to domination, it is not *enforced* from above but rather *deployed* from below...Yet it would be a mistake to value this resistance too highly, for it is... a defence in the context of domination ... rather than a sign of emancipation from it." (Brown 2005: 97). Certainly many of the silences in this narrative are in direct response to the contexts in which these women find themselves, each to their own experiences of constraint, devaluing or violation. Silence may be resistance, but it is entered into precisely because of the social and individual experiences of oppression. The question of whether there are silences which are forms of freedom, and not only forms of resistance, is an interesting one, hinging on whether it is possible to conceive of a silence which is entered into not out of strategy or necessity. Conceiving of the space offered by privacy – silence as a withdrawal from the world – as a space not only of ‘sanctuary’, but of ‘creativity’, ‘self-reflection’, and the pleasures of these, a space in which other forms of thinking, critique, or resistance might be incubated, offers the potential of conceiving of this silence as not only being defensive. The narrative of Neshat’s film uses silence to signify these different forms of oppression, through the motif of silencing, but also explores the silences which the women willingly enter into, which are embodied in the garden. The strategic silences of these women open the possibility for a space outside of the lives which constrain them; the garden offers both a physical manifestation of this third space, which is neither the public, nor the private sphere, and acts as a metaphor for it also. The garden as a space of transformation does not only depend on their self-reflection in solitude, on a retreat into themselves, though each of these women do make very different changes to themselves, independent from each other, the garden is also a space which is *shared*. I have already noted that Fakhri takes on a maternal role for Zarin and Faezeh, that the women sit together, eat together, speak and listen to one another. The contents of these conversations in the garden is not always audible, leaving open the question of what it is that they talk about, what they share. In Munis’ garden in the city, we know that she and Faezeh talk about their different opinions on politics, virginity, their bodies – this is not a ‘silent’ conversation, but it is also not one that they engage in when Amir is present. Just as Faezeh identifies the café as a space not-for-women, the ‘space’ of their conversation is not for men, or at least it is Amir’s presence which marks a change in the space of the garden into one in which they are not as free to speak, nor in Faezeh’s case to be unveiled. Though most of the conversations in Karaj are not heard by the viewer, the women appear relaxed in each other’s company –

what constrains them is what they have brought with them: Faezeh's initial anxieties, Fakhri's desire for the society beyond the garden which proves devastating for Zarin.

Zarin does not speak, but equally the ways in which she does communicate her antipathy for the party are not recognised for what they are. Her sudden relapse, the falling branches, are non-verbal displays, but they are not understood by Fakhri or Faezeh. The shared space of the garden offers the potential for these women to not only 'find themselves' but also to be listened to by each other – it is the sound of Fakhri's voice which draws Faezeh back from the desert, and in her silence Zarin appears to be listening constantly – listening to the others, listening to the garden itself also. The theme of falling silent in order to listen has been present, if only implicitly, in my previous chapters, but it is the subject of my next chapter, in which I posit listening, as a form of silence, as something essential to communication, and therefore community, rather than situated in opposition or separate from it.

This chapter has focused upon silences which are agential, chosen – in the forms of secrecy or resistance silence has been given definition in contrast to either oppressive discourses, or the judgements of others, refusals to listen. As is clear in the cultural fictions examined here – the short story and feature film – that this separation can be both defensive, but also a means of creating 'ones own space'. What is posited in this silence – either of secrecy or privacy in these contexts – is independence, a separation from forms of constraint. Here it also became clear that this need not be confined to forms of solitude, but also hold the potential to create shared spaces, which is the focus of the next chapter.

# Chapter Four

## Silence as Listening

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### *Shared Silence*

In all three previous chapters, the discussion of silence often either focussed upon or implied the issue of separation, though what was in that space of silence varied from inhuman Otherness, the isolation of dehumanisation, and lastly independence. In this chapter I intend to shift to thinking through silence in terms other than separation. Whereas in my previous chapters, silence has functioned as a barrier, something preventing communication or connection with Other, either experienced in terms of alienation, or in terms of a defensive action, here, in the form of listening, silence begins to function as a bridge. The theme of silence as listening has not been completely absent from my previous chapters – it was evident in my engagement with The Silence of Abraham Bomba (2009), in which Torner explicitly refers to the almost-tangible silence of listening to this testimony. It was also through the possibility of listening, sharing a space, that I discussed some of the potentials for privacy (a privacy which was not only about solitude) in my previous chapter. That listening should have been previously evident is unsurprising – ultimately it is a fundamental part of any communication, any attempt at community. In listening, silence becomes an act, not of separation, but of reciprocity, *being with* an Other by creating a mutual space. It is this theme of mutuality, of being in relation with Others, which is the subject of this chapter on listening. I shall begin with an examination of Dauenhauer's work Silence: The Phenomenon and Its Ontological Significance (1980), because although described in fairly dense terms, he is thinking through silence as listening as a concept fundamental to language.

## *Opening Silence*

In this work, Dauenhauer seeks to set out a number of fundamental characteristics of silence. His further exegesis of the dynamics of discourse and tradition, and his later examinations of the philosophical works of Heidegger, Kierkegaard, Merleau-Ponty and others, are all discussed in relation to how they support or are incommensurate with the silence that he sets out to describe. Silence is, Dauenhauer reiterates, a human performance. It is enacted always in relation to an utterance. No matter how unthinkingly someone may utter something, language is, for Dauenhauer, a fundamentally cultural act, explicitly different from a biological response (1980: 24); silence likewise is 'an active human performance' (1980: 79) – and throughout this text he ponders the extent to which silence and language are bound up with what it means to be human. Dauenhauer's silences are always chosen – they are not 'traumatic', and they always carry meaning. Though he does discuss the 'demoniacal' silence in Kierkegaard, and briefly refers to 'dark silence' which would be similar to my discussion of the loss of language, Dauenhauer sets this apart almost as a tangent, separate from his engagement with silence as an 'integral to language', every-day concept. Dauenhauer's silence is tied up with language, it is something which works with language, alongside, and within it. His term is 'equiprimordial' (1980: 5) – it is as old as language, it does not precede it, or come after it. To have what humans conceive of as silence, there must simultaneously be language. Perhaps it is possible to say that a silence preceding language is not one we can readily conceive of. These silences are extensively structural in his descriptions – part of the 'workings' of language.

Discussing the silences which are intrinsic to utterance, Dauenhauer argues that while these silences are not always easy to 'hear', they certainly exist conceptually – the idea of a space, a separation which also *joins*. It is from the 'functional' examination of silence that Dauenhauer begins to explore other, more conceptual issues. Of the silences at work within language that Dauenhauer discusses, the first is 'intervening silence': the space between words or phrases in an utterance (1980: 6). This is starkly clear in its absence: when hearing an utterance where one cannot distinguish the words from each other, one hears something incomprehensible, an undifferentiated babble, not unlike Levi's 'hubbub' of unfamiliar speech, his drowning language, which was mentioned by Brown in my last chapter. One-may-speak-without-pause, (onemaywritewithoutspaces) but conceptually the separation exists. Intervening



silences are the pauses before the punch-line of a joke, and in the relating of a tale. In each intervening silence there is something of the words or phrases which it stands between, an echo of the preceding word, and a foreshadow of the next (1980: 8). It is often possible to tell when a sentence breaks off, or a word, not only through punctuation but through our expectation to find certain meanings, and our presupposition that something is missing if given what appears to be only a fragment. The space at the end, the blankness of 'the rest', is silence out of the spaces where it would be unnoticed. Between words, the space almost disappears because what is being focused on are the words themselves. It is only when the space opens unexpectedly, or the words seem to point towards more that is to be said but remains unsaid, that the space becomes noticed. The silence at the end of a fragment is one of absence, rather than the integral silences that Dauenhauer is describing as 'intervening' – a gap which is unnoticed because it is 'supposed' to be there. But it is not just within an utterance that these intrinsic silences are to be found. Utterance is also framed by 'fore-and-after' silence (1980: 9-10): "Merleau-Ponty speaks of the end of a speech or text as the 'lifting of a spell'. If after-silence lifts a spell, then fore-silence casts a spell." (1980: 13). Like intervening silence, fore-silence carries within it a trace of what has been uttered before, a context and history for the utterance (1980: 11). After-silence closes the utterance, it renders it as memory, rather than utterance, and when it is forgotten, its after-silence has also finally ended (1980: 13). Utterances 'speak to' what has gone before, and call for reply from as yet unspoken utterances: "[every utterance] originates as response and terminates as interrogation..." (1980: 14). This silence which Dauenhauer describes as fringing utterance creates a space for that utterance; silence both stands ground, separating utterances, and yet silence also 'yields', giving way, paving the way, for utterance. And it is this latter point which Dauenhauer sees as not only being part of the structure of language/silence, but as something which has consequences for intersubjectivity.

Silence creates a space – this is not radically different from what I have been discussing in previous chapters, but in Dauenhauer's conception this space opens the potential for some connection. Not only between words, to be hooked together to pile up meaning, but also between people, as dialogue. It is this *opening silence*, which Dauenhauer sees as being at work in forms of religious silence, and also the 'silence of intimates'. Dauenhauer's 'liturgical silence' is the silence of prayer or religious worship – all his examples being drawn from within a specifically Christian tradition (Roman Catholicism and Quakers). In ritual worship, a space of silence is held open by the worshipers, a space in which God may work, even if that action is inaction, that

is, even if God's answer is silence (1980: 19). But it is not only prayer which opens such a space – for Dauenhauer all utterances appeal beyond themselves for some form of 'authentification', and authentication which is not simply the presence of another utterance. Nor does this silence make sense in any form of isolation – these silences exist in contexts where there is "someone for whom silence leaves room" to respond (1980: 20). A response which does not 'respond' to what has just been said, which creates non-sense, is a response which seems to have not heard the previous utterance. Just as Dauenhauer recognises that the silence or inaction of God to prayer is not what is at issue, here also response is not an utterance, but the authentication of being listened to.

Dauenhauer, by seeing silence as always in context with language, argues that it cannot be wholly 'autonomous'; like utterance, it must be intersubjective. Silence cannot be performed in radical independence (1980: 24), but must also be performed in reference to a context and to others. I shall come back to this point. But Dauenhauer does not only see silence in terms of connecting an individual to another – there is a 'yielding' in silence which he also sees as necessary for intersubjectivity. In being between the Self and an Other, silence includes a recognition of the existence of this Other, and thus, in Dauenhauer's terms, 'an awareness of finitude and awe' (1980: 24). 'Finitude' because it implies a recognition of the self's limits, of there being someone other, with their own ways of knowing, and their own potential to utter; 'awe' because this recognition also implies one's own vulnerability, the possibility of being surprised, for good or bad – this Other who might be a source of fear, or delight (for 'awe' is both fear and reverence). This is a continuation of the observation that there can be no 'radical independence' in silence. To become silent in the presence of another is to open a space into which they might utter. Dauenhauer writes:

In performing silence one acknowledges some centre of significance of which he [sic] is not the source, a centre to be wondered at, to be in awe of. The very doing of silence is the acknowledgement of the agent's finitude and of the awesomeness of that of which he [sic] is not the source .... [T]he agent is aware that the doing of silence opens him [sic] to meet that which lies beyond his control. (1980: 25).

The Other, according to Dauenhauer, can only touch the self through the self's yielding, and the self is thus responsible for the appearance of the Other (1980: 25). It is like saying that in order to see the Other, we must first of all open our eyes. This

yielding to the Other simultaneously binds the self to the other. In recognising the presence of the Other, in closing off one's own utterances to allow for the Other's fore-silence, one is binding oneself into intersubjectivity with the Other, in opening a space for their utterance, and silences of their own making. What this silence *is* in ordinary terms is *listening*. To listen to the Other is to recognise that one's own world, one's own voice or way of seeing, is both finite, and not the only perspective, and to speak is to presuppose that another is listening, and to listen is to open the possibility of contact with another's voice, another's perspective. For Dauenhauer, if we talk of silence not only do we have to presuppose an intersubjective context (in part because we are always already intersubjective, and to speak of silence, even to contrast it to language, must necessarily be in this intersubjective space), but also to see this listening silence as a prerequisite for intersubjectivity (1980: 80). We cannot be in community with others unless we recognise them outside of us, and fall silent in order to listen.

Listening is just one aspect of silence, for Dauenhauer: "[S]ilence in all of its aspects originates or opens the way for something." (1980: 77). But it is silence as listening – rather than as a structure in speech, unheard but between the words – that I am interested in. He returns to this theme of intersubjectivity: "...the world is in a kind of dialogue with me. For this dialogue to proceed I must both speak and listen." (1980: 118). This silence which *opens* a space – rather than creating a boundary, or being symbolic of one – this silence which creates the possibility of dialogue and connection to something 'outside' of the self, beyond one's ken, is fundamentally different from the silences discussed in previous chapters, though as in secrecy it remains a choice, rather than an imposition. But it is important to keep the issue of choice visible, even here when thinking about 'listening'. One does not 'open' one's ears as one does one's eyes – likewise the ear must constantly hear, unless deafened. The choice to listen, rather than being forced to hear, is what constitutes 'genuine listening' for Gemma Corradi Fiumara, as she engages with 'listening' as urgent to philosophy:

Among the most deceiving [false meanings of listening] is the idea that listening is something imposed by the holders of standard rationality upon those who can not or should not speak. A large part of the linguistic interaction that underlies human coexistence is certainly not listening so much as endurance or forced feeding ... (Fiumara 1990: 93)

The silence that Fiumara sees as necessary is a listening which, like speaking, constitutes a decision, and thus is neither an 'inability' to express oneself, or 'imposed muteness' (1990: 99), nor the previously mentioned 'listening' which is 'endured'. This listening, this opening silence is not about being forced to listen, being unable to stop one's own exposure to voice, sound, noise, being unable to 'shut it out'. It is in listening that Fiumara sees silence in its 'best' form, in its potential to open a space for communication: "The highest function of silence is revealed in the creation of a coexistential space which permits dialogue to come along." (1990: 99). Philosophy, or rather philosophers, need to 'be able to listen in spite of the din' of language (1990: 95), because it is "only when we know how to be silent will that of which we cannot speak begin to tell us something" (1990: 99). Falling silent allows for an encounter of something outside of ourselves, 'that of which we cannot speak' – in this context, another's words, another's knowledge, which is outside of our own. Like Dauenhauer, Fiumara sees silence in terms of an intersubjective space, one in which there is something ethical at stake:

If we wonder where the philosopher should go and whether he should hurry we might reply in the words of Canetti: 'But what is urgent? What he feels and recognises in others and what they cannot say.... He has to be capable of two things: to feel strongly and to think; and to *hear* the others and take them seriously in a never-ending passion. The impression of congruence must be sincere, undimmed by any vanity ... It is the most precious but also the most terrifying thing that a man [sic] can experience.' (1990: 94 *emphasis in original*).

Dauenhauer's 'awe' is recreated here in terms of simultaneous 'preciousness' and 'terror', the 'congruence' between the listener and speaker one of 'recognition' between them which extends beyond what is said, into what also 'cannot be said'. There are two silences here – both the silence of the listener, and also the potential for silence in the 'speaker', the 'Other', the limits of their language, what they cannot say, but also perhaps what they choose not to utter. Fiumara aligns this with the 'unknown', much as Dauenhauer identifies it with 'finitude', the unknown outside of your own limits.

'Performing silence', 'doing silence', 'to hear the others and take them seriously', these situate listening silence as a conscious choice, and as an act that is integral to being with others, engaging with this world which is not centred around ourselves.

The concept of silence, of listening, opening a space is common within a number of theological or spiritual discourses; a number are discussed, even briefly, by Dauenhauer, and I have also touched on the concept of listening or silence in theological terms, for example in Picard, and to some extent also in Maitland. However, I would like to find a way of navigating through these ideas which does not keep gesturing towards dialogues with God. While acknowledging that silences – in terms of listening, or authentication – are easily interpreted metaphysically, or theologically, Dauenhauer insists on not confining the conceptualisation of silence to these interpretations (1980: 21). Likewise I am not focusing here on religious silence, or prayer, or listening to/for a God, as I do not wish to move into metaphysics. I do not wish to confine the conception of a dialogue as being with an/the Other, when these are always given as singular, as though there is only ever one ‘Other’ in contrast to a clear ‘Self’; but I also do not wish to confine myself to thinking through these ‘opening silences’ or ‘listening silences’ in terms of God (as a great Other, or Thou). I find it more useful to think through this in terms of multiple Others, other beings – not about a relation to God, but to others with whom one might relate. I now wish to turn to another engagement which is particularly focused on listening, and what might be ‘heard’ when listening to silence, and also to ‘noise’, an engagement which conceives of listening not only in terms of listening to Others, or searching for comprehensibility.

### ***Listening for its own Sake***

Voegelin’s book Listening to Noise and Silence (2010) is explicitly concerned with working towards a ‘philosophy of sound art’ – and it is important to keep this context in mind, because her work is not an exploration of testimony, or secrecy, and in drawing on her concepts, I wish to keep it explicit that I am extrapolating them for my own uses, rather than using them in the way she intends within this work. But I do not think that this extrapolation is too great a one, as her discussions of the relations between noise, silence, and listening, do not lose their pertinence when taken beyond the scope of sound installations, or music. I touch on Voegelin because her work on listening raises two questions – one concerned with noise, the other with silence. Voegelin situates noise as being outside of language, even as being indescribable – this renders it alongside silence, when silence is conceived of in terms of being not-language. It is also worth recalling the extent to which the outside of language has been described as ‘silent’ regardless of whether what is situated there makes noise –

the silence of animals, for example, regardless of their ability to make sounds, even communicate through them. In noise Voegelin sees the possibility for crossing boundaries instituted by language. Her engagement with silence, and listening to silence, is similar to my previous discussion of privacy, insofar as she situates an encounter with oneself in silence.

To begin with noise: in Voegelin's discussion noise is sound which is not language; noise is that which "can only find its way to language in the acknowledgment that it can't." (2010: 65). This theme of indescribability was previously encountered in my first chapter. This indescribability in noise is something isolating, something which separates the hearer from all others (2010: 44), much like Scarry's description of the isolation implied in being unable to describe pain. This isolation is linked to a certain solitariness which Voegelin sees in all listening, a solitariness which is useful in removing one from a 'myth of the collective' (2010: 40). Just as in my previous engagement with privacy, and Woolf's situating of the possibility for independent thought as being dependent on some form of privacy, Voegelin finds something critically important in the possibility of being isolated, and questioning even the basis of communal, hegemonic meaning (2010: 40). There is an Otherness to noise for Voegelin – noise remains *non-sense* (2010: 46). It is in listening to noise that a listener is affirmed as being bodily – a body which listens, physically through its ears and their internal structures, a body which can even feel noise on its skin if what it touches vibrates. Sound is motion – vibration, waves – silence is either our deafness (the limits of our hearing), or else it is stillness, its motionlessness being what is gestured towards in its etymology.

Voegelin defines 'muteness' as a 'numbing' or 'anaesthetising' of hearing – an artificial encounter with the world as though it were purely visible, and not also about hearing (2010: 11-12). While for Voegelin 'muteness' is a deafness, 'silence' is a form of attentiveness, of listening. The sounds individuals can make extend beyond language, from the sounds of our own movement, our physical presence in the world, to the vocal sounds which nevertheless do not constitute words. But it is the body which hears, and also the body which can make noise, and be aware of its own soundings, which both are and are not language: "My voice meets [another's] voice not through language but through both our fleshness.... It is the tentative approach of our naked bodies to the civilization of speaking for which we have to invent ourselves as fleeting associations by making our own noise." (2010: 73). Noise is for Voegelin the point where physicality becomes sound; in Scarry's context, making sounds may

form part of the fight against death: “so long as one is speaking the self extends out beyond the boundaries of the body .... Their ceaseless talk articulates the unspoken understanding that only in silence do the edges of the self become coterminous with the edges of the body it will die with.” (Scarry 1985: 33). While Scarry is referring to linguistic sounds (talking), Voegelin applies this also to wilfully made noise. Voegelin’s cases are, as I have said, taken from sound art, Scarry’s work is an investigation of pain and torture – I feel that it is important to recognise that Voegelin’s discussions of the body are firmly situated in a context where she has agency. Voegelin’s focus on the body is an important one – our awareness of the world is mediated through the body, but I am cautious also of her unambiguous alignment of noise, non-linguistic sounds, with ‘nakedness’, a naturalness outside of ‘civilisation’. And while she interprets noise as a means of expressing the body without language, language also requires the body – to be voiced, written, signed, read, or heard – and thus also marks the presence of corporeality. There is also the danger that, once again, in correlating presence to presence projected through sound, silence becomes associated with the loss or absence of that presence. While shouting might ‘expand corporeality’ beyond the boundaries of the body, falling silent is not the same as ceasing to exist (Scarry’s discussion of death being noted). To an extent Voegelin is taking up the Aristotlean map in which language is the ‘City of Men’ – “the civilization of speaking” (2010: 73) – and sets noise outside of it. She does not redraw the map but she does demand an encounter with the ‘wilderness’, with the voices (*phone*) outside.

For Voegelin, the possibility held in noise is the potential of meeting outside of language, and therefore outside of the identity constraints attached to language. ‘Noisy voices’ question the possibility of communication, in being non-sense, outside of language, isolating; the sort of language that they might possibly be is one of doubt and uncertainty, a desire to communicate even in the absence of a previously given template of communicating (2010: 72). ‘Noisy voices’ are not just non-linguistic human sounds, Voegelin also includes anything which falls outside of dominant discourse, which goes un-listened to because it cannot be expressed within accepted discourse, as a ‘noisy voice’ (2010: 71). The extent to which non-dominant discourse is still within *language* is not touched on by Voegelin. But the conception of these ‘noisy voices’ as disrupting language is similar to Anne Carson’s (1995) discussion of catastrophic speech, and the untranslatable, which disrupts the clichés of predictable language, which I engaged with in my first chapter. Part of Voegelin’s agenda is laying out her philosophy of sound art, one which she sees as needing to explicitly

refuse to identify groupings of ‘sameness and difference’ which she sees as always ultimately serving to create, legitimize and reinforce discrimination, hierarchies, and exclusion, something which she sees sound, in being outside of language, should be in a position to challenge and unravel (2010: 72). This is a tall order for a philosophy of sound art, but also not what I intend to focus on. I bring up this issue of noise because – although in Voegelin’s discussion it is most certainly distinct from silence – it remains separated outside of language in a way that silence often is, drawing a connection between these two, apparently quite different concepts. Furthermore, thinking about listening to noise – listening to sounds in which meaning is unclear – helps to destabilise any presuppositions that listening is always ‘easy’, or that what it awaits is always comprehensible. It is also useful to think about what is called ‘noise’ – the sounds of animals, the sounds that others make that is felt to be strange, or to infringe, ‘barbaric’ speech, these things which are also associated with silence – and to think about the possibility of actively listening even to what you know you cannot presume to understand.

Turning more explicitly to ‘silence’: whereas noise was something which demanded attention, and could not be ignored, silence requires the listener to pause, to actively listen for it, and also to quieten themselves; since the listener themselves also can create sound, silence requires a complicity from the listener in order to be (2010: 82). What a listener hears in silence is both the possibility of communication, and they also hear themselves, their own presence, their own subjectivity: “*Silence is not the absence of sound but the beginning of listening.*” (2010: 83 *emphasis added*). If ‘listening’ becomes an attentiveness, it is not only an attention to the audible, but to anything that might come to our attention. The theme of ‘attentiveness’ shall be returned to in greater depth in my engagement with King-Kok Cheung, later in this chapter.

What Voegelin keeps returning to is that in silence what the listener hears is *themselves* – their own sounds, their own presence.<sup>33</sup> I have already touched on her concept of isolation, and the importance of this particular solitude in which one is independent remains in her engagement with silence.

... subjectivity is drawn in silence. ... My ‘I’ hears within the quiet soundscape, through its silence, my sounds. My subjectivity is produced

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<sup>33</sup> If a sense of self is based on the *senses*, then I don’t think that one should be privileged over another. Voegelin seems to begin with the argument that visuality has been privileged, but then simply reinstates hearing in a similar position.



in this intersubjective act of listening to silent sounds that meet me in the [quiet]<sup>34</sup> .... Silence is a mirror that shows this formless subject to himself.... Silence is the place of the 'I' in the listened-to world. (2010: 92-3)

Here Voegelin describes listenings which are utterly alone. Alone, you hear nothing but yourself. This is a similar argument to the one put forwards by Spacks which I discussed in my previous chapter and the exploration of privacy as a space in which one can be both self-reflexive, and autonomous. Voegelin uses the metaphor of a mirror to describe this silence, the same image which formed part of my discussion of Neshat's film Women Without Men (2010). But it is the point where listening and silence become the ground for intersubjectivity, and the possibility of communication, that I find more interesting here.

While noise remains non-sense, Voegelin does situate the desire to communicate (though not a 'system of speaking') in noise, and it is this desire to communicate which she identifies as the necessary basis for language (2010: 87). Silence is not opposite to noise in this understanding, but is the basis for listening which also is a necessity for communication (2010: 87). For all the reiteration that in silence one hears oneself in isolation, it is in silence also that others are encountered. And it is the possibility of 'intersubjective listening' which Voegelin describes as politicising sound – in silence it is the listener's agency to listen which situates both themselves, and themselves-within-the-world (2010: 94). It is this relation 'with' that I take to be not only about being in an auditory 'landscape', but also with others. Voegelin situates great potential in this listening – in it she sees the possibility of a form of belonging which, though linked with the desire and effort to communicate, is not tied down to language, and the national and cultural specificities attached to individual languages:

[The] self finds the collective from his<sup>35</sup> solitary agency of listening through his body rather than through language ... and it is his effort to communicate, to belong, that is the belonging rather than an assumed

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<sup>34</sup> This quotation is taken from a passage in which Voegelin is discussing listening in the midst of a snow-covered landscape. I have removed the references to snow and ice, and replaced them with 'quiet', in order to make the discussion more general, and not confined to wintery terrains.

<sup>35</sup> Voegelin's listener is always designated in the masculine, unless she is referring to her own experience.

and preordained position of national or cultural identity backed by an *a priori* language. (2010: 94)

There is something crucial in Voegelin's articulation of the 'solitary agency of listening' – the choice *to be attentive*, which is not simply to passively hear, but to actively engage in communication by listening. I am however, cautious of her setting the body in opposition to identity, nation, culture, language – even when not speaking, we are 'in culture'. Whether we touch another person, and where: hands, feet, face; how close we stand, whose eyes yours meet, how much of our body is covered, what gestures – these are culturally constrained. It is difficult to project how a person removed completely from any culture might gesture, or sound. Language is situated before nation or culture here, but it is difficult to say which one precedes the other, since nation, culture, language, are difficult to disentangle, and implicate one another in their production. But I also think that her situating of the 'effort to communicate, to belong' as that which constitutes 'the belonging' is important, in that it figures belonging as a verb, an action, an effort, and one that is not solitary, or fixed. In Voegelin's understanding it is through listening that there is community, capable of communicating. It is through silence, the choice to 'begin listening' that there is inter-relation.

What is heard is transitory, ephemeral, and can be unpredictable, it is through listening that "doubt and astonishment" can challenge "the illusion of a habitual and total meaning" (2010: 39). I take this argument that listening opens the possibility for 'doubt and astonishment' to be similar to Dauenhauer's description of listening, or 'doing silence' in terms of "acknowledg[ing] some centre of significance of which he is not the source, a centre to be wondered at, to be in awe of .... the doing of silence opens him to meet that which lies beyond his control." (Dauenhauer 1980: 25). For Voegelin, the intersubjectivity of listening is a demonstration of an awareness of the existence of the Other, that does not presume that communication will necessarily happen, or that it will be comprehensible, and yet nevertheless listens (Voegelin 2010: 196). What is shared in listening is a recognition of mutual intersubjectivity, and the possible desire to communicate, regardless of whether there is a pre-existing code, or language (2010: 196).

Voegelin's listener is "unambiguously individual" (2010: 96), she conceives of all listening as ultimately solitary, and situates a capacity for critical listening, and the possibility of challenging constraining categories of identity (nation, culture,

language) in this utter individuality. Whereas Dauenhauer situates silence in context with language – listening for the possibility of another’s voice – Voegelin separates silence and language by turning silence and listening towards noise. Voegelin sees in noise the possibility for transcending boundaries, for questioning all forms of hierarchies, exclusions, systems of difference and inequality. And yet she bases this firmly within the discipline of sound art – art itself being riven with issues of ‘high’ and ‘low’, popularity, and also, importantly, access. What one does not have access to, one cannot be touched by, limiting the possibility of critique to those who actively engage with this specific form of art.

Voegelin’s engagement with listening is useful, but I am cautious of her insistence on absolute individuality, the absolute ‘Otherness’ of each self. I agree that each Self is ‘Other’ to their ‘Other’, and that a plural ‘self’ (conceiving of a nation as ‘a self’, for example) is something which should be questioned. While I would agree with an *a priori* individuality, a uniqueness of an individual’s encounter with the world, it is difficult, perhaps impossible, at a point to distinguish between an individual’s understanding of their experiences and the extent to which this is affected by commonly held frames of meaning. Individuals are both constrained by and complicit in these frameworks, as well as being capable of being critical of them, but the extent to which an individual – while still remaining an individual – can be utterly outside of these frameworks, or meaning-making, is something I would question. I would also question the extent to which ‘the sonic’ is utterly outside of such frameworks, if only to gesture towards Carson’s opening statement in “The Gender of Sound” (1995) that “[i]t is in large part according to the sounds people make that we judge them sane or insane, male or female, good, evil, trustworthy, depressive, marriageable, moribund, likely or unlikely to make war with us, little better than animals, inspired by God.” (1995: 119). But what I take to be valuable in Voegelin’s work is the recognition that language must be preceded by the desire to communicate, and to communicate through any means, not only through language. Voegelin touches the theme of ‘attention’ in relation to listening and intersubjectivity, and it is this ‘attention’, or ‘attentiveness’ which is central to King-Kok Cheung’s discussion of silence.

### ***Attentive Silence***

To think through ‘listening’, and also some of its implications, I shall engage with King-Kok Cheung’s (1993, 1994) analyses of Joy Kogawa’s book Obasan (first

published in 1981). This novel is concerned with the experience of Canadians of Japanese ancestry (over 21,000; of whom 17,000 were Canadian-born) who after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941 were 'resettled' in the British Columbia interior (1994: 114). The narrative focuses on the legacy of this displacement, but also with the disappearance of the narrator's mother who had returned to Japan just before the outbreak of the war (1994: 115). Cheung's use of this concept of 'attentive silences' is used as a means of discussing certain themes within this specific narrative, or to be precise, to name certain silences within it. But Cheung's engagement with this narrative also makes other forms of silence (censorship, secrecy, death, repression) explicit, and in so doing renders the difference between these different silences particularly clear. Cheung's engagement is firmly situated in the literature she is examining, and through that also a particular cultural issue, namely the association between silence and 'oriental' cultures. On the one hand she recognises that this is a stereotype, but she is also intent on engaging with the extent to which heritages of non-verbal forms of communication are devalued, misunderstood, and sometimes rejected by the second or third generation in immigrant cultures – part of the question here also being those 'caught' between cultures, growing up in Canada, but with a Japanese heritage (1994: 113-4). Kogawa's ability to conceive of a spectrum of silences is described here as being part of her 'bicultural heritage' (1994: 118). Cheung sees one of the central questions in this narrative as being how to negotiate between 'voicelessness' and 'vociferousness' (1994: 114); this is also expressed as a dichotomy between feeling 'invaded by words' and 'frustrated by wordlessness' (1994: 116). Here this is a question which is also tied to culture (between Japanese, and 'Canadian' / 'Western' / 'Eurocentric') but also between the generations – between 'issei' (first generation), 'nissei' (second), and 'sansei' (third) generations. Cheung's analysis of this novel is pertinent to this thesis because in attempting to find a way between 'voicelessness' and 'invading words', she does not automatically privilege language over silence, while at the same time being mindful of the negative aspects of silence. As she summates with brevity and clarity: "Certainly language can liberate and heal, but it can also distort and hurt; and while silence may smother and obliterate, it can also minister, soothe, and communicate." (1994: 114).

Cheung notes in the opening paragraphs of her article (1994) that the Japanese character for silence sets it as opposite to 'noise', 'motion', 'commotion', and seen as a symbol of pensiveness, sensitivity, alertness – unlike a Eurocentric tradition in which silence may signify passivity, or be the opposite of communication or expression (1994: 113). My own engagements with silence, despite drawing examples

from a number of countries, has not offered an in-depth focus on culturally specific forms of silence, nor attempted to interpret silences in terms of being associated with particular cultures (and therefore not others). This has in part been due to conscious avoidance of more anthropological or ethnographic engagements with silence, and also a certain caution against dealing too much with stereotypes, or generalisations. While attributing the attentive silence within this narrative to a specific heritage and tradition (in Japanese culture), Cheung is not arguing that it is confined to this tradition – likewise in my engagements with silence throughout this thesis, I have presumed that the examples I have drawn upon are not unique, but merely one instance among others.

Cheung posits attentive silences as being integral to the narrative, but does not conceive of silence as being equivocally positive; her conception of the possibility of positive silences exists in balance with more negative forms, such as political disenfranchisement, shame, destructive secrecy. But she is also conscious of the dangers of language, the ways in which it is used to deceive, or injure. Her examples range from the gendered difference between ‘bachelor’ or ‘spinster’ (that the former, traditionally masculine term, has connotations of sexual freedom, and the latter, feminine, is pejorative, and has connotations of celibacy) (1994: 116-7), but is more focused on racism and political propaganda – such as calling prison camps ‘interior housing projects’ (1994: 117). The point where propaganda, or in contemporary terms ‘spin’, passes as ‘news’, is one in which language is not emancipatory, but is experienced as threatening, and rather than being a means of disclosing truth, becomes the conduit for information which provokes suspicion, and disbelief. Cheung identifies two questions which ‘language’ gives rise to – first of all, the question of what it says (its ‘transparency’), secondly what it achieves (its ‘efficacy’) (1994: 117). It is a doubting of what language says (is it the truth? Does it intend to injure?), or what it achieves (does anyone listen? Does it end or prevent further suffering?), which can lead to a disenchantment with language (1994: 117). When speaking neither “alleviate[s] actual suffering or inspire[s] redeeming vision” (1994: 118), the disenchantment with speaking leads to silence, and a scepticism over what it is that speaking, or speaking out, may achieve.

Cheung recognises that there are a number of oppressive or what she terms ‘inhibitive’ silences in the narrative, both for individuals, and for whole communities. The narrator (Naomi Nakane) does not speak of her childhood sexual abuse, nor does her brother divulge who has beaten him up; Cheung identifies both of the silences with

shame (1994: 118). In the camps all letters are censored, and no one is allowed 'any means of communication' such as radio; these are physically enforced silences, but there is also the narrator's tendency not to talk during her daily life about the events during the war (1994: 118-9). There is also the secrecy surrounding her mother's fate, which regardless of her mother's and aunt's original intentions in keeping the truth from her, is experienced by the narrator as haunting and oppressive (1994: 118). Cheung identifies these forms of silence – and silencing – but places them alongside the dangers of language, situating both as experienced in harmful ways, in certain contexts, both language and silence being forms of oppression in their ways.

Separate from these inhibitive silences are those which Cheung identifies as *attentive silences* – ones which she associates in particular with Naomi's mother and aunt. Cheung draws on Gayle Fujita's analysis of the novel in using the concept of 'attendance', but Cheung distinguishes between a number of different 'attentivenesses', all of which she also associates with silence: these are protective, stoic, and attentive silences (1994: 114). In its 'protective' form, silence becomes a means of staying calm, saying little or nothing, in an attempt to 'create a soothing atmosphere for the children' (1994: 119). This is also extrapolated beyond childhood though, as a means of keeping silent, or keeping a secret, which might cause pain were it to be revealed. This 'protective' silence might have its place when dealing with children (such as her aunt's decision not to tell her about Nagasaki, or her mother's injuries there), but Cheung recognises that it also runs the danger of 'infantilising', or 'enforcing innocence' (1994: 119). She associates this 'enforced innocence' with the mother's decision to ask that her children be kept in ignorance of what happened to her (1994: 121). Though motivated by the desire to protect, this nevertheless becomes a destructive silence; as Naomi says of the separation, even alienation she felt from her mother, due to her own silence surrounding her sexual assault, and her mother's choice to have her fate kept secret: "Our wordlessness was our mutual destruction." (in Cheung 1994: 121). The other silence, which Cheung calls 'stoic', is tied to a belief in forbearance, dignity, endurance (1994: 119). Cheung recognises the ambivalence in this position, in that it simultaneously provides an important source of strength, but may also be perceived by others as a form of submission, or weakness (1994: 119). This would in part be dependent on the interpreting of silence in terms of passivity, rather than an active decision.

To turn specifically to attentive silence and listening, it is important to recognise that this listening, this 'attendance' is not only being in waiting for words. Cheung's first

example of 'attendance' is the picture in Naomi's room "of a little girl with a book in her lap, looking up into a tree where a bird sits. One of the child's hands is half raised as she watches and listens, attending the bird." (quoted in Cheung 1994: 120). This attention is hardly passive – it is a form of 'thoughtfulness', 'physical readiness', 'vigilance' (1994: 120). This attendance is also tied to the gaze – 'visual attendance' (1993: 147) – she watches the bird, waiting for it to trust her, to come to her, in its time, something which cannot be forced or rushed. Attentive watching is not the same as 'staring'; but is an attempt to 'anticipate the other's need' (1993: 146). It is interesting that this first example, in the form of a child's picture, should symbolise attendance through a relation with an animal. I have already explored the extent to which animals often symbolise Otherness, but here the bird becomes one half of a relation in which it has the power to respond, or not. The child in the picture waits, attends, but cannot be assured that the bird will come. All she can do is create the conditions under which it might. There is also an issue of trust implicit here – perhaps the child has seed in her hands, if so it could be interpreted either in terms of being a *lure*, or a *gift*. To wait for an animal, to lay out food, lies ambiguously as being an act associated with empathy, or with wanting to see the animal (out of curiosity or pleasure, but in either instance because of a desire situated in the self, rather than empathy), but also with acts of trapping, or hunting animals. Likewise there is an act of trust implicit in attendance as listening, particularly in listening which invites the sharing of secrets – as Cheung recognises in her discussion of the dangers of language, and Wendy Brown (2005) recognises in her examination of the 'fetishizing' of breaking silence, divulging can also make one vulnerable.

Cheung's discussion of attentive silence situates it as being a situation of mutual attendance – when Naomi mentions the attentiveness shared between herself and her grandmother she says: "when I am hungry, and before I can ask, there is food... if there is pain there is care simultaneously. If Grandma shifts uncomfortably, I bring her a cushion." (in Cheung 1994: 120). This is a situation in which both care for each other, a caring which is also extended beyond the family. There is attention given to strangers with whom they are being 'evacuated', such as the blankets and food given to the young woman with a new-born infant (1993:148). Cheung also links this with the practice of hailing strangers as 'ojisan' (uncle) or 'obasan' (aunt), as a means of fostering trust, and sees in this possibility that "[g]iven sufficient caring and empathy ... strangers could turn kin indeed." (1993: 148). But all of this attentiveness is tied to particularly negative views of 'selfishness' and being inconsiderate of others – Naomi reiterates that "[w]e must always honour the wishes of others before our

own..." (in Cheung 1994: 120), and to do otherwise is to be selfish, discourteous, thoughtless. To be selfish like this is to be 'wagamama', something which is seen in particularly negative terms (1994: 120). Much of this 'attending' takes place in silence – "there is neither explicit request nor open inquiry" (in Cheung 1994: 120) – though there is a point where this silence ties in to shame: "the anticipatory acts are performed without speaking so that the receiving party need not feel embarrassment." (1993: 148). This raises the question of how constraining the shame, or embarrassment, in being dependant or needy is felt to be, and whether this ties back to 'wagamama'. If attending to one's own needs runs the danger of being perceived as selfish, one of the reasons why there is 'neither explicit nor open inquiry', and why this is 'attended to in silence', is an attempt to hide the fact that one does need, and depend on others.

Cheung remains highly aware of the ambivalence, 'the woe and wonder of silence' (1994: 120); but she is earnest to interpret attentive silence, *listening*, not only as important within this narrative, but as an important concept beyond the confines of the page. For the narrator of this novel, Naomi, knowledge and empathy can only be attained if she becomes attentive, which is not the same as *demanding to know* (1994: 125). In the examples drawn on by Cheung, this attending is explicitly rendered in terms of listening. In the first, Naomi appeals to her absent mother almost as if in prayer: "Gradually the room grows still and it is as if I am ... listening and listening to the silent earth and the silent sky as I have done all my life .... Mother. I am listening. Assist me to hear you." (in Cheung 1994: 121). The other example is both explicit, and yet also symbolic since it is in the form of a dream:

[The Grand Inquisitor's] demand to know was both a judgement and a refusal to hear. The more he questioned [Mother], the more he was her accuser and murderer. The more he killed her, the deeper her silence became. What the Grand Inquisitor has never learned is that the avenues of speech are the avenues of silence. To hear my mother, to attend her speech, to attend the sound of stone, he must first become silent. Only when he enters her abandonment will he be released from his own. (in Cheung 1994: 125).

If a silence is to be 'broken', the listener themselves must be complicit in creating that space, must recognise that they themselves are already complicit in that silence (and may even be part of the reason for it). Cheung recognises the figure of 'the Grand Inquisitor' as a reference to Dostoevsky, but also sees an association with the narrator



herself, attempting to understand how her own questioning was not the same as 'attending' an answer (1994: 125). The 'demand to know' in this case is a 'judgement' because it presupposes a right to know, it is a 'refusal to hear' because what it does not acknowledge are the reasons why her mother chose to be silent, nor does it grant her the right to silence. In this the Grand Inquisitor resembles Gerald in Wilde's narrative – claiming a right to know that is simultaneously a judgement and a presupposition of this right. The figure of 'the Grand Inquisitor' aligns questioning, the 'demand to know', with a trial or interrogation – both particularly negative associations for being 'forced to speak'. To hear, to wait for an answer, the dream insists, the Inquisitor must quieten, fall silent. The mother's silence in this dream is a form of resistance, to judgement, to accusation, to violence, to 'refusals to hear' her on her own terms. In this dream both the mother figure and the Grand Inquisitor are 'abandoned' – each in their own, separate, spheres. This returns to the concept of empathy: only in apprehending the mother's separation, her choice to be silent, the reasons for the secrecy – her 'abandonment' – only in entering into that space with her, understanding and sharing that silence, can the Inquisitor himself no longer be isolated.

In this form, attentive silence is both a basis for a belief in language (to tell the truth, and to achieve something), the basis for relations with others, the only means of 'breaking silences' which are oppressive. But Cheung does recognise that there is a 'slippery side' to attentiveness, and attentive silence (1993: 151). While it has the potential to be affirmative, it can also run the risk of becoming an obligation, and thus runs the risk of becoming complicit with oppression – with being forced to listen, forced to attend, to be unable to attend to oneself. Cheung associates this (in part due to the correlation in this narrative between attentiveness and female characters) with gender issues: "[u]nqualified endorsement of attentiveness can reinforce traditional mores (such as those associated with motherhood) that, precisely because of their positive valences, are especially binding for women." (1993: 151). While attending to others may be fulfilling, and at times imperative, constant attention towards others can also take its toll. The character in this narrative which focuses Cheung's engagement with this ambivalence of attentive silences is Naomi's aunt, who "remains in silent territory, defined by her serving hands." (in Cheung 1994: 121). She has both been silenced, and also has chosen to be silent, by making it into a way of dealing with the painful events of her life. Naomi's aunt has taken care of others to the extent she has not taken care of herself. Her increasingly failing eyesight not only functions as a literary trope (the wise, blind seer), but also marks the difficulties she has survived (the 'socio-political constraints') but also her own self-censorship – before she

married she was an accomplished musician (1993: 151). This is in part the danger of the 'obligation' to attend, the expectation that one should attend to others. But it is also a question which returns to the theme of 'mutual attentiveness' – the question of who has attended to her, the *Obasan* [aunt] of the title.

One of the central themes in this novel is the 'breaking' of silence – the secrecy surrounding the mother's 'disappearance', which comes to coincide with her disfigurement at Nagasaki, and also her death – and the novel itself functioning as a form of bringing issues surrounding the treatment of Canadians of Japanese ancestry during the war, and afterwards, into public discourse. Yet Cheung argues that it is nevertheless important not to simply re-privilege speech over silence, or to see this as the 'message' of the novel. The 'breaking' of the silence in this novel also requires a silence – the attentive silence, the willingness to wait, to listen, and empathise, without which the silence of secrecy, or the silence which has become her aunt's 'language of grief' (1994: 121), will not open itself.

Dauenhauer's Other is described in terms of being a stranger, Cheung/Kogawa's listening is also a silence between intimates, who are rendered Other through this silence. Yet in both, there is a recognition, and respect, of this Otherness – and the complicity of a listener in what is said, or remains unspoken, is made explicit. Cheung opens her discussion with the epigraph from Kogawa's novel:

There is a silence that cannot speak. / There is a silence that will not speak. / Beneath the grass the speaking dreams and beneath the dreams is a sensate sea. The speech that frees comes forth from that amniotic deep. To attend its voice, I can hear it say, is to embrace its absence.... Unless the stone bursts with telling, unless the seed flowers with speech, there is in my life no living word. (in Cheung 1993: 126)

Between the silence that 'cannot' and the silence that 'will not' is the question of agency. The 'speech that frees' comes out from a 'sensate sea', from 'speaking dreams', from beneath the 'grass' – liberatory speech arises out of that which is not language, an ocean of feeling, symbolic dreams, the growing grass. This is like Blackmur's 'quick' of silence which is living, which gives meaning to words. But what is key here is the 'attending': "To attend its voice, I can hear it say, is to embrace its absence ..." – to wait for that voice is to grasp a hold of the silence, the voice's 'absence'. And it is this embrace, this attention, that the voice is asking for. Kogawa's

text is a particular narrative, and Cheung's analysis also is focusing on the silences she perceives in this text specifically, but the potency in these concepts of attentive silence is precisely their relevance to other texts, and to the world lived beyond the written word.

For Dauenhaur, silence "opens the way for something" (1980: 77), and in listening this silence opens the way for another person, and becomes the basis for any encounter with someone outside of the self, beyond one's control or imagination. For Voegelin, the basis for communication is not language because it must be preceded by the *desire* to listen and communicate, a desire to enter into subjectivity through any means, not only through language. Language thus becomes merely one way of 'being with another', among others. Cheung's attentive silences centre around empathy, and the recognition of complicity in silences – indeed the possibility of listening and respecting the choice to remain silent. Voegelin's work also engages with 'noise' as being aligned with silence due to being categorised as outside of language (rather than in terms of sound). At this point I wish to turn to an example where voice, noise, and listening/silence, and indeed the issue of being silenced, are all present and the relations between them become particularly clear.

## ***Turbulent***

Shirin Neshat's short installation film Turbulent (1998) focuses on the theme of gendered voices, and the desire to communicate/be heard. In my previous chapter I engaged with her feature-length film Women Without Men (2010), but Neshat is better known for her photography, and more recently, short installation films. While being very successful, her work is not without criticism. While dealing with themes surrounding women and representation (both as art, and in terms of politics), Lindsey Moore argues that her work (her 'beautiful worlds') ultimately feeds a Western taste for images of an oriental Other (2002: 14). There is always a question hovering over the difference between the 'exotic' and the 'authentic', and part of Moore's concern is the extent to which Neshat's work is read uncritically as 'authentic' (2002: 12). In Moore's terms, Neshat's art tends to become 'solipsistic' (2002: 14), referencing itself rather than the outside world. Moore argues that Neshat's representations are not 'realistic', which would be less of a problem if it were explicit in its non-realism (2002: 10) – while gesturing towards issues within Iran, she neither films nor photographs there, and her models and actors are not always Iranian (for example in

those installations that were filmed in Turkey, or Morocco). As mentioned previously, Neshat lives and works in exile from Iran; here Moore argues that Neshat's art is her own attempt to 'reconcile', or 'insert' herself into what she is displaced from – Iran, and the political and gendered struggles occurring there (2002: 8). Neshat's work becomes one of 'critical yet nostalgic ambivalence' (2002: 2) towards Iran, and her/its culture. What is problematic is that the popularity, the predominance, of Neshat's images within 'Western' engagements with contemporary 'Iranian' art, means that the West is presented, not with testimony from women who are/were involved either in past revolutions, nor in continuing struggles, but these representations which are at a remove, a performance, rather than 'testimony' (2002: 8). These are important criticisms, and in my following engagement I try not to generalise from the installation piece itself, to the situation in Iran, or to certain 'truths' of women, their performances, or silences within Islam.

There is a connection between this installation and Neshat's film Women Without Men (2010), if only a slight one. In the midst of the breaking up of a political demonstration, Munis states: "in all this turbulence and noise, there was almost a silence underneath. The sense that everything repeats itself over time: hope, betrayal, fear." (2010). There is the question of translation (the choice of the word 'turbulence' in English), but the fact that Neshat is highly conscious of her English-speaking audience makes it tenable to draw a parallel here between the concepts of political unrest – 'turbulence and noise' – and the 'silence' underneath which is full of emotion; almost like Blackmur's *quick* silence, out of which words (or in this case, even just noise) eventually erupt. Dealing with issues of performance, and gender, Neshat's installation was initially a response to two incidents. The first was the prohibition against women performing in public in Iran, and the second was an encounter that Neshat had in Istanbul, where she saw a young blind woman singing on the streets, was captivated by her music (after purchasing a cassette, she had the lyrics translated so that she could understand them), and was intrigued with exploring the idea of how not having a visible audience – in this case because of blindness – might affect a performer's music (in Danto 2000).

Originally projected on two separate screens, though out of an exhibition context often shown on a single, split screen, Turbulent (1998) creates a contrast between two singers: on one hand a man, dressed in a white shirt, in an auditorium filled with an exclusively male audience; and on the other, a woman in a black chador, who faces what looks to be the same auditorium, completely empty. The man is applauded as he

walks on stage, while the woman is greeted only by the empty seats. The man is Shoja Azari, lip-synching a song by Shahram Nazeri whose lyrics draw on the poetry of the Sufi poet Rumi; the woman is Sussan Deyhim, and does not begin to sing until after Azari's performance, though she too is lip-synching, though to her own voice, heavily synthesized (MacDonald 2004: 632). Each of the screens is 'silent' when the other sings, and although it is not certain, and Deyhim remains facing away during Azari's performance, it is implied that each is listening to (or at least can hear) the other – Deyhim adjusts her veil a handful of times, one of the few movements that she makes, and Azari turns away from the audience when she begins to sing, as though distracted from them by her voice. Neshat is quoted in Moore saying that she has increasingly moved towards the use of music with her art because it "transcends cultural boundaries" (2002: 9), something which Moore reads as the presupposition of the need to cross these boundaries, that is, presuming spectators who are not from the same culture (2002: 10). Moore does engage with what is achieved by the use of the two screens, and the disjunction between them, as being symbolic of an 'untranslatability' between them (2002: 12). But this poses the question of whether they 'promise' or 'problematize' 'reconciliation' (2002: 13), since this is both a space of separation and connection (2002: 13). The separation is heightened because the characters do not gesture or speak across this divide (2002: 13), but the viewer is between them, in the space between them, complicit in the question of what reconciliation is possible between these two spaces – male and female, public and 'private', audience and emptiness – if they are indeed as untranslatable to each other as they appear.

The 'songs' that each sings are also in stark contrast – Azari's is framed by applause, is supported by instrumental music, and has recognisable lyrics; even if one cannot understand the language (Farsi), it remains clear that he is singing/speaking. For those familiar with Farsi or Persian culture, the lyrics are taken from the 13<sup>th</sup> Century poet Rumi, and are about divine love (Danto 2000). Throughout his performance he faces away from his audience, but out of the screen, facing the viewer – the camera does not move, and we are simply 'faced' with him throughout his performance. But this in effect draws the viewer in, including them as part of his audience because he faces them, as though it is they who he is actually performing for, expecting to be listened to. His song is beautiful, but also very conventional, familiar as a song being sung upon a stage, to an attentive audience. The lyrics are concerned with love, in particular its ambivalence, it is an appeal and address to the Other, to 'You', the Beloved, to God – an appeal for the Other to listen, and apprehend the speaker's prayer song.

There is a particular difference between two silences in this short film – the silent audience waiting for the man’s performance, and the silence of the empty auditorium. A viewer can recognise the difference between the listening audience, and the empty chairs, inanimate objects, empty of an audience. The scene is complicated by the question of whether or not the men hear the woman when she starts to sing – the male singer turns around as though he can hear her, but throughout her performance – which ranges from melodic chords to screams and ululations – both he and the audience behind him give little indication of response to what they might hear. There is of course another listener here – the listener/viewer, in the exhibition setting standing between the two screens, or out of it facing them both.

It is as Azari’s final applause dies down that Deyhim begins to make noise – at first little more than a deep hum, it appears to draw Azari’s attention away from his applause, and perhaps even quieten his audience as they become aware of her humming becoming audible behind their clapping. This ‘song’ is without words, and without backing instruments, a sort of wordless acapella. The sounds that Deyhim sings range from hums, to rhythmic cries, to what can only be described as screams. But she is also lip-synching – and this at times becomes apparent both because the sounds do not always seem to match her lips, or pause for breath; her voice was altered with a synthesizer, rendering it extremely unfamiliar, unnerving, uncanny. Whereas Azari’s performance is situated within language, and is also ‘public’ (upon a stage, and to a visible audience), Deyhim’s is wordless, and solitary in that her auditorium is empty (MacDonald 2004: 622), though there is of course, always the viewer. Situating this in the context of Iran, Moore sees this possibility of being a woman acting ‘out-of-the-law’ (performing in a space that seems to be public) as being ‘compromised’ by the emptiness of the auditorium (2002: 10) – the narrative is ‘incomplete’ in not providing a way out, or beyond this impasse, a similar question she raised in terms of the ‘untranslatability’ between the two screens. The camera slowly circles Deyhim during her performance, unlike the fixed perspective in Azari’s sequence. Neshat correlates the camera movement in this sequence to a reflection of the woman’s state, “her madness, her rage” (2004: 632). Whereas even those who cannot understand Farsi could recognise Azari’s song as being language, Deyhim’s remains steadfastly ‘noise’, sometimes recognisably human, at others so strange that without being able to see her singing, a hearer might be hard pressed to identify *what* they were hearing.

Voegelin recognises that it is difficult to render noise into language – probably one of the reasons why each language has developed such different renditions of the sounds that animals make, or the sound of dripping water, or the wind, even in cases where the words are onomatopoeic. Understanding noise in Voegelin’s terms is always a matter of uncertainty – in this case not merely identifying where it is coming from, but in attaching it to Deyhim and recognising it as a performance which cannot be translated through a knowledge of Farsi, or any other language. To listen to Deyhim, to know there is an intent to communicate, but that what *is* being ‘said’ might remain uncertain, is to listen to Voegelin’s ‘noisy voices’. Deyhim’s voice is ‘noisy’ – it does not speak words, it simply *sounds*. But in sounding, what she might say is not limited to the lines drawn by the conventions of a language (the Farsi of Azari’s performance for example). Voegelin writes that “screams produce the meeting of two [listening] bodies. Back to back we know each other in knowing rather than in talking....” (Voegelin 2010: 72). A viewer watching *Turbulent* (1998) listens to both performances, but while Azari’s is ‘familiar’ it remains an issue of translation whether the song can be said to be ‘understood’ – for Deyhim’s performance what might be understood, even without absolute certainty, are not about ‘translations’, but about something approaching empathy, emotion, what the listener themselves is touched by what it provokes in them themselves. Azari’s song is about connection with God (the ‘you’ being addressed and appealed to) – while what Deyhim’s is ‘about’ remains untranslatable. Her performance (while seen by the viewer, of course, and possibly heard by the male audience and Azari) is in a context where what is at stake is a connection with any other, her isolation/separation is interpersonal. Azari’s song is about a dialogue with the divine, but it is performed for, or at least to the appreciation of, an audience which is visibly present; hers is in a situation where she is separated from those who might have been immediately around her, regardless of what her song is ‘about’.

The silence in listening tends to disappear from view en lieu of what is listened to – sounds, speech, noise become the focus of attention. Listening *to* silence, hearing nothing, makes the listening more ‘visible’, because the act of listening is thrown into question (what are you listening to?). Voegelin’s concept of listening to silence, enabling one to situate oneself in the world, is similar to Spacks’ concept of privacy – and both situate a certain solitude in this: listening to oneself in silence, being alone with oneself, turning one’s attention ‘inwards’ to the self because there is nothing ‘outside’ to take one’s attention. This is a similar issue in Maitland’s search for silence, which is explicitly tied to solitude in her work. But it is the turning of

attention back outwards which I think is of equal importance here – listening for an other, to an other, the recognition that one is not alone. Perhaps it is possible to say that silence, in the form of listening, is an address, or a hailing, which is not speaking. This opening of space acting as an invitation, a gesture of complicity. In these discourses silence is being figured as listening, as a space in which listening is possible. What silence is therefore being contrasted against is in some ways similar to the previous chapter – oppressive, judgemental discourse, but in particular an *exclusive* discourse which leaves no space for the Other to speak, or to be a presence. What is being posited in the space that silence creates is thus intersubjectivity’ a space in which an Other’s presence is acknowledged, whether they choose to speak or not.

### ***A Room Full of Questions***

This section seeks to explore listening to different forms of silence by examining the ways through which silence is represented in a number of poems taken from Ingrid de Kok’s series “A Room Full of Questions” (2002), which focuses on the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). The sequence “A Room Full of Questions” is contained within the book Terrestrial Things (2002), which also includes poems concerned with the continually relevant issues of poverty, and AIDS. This section explores these silences by using individual poems from this series not only as illustrations, but as forms of bearing witness to both individual events (the Commission specifically), and experiences of testimony, incomprehensibility, and silence more generally.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), perhaps one of the most publicised of its kind, was established in 1995 to investigate human rights violations that occurred in South Africa between 1960-1994, and to grant amnesty to those individuals willing to make ‘full disclosure’ about crimes committed with a political motivation during Apartheid (Phelps 2004: 107). Apartheid had been enforced in South Africa from 1948, enshrining in law the segregation of different races and denying the vote, and socio-economic opportunity to the black majority (Phelps 2004: 106). While a display of remorse was not a requirement for amnesty, perpetrators could ask for forgiveness from their victims, or the victims’ surviving relatives. Unlike earlier truth commissions, the TRC made the testimonies public (Phelps 2004: 107). A distinctive feature of the Commission was the presence of the media: journalists were present at the hearings, and actual testimony was broadcast on the radio and television.



Even at the time of its inception it had many critics – it was castigated as a witch hunt by the Afrikaner right wing; many on the left saw no justice in the concept of amnesty (Phelps 2004: 108). Some also disliked the recourse into spiritual Christianity in the discourses surrounding the Commission, being unrepresentative of other faiths, or a secular approach (Ross 2003: 12). Hamber and Wilson (2002) argue that truth commissions, while generally framed in a discourse of human rights, follow a nationalist agenda, and even when exposing atrocities, create a new version of the truth which may be just as hegemonic, and in so doing also ignore the disparate needs of individuals (2002: 2). Amongst these numerous critiques there is also the recognition that what ‘necessitated’ the TRC was not what it was capable of ‘solving’, but the Commission nevertheless provided a moral foundation and forum where the conditions that made Apartheid could be explored. Antjie Krog argues the Commission was ‘remarkably’ successful at creating a forum for victim’s testimonies to provide a balance to amnesty, ‘fairly’ successful at investigating and establishing facts about the past, but less able to figure the moral truth of who was responsible (1999: 447-8). The extent to which ‘reconciliation’ was achieved is often debated, though Ignatieff recognises that while commissions can change public memory and discourses, they cannot be critiqued for failing to change human behaviour or institutions – that is the mandate of politicians, not the commissioners (in Krog 1999: 435). While acknowledging the pertinence of these critiques, the TRC itself is not the subject of this work. Rather than the hearings, in their original settings or in their broadcast forms, or the 2,739-page, five-volume report,<sup>36</sup> I have chosen to look at a particular secondary source. As Krog recognises, the TRC was more effective at establishing material facts than moral truths, just as Agamben argues that the materiality of Auschwitz does not disclose its significance – and it is in the ellipses beyond the Commission’s facts that secondary representations seek to discover or disclose their meaning.

It could be argued that the TRC was predicated on listening, on a nation-wide audience who were implicated as either ‘participants’, ‘victims’, or ‘beneficiaries’ of Apartheid; the Commissioners who oversaw the hearings, the audiences at those hearings; on the belief of the need for ‘truth-telling’ in order to achieve ‘reconciliation’ – it was based on ‘hearings’, its focus was testimony, on it being publically broadcast, on its translation; this placed a great deal of focus on the significance of *listening* to these stories, these testimonies. E. S. A. Ayee suggests that

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<sup>36</sup> For a more detailed description, see the Commission’s online site, or Phelps’ 2004 work on truth commissions in general.

any thoughts of reconciliation must presuppose a willingness to listen, to give time and trust to other's stories; he quotes de Gruchy: "The way in which we speak with and listen to the alienated 'other' is already an action that makes reconciliation a possibility." (Ayee 2010: 21). Depending on the individual case, or on perspective, this could be framed as a breaking of silence, for example around the State use of torture and assassination, or simply the 'banal', everyday effects of Apartheid – but, as with Abraham Bomba's testimony, silences remain in the testimony given. There have also been numerous engagements with the TRC in terms of silence – particularly the silence of women who testified (or whose testimony was not applicable) in the hearings, and the 'meanings' of some of these silences, and the extent to which they can be 'read' (for example Ross 2003; Motsemme 2004). If testimony is what has been said – and the gaps in such speech – there are many ways in which this is preserved, reproduced, synthesised. What begins with a witness giving testimony before the Commission is filtered, perhaps first of all through live translation<sup>37</sup>, and then through the mediation of film, aural recordings, photography. Written transcripts are followed by other written works – and it will be one of these secondary representations, the books, poetry, and plays which both preserve testimony<sup>38</sup> and further its meaning, that I am examining here.

"A Room Full of Questions" (2002) is simultaneously a record of testimony, and also a personal response, but unlike some other works dealing with the TRC, it is very brief – consisting of a dozen poems. It is in no way a distillation of either the hearings, or the post-Apartheid moment in which they occurred, or even the convoluted issues of trauma, revenge, testimony, grief, (re)conciliation, amnesty, forgiveness. There is no quintessence to be drawn out or captured – instead, these poems are a collection of fragments, bits and pieces brought together like a scrap book of the poignant and the banal. Half of them are responses to specified incidents – such as Archbishop Desmond Tutu weeping at the first session (2002: 22) – others are far more general, observing pervading violence, from the memories related in the hearings, to the recurring violence in everyday life. "If we go on like this," de Kok writes in the poem "Today, Again", "everyone/ will know somebody this week dead,/ watch somebody die, kill somebody/ or film it, write about it." (2002: 35). "A Room Full of Questions" offers no easy answers. In an essay, de Kok writes of the need for artists (and cultural institutions) to "[permit] contradictory voices to be heard as testimony or in

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<sup>37</sup> There are eleven official languages in South Africa, and the TRC thus required a significant number of translators to provide live translation during the hearings.

<sup>38</sup> There are numerous examples of testimony from the hearings being incorporated into dramatic works, films, novels, poetry.

interpretations, not in order to ‘resolve’ the turbulence, but to recompose it.” (1998: 61). The ‘turbulence’ here is not only the contradictory voices of testimony, but also those attempting to interpret beyond it – such as the attempts to read into specific silences. The turbulence is the uncertainty, the unresolved questions: ‘what kind of man tortures another?’, ‘what if some stories don’t want to be told?’. Part of what de Kok’s sequence attempts to work through is what sense is to be made out of contradictory voices, out of this turbulence, and the question of what the *point* of listening is. Is it to preserve testimony, to take part in bearing witness, to establish ‘truth’, to establish community – and how does listening confront certain silences, such as fragmented speech, the silence of the dead, literal silences in the hearing, the confrontation with ‘evil’. De Kok’s poetry does not attempt to provide answers, or solutions, but holds these questions open – my attempt here is less an analysis of these poems<sup>39</sup> than a way of using them to think through what they are circling around, namely *listening*, not only to testimony, but to different *silences*.

In talking about silence in the context of conflict or post-conflict situations, it is often taken for granted that the silence to which one refers is related to some form of trauma, censorship, or oppression. In my second chapter I engaged with the difficulty of translating an experience of intense pain into language, the difficulty Scarry describes as the unshareability of pain; and those who, however tentatively, develop ‘languages of pain’ (1985: 4-6) – those who have suffered, and those who speak *of* them, such as medics, commissions and trials, and artists (1985: 6-11). De Kok’s work could certainly be situated here, these poems engage with direct testimony, and with the forum created by the TRC, as a space to both hear witnesses and to archive their words, but de Kok’s poetry also creates languages of pain beyond testimony, engaging with the attempt to understand its meaning. In the third poem of the series, de Kok writes: “The witness tells it steady/ ... the window splintering,/... The mother and her spreading blanket./ ...And juridical questions/ swab swab the brains and blood off the floor.” (2002: 23). Agamben uses the example of Auschwitz to illustrate that, despite the possibility of obtaining a plethora of material information about an atrocity – the technical, bureaucratic, statistical, or legal details – we nevertheless still struggle to turn this into ‘human understanding’, that is, into ‘ethical or political significance’ (2005:11). While historians can gather more information about a single event than even the participants might have been aware of, we still often feel that this does not translate into an understanding of how to respond, or even a full apprehension of what

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<sup>39</sup> For further analysis of these poems see Spearey (2008).

happened. A sense of the insufficiency of testimony pervades much of the writing on the TRC – that bearing witness is simultaneously imperative, and yet not enough. Testimony arises from the question ‘what has happened?’, but then gives rise to further questions: ‘what else; what now?’. While testimony is always authored – that is, based upon someone’s ‘authority’ to speak of that event, as witness or survivor, or indeed perpetrator – there is a difference between testimony and ‘truth’ (2005: 158). It is, perhaps, precisely such a conflation that occurs in the Commission – the ‘truth’ of what happened during Apartheid can only be obtained through testimony, the preservation of this testimony allows for different versions of events to be authored, to coexist, even in contradiction.

Agamben raises an important point when thinking about testimony: if one is seeking to create some sort of ‘complete account’, eventually one is confronted with the impossibility of archiving something from which there are no survivors, no memories, no record. This is not the boundaries of language where ‘words fail’, but the hole in testimony where there are ‘no words’. This ‘gap’ is the question at the heart of de Kok’s poem “Some There Be”. It opens with a passage from the Apocrypha, from which the title is also drawn: *“There be of them, that have left a name behind them, that their praises might be reported. And some there be, which have no memorial, who are perished as though they had never been...”* (2002: 36 *emphasis in original*). De Kok’s response is fragmentary, but engages with this concept of the ‘lost’ – lost people, lost knowledge, lost stories: “women in blankets bent over / their faces lost to the light. // And remnants: / ... stones in a half circle / afterbirths buried in silt. // Can the forgotten // be born again // into a land of names?” (2002: 36). De Kok does not promise any hope of recovering what is lost, the past may be quite literally unexhumeable, the shape of people recalled but not their faces. The ‘forgotten’ can only be spoken of in their loss, in their absence from this speaking world where people write and film violence, and where victims and perpetrators have names. In asking to be born again, the forgotten are the un-named dead in unmarked graves, and perhaps, at the utmost of forgetting, they also go un-mourned. This is the silence of the unknown, of lost or absent testimony, which is distinct from the relived pain of relating trauma. There is no sound in this poem, no voices – only the remnants of ‘half circles’, and ‘afterbirths’, unspeaking women, and the question: what can be recovered out of these remnants? Does listening to these ‘half-there’ things eventually bring us to names?

Engaging with fragments is also the question in “Tongue-Tied”, where de Kok circles around the difficulty of retelling trauma, one’s own, and that of others, as well as the disjunction also between ‘juridical’ and ‘testimonial’ languages. Pain, in being difficult to communicate, ruptures also one’s ability to share it with others through language – this was the crux of my previous discussion of Scarry. What empathy can be given is based upon our knowledge of our own experiences of pain, rather than an unmediated feeling of the pain of another. But de Kok also fuses this issue of telling pain with the telling of ‘truth’, and the crisis of being without language in a situation where it is language which is valued and judged as evidence. There is contrast between ‘languages’ here, between the apparently clear, formulaic “Do you promise to tell the truth, / the whole truth and nothing but the truth?” (2002: 24) which opens the poem, and in contrast the fragmented speech which follows: “They came for the children, took, then me, / and then, then afterwards / the bucket bled. My ears went still. / I’m older than my mother when...’ // ‘That’s the truth. So help. Whole. To tell.” (2002: 24). While ‘you promise to tell the truth’ is familiar, and appears clear, the ‘truth’ that is given destabilises the notion of ‘whole’, ‘nothing-but’ truths. The poem is half-way to a tongue-twister, it is difficult to read aloud – to get your tongue around its alliteration, and irregular but uncomplicated rhymes. But it is not only about the difficulties of enunciation – how does the law and language, interested in a ‘whole truth’, make sense of fragments, where a bucket can bleed, and ears become motionless? These can be translated into ‘leaking’ and ‘deafness’ – but it is precisely this gap, this need for a bridge, which could ‘help tell the whole truth’ that de Kok is highlighting, along with the possible impossibility of answering such a plea.

The witness is speaking both of her own hurt, and that of others, from whom her pain becomes inseparable. This space of confusing testimony, piecemeal truths, and fragmented speech, is described as ‘underwater’, the witness simultaneously being in this space, and speaking to it: “They say she’s ‘tongue-tied’... / No spit, sound, swallow. [...] // Now she’s speaking underwater, / to herself, to drowning, / to her son, her lost daughter.” (2002: 24). I have previously touched on the prevalence of ‘submersion’ as an image or metaphor of this speechlessness, or of silence. In Veena Das’ work, pain may only with difficulty be narrated outside of the language that each culture develops to speak of it (1997: 88), but one may still *feel* even if one cannot *express* the pain of another’s suffering. While one necessarily possesses one’s pain, it is not necessary that the pain one feels has its location in one’s own body. Experiencing pain because another is pained is a powerful inter-relation, even if it is one of what Das calls the ‘imagination’ (1997: 97-8). In a poignant example from “A

Room Full of Questions”, de Kok describes a sound engineer, editing transcripts for radio, listening to testimonial upon testimonial, and feeling his ear-drum tearing (2002: 34) – an analogous image perhaps to “Tongue-Tied”s ‘still ears’, a particular silence (stillness) as the sound of inexpressible memory.

The notion of empathy, or ‘empathetic unsettlement’ in Dominick LaCapra’s (1999) terms, was very current at the hearings. The TRC employed numerous ‘comforters’ – both for victims and perpetrators (Edelstein 2001: 92), and the distress of working on the TRC is examined explicitly in Krog’s Country of my Skull where she notes that many of the journalists, translators, committee members, and others began to suffer a sort of ‘secondary trauma’ (1999: 55). This is also a recurrent issue in de Kok’s poems – in the second poem, “The Archbishop Chairs the First Session” she writes: “There was a long table... and after a few hours of testimony,/ the Archbishop .../ laid down his head, and wept./ That’s how it began.” (2002: 22). The possibility for testimony thus begins in empathy, in the desire to establish this inter-relation of being aware of another’s pain, rather than only resulting in it. Empathy is not only the end result of testimony, but also its precondition – by which I mean the willingness to *listen*, to be exposed to another’s narrative, and the possibility of empathising. It is precisely this possibility of empathy that is either refused, or feared, in a refusal to listen.

But there is a difference between discerning the truth in a fragmented testimony such as is rendered in the previous poem, and trying to read a ‘literal’ silence, an instance when someone who is bearing witness does not speak at all. Is this a loss of language? Or a refusal to answer certain questions? The question of reading silence is at the heart of the poem “The Transcriber Speaks”. There is a distinction between the translators – who provided live translation during the hearing – and the subject of de Kok’s poem, who is transforming testimony from oral to written form, but the issue of translation remains in evidence, even if it is not between ‘languages’. The transcriber “listened and wrote. / Like bricks for a kiln ... /Or the sweeping of leaves into piles for burning: / I don’t know which: / Word upon word upon word.”(2002: 32). The question that the transcriber struggles with is precisely the meaning of silence – what is to be interpreted as silence, how it is to be described, what does it mean:

... how to transcribe silence ...?

Is weeping a pause or a word?

What written sign for a strangled throat?

And a witness pointing? That I described,

When officials identified direction and name.

But what if she stared?

And if the silence seemed to stretch

... Away to a door or a grave or a child,

Was it my job to conclude:

‘The witness was silent. There was nothing left to say.’? (2002: 32)

The describing (like ‘transcribing’, its etymology is ‘writing’) of silence opens these questions – is weeping ‘a pause’, or ‘silence’, or ‘a word’ and if so which? How do we transcribe sounds – a gasp, a mutter, a strangled throat? Torner’s approach to Abraham Bomba’s muttered words was to render their incomprehensibility explicit, and say that he uttered, but it could not be translated (2009). How to transcribe gesture, such as pointing – is staring a gesture? Can it be known what she is staring at, if all is as it ‘seems’? What does it mean ‘there was nothing left to say’? The poem has not indicated that the whole story has been related – the truth, the whole truth – only that nothing is left which might be *said*, spoken – words have run dry, and the silence stretches on beyond them, pointing, nevertheless, to something, a name, a place, an event. The witness stares – and not at anything in the room. It is a gaze which is both turned inwards, into the witness herself, her memories and thoughts. But it also turns outwards: past the room visible around her, to the world outside the space of the hearing, where that which is being testified to is actually situated: the street, the door, the grave. There are manifold silences in this poem: not only the complicated silent staring of the witness, but the silence of how to represent silence – a pause, a word, ellipses perhaps, the word ‘silence’ in brackets or parentheses holding a blank space. The silence ‘seems’ to stretch, ‘seems’ to point – but how do you transcribe half-utterances into anything but half-truths? And what important distinctions are there between ‘nothing else was said’ and ‘there was nothing left *to say*’? This poem is about bringing silences into language, into writing – and it does so by giving a silent writer, the un-named, invisible scribe, who listens and types, a chance to speak for themselves, of their ‘after-hours’ profession – of building the transcripts, the archive, making words physical, like bricks, though with the uncertainty of what will actually happen to them – if they will be ignored, or refuted, ‘leaves for burning’. The poem ends with a question mark, like almost half the poems in this sequence, punctuation that is unspoken but indicates tone, intention, pause. “A Room Full of Questions” is not about offering answers, but about repeating questions.

How do we transcribe silence, how do we translate the unspeakable, or name what we cannot define? These poems not only pose these problems but in circling and circling around them, come at them from different angles. This sequence, while reiterating these questions, nevertheless also offers an illustration of different attempts of 'bringing into language'. We denote the outside with something at the edge – with a liminal figure that is like-but-not. 'Somethings', metaphor: "The gull drags its wing to the lighthouse steps." (2002: 24); "gate without hinges/ stones in a half circle." (2002: 36) – these images speak of more than what they strictly denote. They are not about birds but injury, not about pebbles and broken gates but fragments, ruins, traces.

The search for a way to describe the unspeakable comes to coincide with 'how to name evil' in de Kok's poem "What kind of man?", written in response to the Benzien hearing. The Benzien hearing was both exceptional within the TRC, but has also been variously considered one of its 'touchstones' (Sanders 2002: 587) and its 'heart', but also a case when it all went 'wrong' (Krog 1999: 112). Police captain Jeffrey Benzien was confronted by men he had tortured, including Tony Yengeni. Perpetrators did not normally testify at human rights violations hearings, but rather at the amnesty hearings, where they were usually questioned by their victims' lawyers. The Benzien hearing not only allowed the five tortured to question their torturer (and vice versa), but a re-enactment of the 'wet bag' technique, in front of the Commission and the media. Much discussion of the significance of this trial focuses on an exchange between Yengeni, and Benzien, and it is with these few lines of testimony that de Kok both opens this poem, and provides its recurring question: "Tony Yengeni: *'What kind of man are you? ... I am talking about the man behind the wet bag.'* / Captain Jeffery T. Benzien: *'... I ask myself the same question.'*" (2002: 25). I have previously discussed Praeg's (2010) engagement with the horror and agitation experienced in an encounter with what is then called 'evil' – the question 'what kind of man is behind the wet bag' is one of horror, and it not only remains unanswered in de Kok's poem, but is reiterated: "It's the question we come back to. / After the political explanations / and the filmy flicker of gulags, concentration / ... camps, / ... here at the commission we ask again, / ...: 'What kind of man are you?'" (2002: 25). De Kok reiterates the question from different places – gulags, camps, killing fields, prisons – and the different attempts to divine the answer: "What kind of man are you? ... We ask and he asks too / like Victorians at a seminar. / Is it in the script, the shape of the head, / the family gene? / Graphology, phrenology or the devil?" (2002: 25). From the shape of the skull to brain scans and genetics, from the devil's influence to an abusive parent, this question remains unanswered, just as Benzien "Gives evidence like this / in



daylight; but can give no account.” (2002: 25). Detailed descriptions of torture methods do not ‘explain’ evil, just as Benzien’s script, or family history, do not ultimately explain ‘what kind of man’ he is. They do not explain because the question attempts to locate something *inhuman* in him, and ultimately Benzien remains human, or at least uncannily familiar.

De Kok writes of Benzien’s appearance, that in the face of being unable to ‘understand’ what he has done, focus is given to what is visible, what is ‘evident’: “Nothing left but to screen his body. / We have no other measure / but body as lie detector... // .....shuffling lumbering cumbersome body //... Though of the heart we cannot speak / ... the body almost but doesn’t explain / ‘What kind of man are you?’” (2002: 26-7). An individual briefly embodies our sense of horror, but “the body almost but doesn’t explain”, the person “gives evidence ... but can give no account.” In asking “what kind of man are you?” one is seeking to qualify the difference, the distinction, between those who have perpetrated violence, and those who have not. We might have material information: Benzien re-enacts the torture method, and relates how Yengeni broke in under thirty minutes, and the names he betrayed as a consequence, but the implications of this information, how we should respond, what language to use to talk about both Benzien and these events, these things are less clear. De Kok is tracing the disquiet around the figure of the perpetrator, how they become the locus for the ambivalence surrounding the ‘evil’, ‘inhumane’, ‘incomprehensible’. Krog also asks these questions: “What kind of person, what kind of human being, keeps another’s hand in a fruit-jar on his desk? What kind of hatred makes animals of people?” (1999:67). Leonhard Praeg (2010) argues that what links ‘evil’ things, from individual acts of violence to conflict on a massive scale, is the agitation, or horror, we feel in response to it. It is our response that marks very disparate events as ‘evil’ – that we are unnerved by them, and find them incomprehensible, even if we know precise details (how many died, and how). He describes evil as ‘uncanny’, that which we describe it as simultaneously familiar and unfamiliar – the wet-bag method is “just for a moment ... so unbelievable/ it looks like a pillow fight between brothers”(de Kok, 2002:26). Evil ‘agitates’ us, disquiets us, in being simultaneously easily named (as that which is Other) and impossible to ‘fix’ – fixing meaning both to firmly situate, and also to solve. The etymology of ‘evil’ is the same as that of ‘utter’ – it is something which is beyond, over, outside. We call things ‘evil’ and mark them as liminal, that is, as a boundary-figure – and we call things we consider to be evil names which reiterate their liminality: bestial, demonic, inhuman. But these categories are rendered metaphors, because ultimately we are still speaking of a human being. The

perpetrator becomes the embodiment of this disquiet, of this state of being beyond – beyond the pale, beyond understanding, beyond words. In asking ‘what kind of man’ Yengeni is asking Benzien to define, and thus defend, his humanity.<sup>40</sup> This language creates a boundary of the human and inhuman, one that is linked also to concepts of the humane. The reply ‘I have asked that myself’ does not answer, but re-poses the question. But it also could turn the address around: asking not only of himself but also of any listener, ‘what kind of man am I?’ – rendering the listener complicit in any answer formed. The ‘answer’ de Kok gives – “This kind, we will possibly answer, / (pointing straight, sideways, / upwards, down, inside out), / this kind.” (2002: 27) – also reposes the question, because all directions are relative to the speaker or listener; ‘sideways, upwards, down, inside out’ points everywhere and nowhere – to everyone, and no one.

Thus far I have been speaking about silences which are perhaps those most referred to in the context of conflict and post-conflict. The silence of trauma, of piecemeal testimony, the incremental and possibly impossible ‘naming of evil’. The silences which I have already covered extensively in the first half of this thesis. But I wish to turn now to other silences, ones which do not originate in any loss of language, dehumanisation, or pain. I am referring now to the choice not to speak, to agential silences. It is too simplistic a move to correlate language to expression, and silence to the utter absence of communication. Language may deceive and withhold information, and silence can be communicative. The silent stare in “The Transcriber Speaks” is far from meaningless, far from being without significance. We may feel challenged when trying to put something into words, but we can also refuse to do so. Elaine Scarry (1985) describes language as the foundation of the commonworld, the sphere of interrelation through communication. Willed silence then is the choice to remain Other, the decision to keep oneself separate – this could be a response to homogenisation, colonialisation, or some other dominant discourse, compelling you to speak of certain things, in certain languages, in certain places or to a certain audience. But this demand may be refused, one may remain in secrecy. In some cases, this may be cast as deception, in others, a form of integrity. This was the topic of my previous chapter. Refusing to confess in torture, and also refusing to give full disclosure in the hearings, while provoking different ethical distinctions, are both examples of willed silence, harbouring secrets. It has been argued that Benzien might not have confessed

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<sup>40</sup> I am aware that his use of ‘man’ could well be gendered, but I think that both Yengeni, and de Kok’s re-use of his words, point towards a questioning of his ‘human-ness’, rather than his masculinity.

to all that he knew, his insistence that he could not recall everything allowing him to circumnavigate full disclosure (Payne 2008: 239). But it is a different non-disclosure that is present in “A Commander Grieves on His Own” – it is a refusal to perform certain modalities of grief, which de Kok interprets not in terms of coldness, but in terms of a type of integrity.

As in “What Kind of Man?”, this poem is framed with a fragment of testimony, the words of Major-General Marius Oelschig, Head of the Ciskei Defence Force at the time of the Bisho Massacre: “... *If, in my professional language of expressing my regret that loved ones have been lost and injured, if that is not sufficient, I apologise for that, but that is how I feel. I am a soldier, and I have been taught to hide my tears, and I have been taught to grieve on my own...*” (2002: 30 *emphasis in original*). It is not the withholding of information that is being focused on here, but the refusal to deliver a specific display of grief or regret. In *Country of my Skull* (1999) Antjie Krog notes that on several occasions body language was sometimes woefully mis-read across different cultural backgrounds (a shaking head mistaken for laughter) – but it is both a question of mis-reading of the commander, or even what an accurate reading might mean, that de Kok is exploring here. The excuse of being inculcated to control one’s emotions, from others in general, and quite explicitly in the public sphere, may well be a means of hiding a *lack* of regret. But it was also a debate that recurred throughout the process of the Amnesty Hearings as to whether, *if* amnesty were to rest upon a show of remorse, would it then be awarded less according to sincerity but according to the capacity to act convincingly – thus to manipulate and deceive. De Kok’s poem allows for an integrity in refusing to act a part, even if ‘being true’ to one’s sense of decorum is translated into an apparently cold withdrawal: “in a confessional booth, a commander / in the court martial of his own judgement / must forgo public forgiveness, / hold mute his grief and guilt. // And I believe it may cost courage / to express professional decorums, / refuse the commerce of pardon / offered for a tale told with feeling...” (2002: 30). In ‘holding mute’ any grief or guilt, he does not appeal to public opinion for redemption, though in so doing, he highlights the difference between amnesty offered by the courts, and the forgiveness that could be given by the victims. There is a shift in this poem from the perspective of the narrator, the first person singular (I), to the more general, the first person plural (we), and then back again. It is the narrator who hears “the cadence of the vanquished” in “this rhetoric of restraint” (2002: 30) and thinks of the ambivalent position of those who have served a State now dishonoured. What is plurally known is less specific – that there were “false heroes jostling on all sides”, ‘bodies’, ‘blood and brokenness’ (2002:

30). The commander who must confess to memory is rendered *generic* – *they are* ‘a commander’, not a specified one (as might be indicated by ‘the’ commander). The last stanzas return quite clearly to the narrator’s belief – that reserve as well as feeling might cost courage. But these ‘thoughts’ verge on imaginings: she would like to think, but does not know, if “he opened his ruled heart in silence,/ unpinned the old brazen medals/... in solitary ceremony.” (2002: 31). The heart of the perpetrator remains unknown territory – as de Kok wrote in the previous poem: ‘...of the heart we cannot speak/ encased in its grille of gristle/ the body almost but doesn’t explain/ ‘what kind of man are you?’ (2002: 27). The commander here also ‘almost but doesn’t explain’ – the hope that de Kok offers is to be found in a ‘solitary corridor’ – away from any witnesses, outside of the hearings, in privacy.

While these poems are explicitly concerned with the TRC, they also point beyond it. The boundaries of the commission appear everywhere. The events which are being testified to occurred in other places, other times, and the imaginations of the characters constantly extend far beyond its scope. The Commission becomes a bounded space in which the world beyond it is spoken of, judged, and also reiterated. De Kok’s poems offer no answers, again and again, only stories. Tales of pain, revenge, grief, mourning, and storytelling itself, though forgiveness is hardly ever explicitly mentioned. The last poem, “Body Parts”, like an appeal or a prayer, asks: ‘may/ ... the severed foot tread home ground/ the punctured ear hear the thrum of songbirds/ may the unfixable broken bone /... lying like a wishbone in the veld / ... give us new bearings.’ (2002: 37). This poem asks for the impossible (‘the severed foot tread home ground’), but it is a reflection on the possibilities that come out of testimony. In testimony, the stories are told – the injuries are already done – but having *heard* the testimony, sharing it, acknowledging it, it is only at this point that the possibility of contemplating ‘new bearings’ begins. The unhealable becomes that which points to new directions, and yet, in never mentioning the TRC, the unhealable is not delimited by what was covered by the Commission, or future possibilities solely determined by it. De Kok does not present this in these poems as a critique, but as the unleashing of many possibilities, of anything that can be imagined and fought for.

That being said, I wish to return to the Commission, specifically to the focus it gave to testimony. The final, and also original, silence in these poems is that of the listener. To attend to testimony is to open a space into which a witness might speak. To be at a ‘hearing’ is – at least in theory – to be *listening*. Dauenhauer (1980) describes this as ‘opening’ silence: it is to fall silent in order to listen to another, to open a space with

one's attentive speechlessness which some other utterance might inhabit, should it choose to do so. Listening silence is the fundamental component of bringing oneself into relation with the Other: "In performing silence one acknowledges some centre of significance of which [you are] not the source ... the doing of silence opens [you] to meet that which lies beyond [your] control." (1980: 25). As noted earlier, these poems offer no answers, only stories – like testimony itself, opening the possibility for change by voicing what it is that must be changed. The dictum 'never again' stems from the testimony of what it *is* that should not be repeated, even if the unrepeatable itself eventually drops from speech.

The last poem I shall be examining, is also the first in de Kok's series: "Parts of Speech". This poem moves between the two agential silences – the unspeaking, and the listening. It begins with "Some stories don't want to be told." (2002: 21), and others which also refuse gesture, refuse to be "danced or mimed/ ... erase their traces in nursery rhymes / or ancient games like blind man's buff." (2002: 21). From this place of refusal, de Kok moves towards the possibility of a forum for some sort of telling, gesturing: "at this stained place words / are scraped from resinous tongues, / ... hung on the lines / of courtroom and confessional, / transposed into the dialect of record." (2002: 21). Stories – unspecified, perhaps as yet untold – which if spoken, might be legitimated as testimony, preserved and archived. They begin in an aversion to being spoken, then into trepidation and possibly even forcing – to be scraped and wrung – transposed into other languages. But the refusals are intriguing, these personified stories that "don't want to be told. / They walk away, carrying their suitcases/... Look at their disappearing curved spines. / Hunchbacks. Harmed ones. Hold-alls." (2002: 21). These stories, with all their baggage – these 'harmed ones', 'hold-alls' – but in refusing to speak of one's trauma, one may also be refusing to be reduced to it – to be labelled a victim, or for a moment of one's victimisation to be the hold-all signifier explaining all of one's later actions. One also refuses to be the hold-all image of other's suffering – an epitome, a symbol for the nation, an appropriation into history, a stereotype. The Benzien hearing, despite being very atypical, seems to perform just such a role – becoming the distillation of the TRC process into a single image: the re-enactment of the past, using volunteers and witnesses, before the media, in the name of truth, and the consolidation of the nation. It is precisely stereotyping that is refused in the second stanza – nursery rhymes, tap-dancing, children's-game renditions. What is being insisted on is not that these stories remain secret, but that they might be disclosed on their own terms, that they shift from 'hold-alls', to 'whole worlds':

Why still believe stories can rise  
with wings, on currents, as silver flares,  
...begin in pain and move towards grace,  
aerating history with recovered breath?

Why still imagine whole words, whole worlds:  
the flame splutter of consonants,  
deep sea anemone vowels,  
birth-cable syntax, rhymes that start in the heart,  
and verbs, verbs that move mountains? (2002: 21)

That there be opportunities to testify, to tell one's own story and those of the dead, is vitally important, especially in a context where such lives and versions of events have been denied or devalued. But we speak of the past not only that it be recorded. 'Why still believe', 'why still imagine' is an appeal to belief and imagination that change can be initiated in the wake of testimony. That records of history can be broadened, that patterns of history can be broken. Aletta Norval, (2009) discussing speech-act theory<sup>41</sup> in reference to the TRC, described testimony as 'passionate' or 'provocative' utterance, acts of speech which demand response, simultaneously breaking history and precedence, and establishing new possibilities. But these 'passionate utterances' are not confined to the space of a hearing – they stretch on beyond it, especially if the ghosts they speak of are not put to rest. It could be said of Truth Commissions that they create neither whole truths nor true reconciliation, but they can help create conditions in which these might be attained.

De Kok asks a lot of words – by which I mean she demands great things from them, but she also questions them, their strengths, their limitations. Why still believe stories can begin in pain and move towards grace, that verbs can move mountains? Stories, testimonies, evoke the possible, and provoke us to act. If she asks a lot of words, she also opens a lot of silences. Silences are very often conflated into a single concept, one which makes it difficult to distinguish different ways of 'being silent', but de Kok's poetry enables distinctions to be drawn between these different silences. The silence of the 'lost' in "Some There Be" (2002:36), where it is an absence of knowledge

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<sup>41</sup> In a poem outside the scope of this study, de Kok writes of 'a ridge of words that look like acts' (*The Talking Cure*, in *Transfer* 1997: 45). It is from this line that Graham (2009) draws the title for his chapter on de Kok in his extensive examination of South African literature.

which confounds language, is distinct from the loss of language in “Tongue-tied” (2002: 24), where it is pain and trauma that defies complete description, a theme expanded in “The Transcriber Speaks” (2002: 32). Yet in none of these is silence reduced to a space of meaninglessness – it is instead heavy with the unsaid, or the unknown. The elusiveness of language in “What Kind of Man?” (2002: 25) is not reducible to either trauma, or lack of knowledge; the agitation surrounding the figure of the perpetrator is an extrapolation of what is known towards further meaning, the significance of what it means to be ‘human’. But the representation of traumatic silence, and the ‘unspeakability’ of the perpetrator, are both relatively common renditions of silence as a space of oppression, frustration, insufficiency. De Kok’s poems are intriguing for their inclusion of the possibility of agential silence. “A Commander Grieves on His Own” (2002: 30) illustrates that refusing to speak might be a form of integrity, even if a problematic one. All of the previous forms of silence, including conceiving it through integrity, conceive of silence as separation through a break in language: the indescribable and the secret being held at a distance. In “Parts of Speech” (2002: 21), the refusal to speak in certain terms or forums shifts the place of silence to a listener. If opening silence is the attentive quiet of a listener, it is a silence which makes ground for connection, rather than enforcing separation. This shift from speaker to listener draws attention to the ethical responsibility inherent in being willing to listen to testimony which unsettles, marks new ground, or challenges expectation. De Kok closes her poems with questions, and I shall do likewise: What do we do in the face of testimony of suffering, from the banal everyday to the momentous? What do we do in the face of silence – break it? Respect it? Mystify it? And where, exactly, does the unfixable broken bone point – straight, sideways, upwards, down, inside out?

The variety of meanings and valences of silence are particularly evident in de Kok’s series, engaging with the silences which have been the topics of this thesis. This final chapter has focused on silence which comes to have starkly different meanings from those in previous chapters – in being posited as both agential, and as the basis of interconnection, what silence signifies here is nothing like the silence of animals, or the loss of language in pain or horror. It might be possible to interpret listening silence as a form of resistance, in creating an alternate space, but unlike the focus on secrecy or privacy which was at issue in the previous chapter, the silence of listening is not concerned with separation. The silence here is contrasted to *exclusive discourse*, as it is seen as creating a space in which connection, listening, and empathy may be possible.

# Conclusions

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This thesis has set out to explore how and why the meaning of silence changes between contexts, and has argued that due to its definition through apophasis, it is the shift in what silence is contrasted to which changes its definition. This shift in what silence is being defined against implies that despite the use of the same term 'silence', and even recurring metaphors or tropes, the concept being called 'silence' is not equivalent across these contexts. In each chapter the meaning of silence has altered in respect to the contexts, due to the change in what silence was being situated in opposition to – in the first chapter this was human language; in the second it was the ability to describe experiences, or speak in a way defined as 'fully human'; in the third chapter silence was contrasted with oppressive or judgemental discourses; in the fourth chapter silence was contrasted against exclusive discourses which refuse to 'listen' or make a space. Arguing that it is because 'silence' comes to be figured as a creator of space, what is at issue in these contexts is what is conceived of as being in this space of silence – Otherness, isolation, individuality, intersubjectivity.

The differences between the meanings that silence accrues in each context implies that it is unwise to generalise between them, or to presuppose some 'universal' meaning for silence. The contrast between 'silence is golden' and 'silence needs to be broken' is not only a question of aphorisms representing different opinions on what the significance of silence is, but are tied into wider issues surrounding the fact that 'silence' as a word is used to refer to utterly different things. In all of the contexts that have been examined however, silence does come to figure a space. It is also its association with space which is referenced in discourses which refer to silence as 'nothing', or define it as negative space – I began with the metaphor of a coastline to attempt to represent the extent to which even something being defined in contrast to another thing (sea versus land, silence versus language) need not be conceived of in terms of nothing versus something. In the contexts that this thesis has been examining, something is posited in the 'space' which silence is seen to create, *something* which is not nothing, or absence. I would argue that it is because of what is being posited in this space is seen as being the key issue in each context, and also that in each case it is seen to be contingent on this space, that the word silence continues to be used. Thus,



in discourses surrounding dehumanisation, it is precisely the isolation created by silence which is at issue, and in contexts concerned with listening it is the intersubjectivity made possible by silence. Likewise the issue of independence is what is at the heart of discourses surrounding privacy and secrecy; and the concept of the knowledge of Others is central to the possibility of ways of knowing outside of the scope of human language.

In the first chapter, what was posited outside of language, outside of human communication, was Otherness – the example used here was the ‘problem of apprehending animal life, animal consciousness, and to problematize both the correlation in discourse of animals to ‘dehumanised’ humans, but also the tendency to assume what an animal perceives or knows. In the second chapter, what was posited outside of speakable experiences was dehumanisation, isolation. This chapter engaged with the question of the problems for testimony, given the loss of language in experiences of pain or horror, and also the ‘silence of death’. While the *Muselmanner* were represented in terms of being a figure of the dehumanised human, in particular in terms of being impossible to bear witness to, and incapable of communicating themselves, examining the testimony of *Muselmanner* both destabilised the extent to which these descriptions could be literal, and also provided further questions concerned with what might be called the ‘imperative to speak’, and the extent to which so much judgement concerned with establishing humanity – even in this case that of other humans – comes to rest upon speech and communication. The shift towards thinking of silence in terms of agency opened the possibility of conceiving silence in more positive ways – in terms of resistance, or possibly even freedom, in the forms of secrecy and privacy. Drawing on the narratives of Wilde’s short story and Neshat’s film, it was shown that in these contexts silence is contrasted to oppressive and judgemental discourse, and what was posited in the space of silence was the possibility of self-reflection, and independence. The last chapter shifted towards the agential silence of listening. Carrying on a number of themes which first arose in the previous chapter, such as self-reflection, and the potential for shared silences, the fourth chapter examined the extent to which silence may come to be integral to communication and community. In this context silence is situated in contrast to exclusive discourses, but instead of positing the separation which was given in the previous chapter, posits the possibility for intersubjectivity in this listening silence. Drawing on narratives in which political recognition, or bearing witness, both require a listener, an audience – a forum to be heard – this chapter finally engages with Ingrid de Kok’s poetic series, in which a number of the silences that have been discussed

throughout this thesis are in evidence. This engagement allows for these different silences to be seen in interaction with one another.

Despite being fairly broad in its ambition and scope, this thesis has limited its engagement with silences to a focus on language. It is possible that further engagements with other forms of silence – such as those which focused on it purely in terms of the audible – would lend a very different conclusion. To an extent there has been a progression through this thesis which recreates the dichotomy of animals versus the ‘City of Men’ – beginning with the silence of the unknown, to animals, then to ‘humans’ who are ‘barely human’, then to humans which choose not to speak, and then finally to community based upon the possibility of speech. Most of my discussions of the contrast between silence and language (which is the basis of so much of this work) is drawing on a particularly ‘Western’ or ‘Eurocentric’ tradition, as is evidenced in the recurring reference to Aristotle, and the significance of language to the philosophy of the ancient Greeks. This is also evident in sources which are influenced by Christian religious doctrine, which continue the tradition of privileging ‘the Word’, ‘Logos’, and featuring it as a religious concept. That being noted, I have also not drawn extensively on religious engagements with these questions – though there are a significant number, in particular with reference to the theme of listening – which might have yielded other ways of thinking, particularly in the context of the presence of Christian discourses in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

This thesis also presented a number of ‘open questions’, most of which remained unanswered, unresolved. Part of the reason for this is the extent to which I feel that it is important not presume to ‘answer’ some of these questions, but to engage with the possibility of debate which does not solve them, but thinks of what issues are raised by them – for example in my first chapter the questions brought up by Lopez: what is apprehended by animals – by *this* animal? What do they understand, how alike to us are they, in what ways might their difference not be deprivation? What possibilities are there for community with beings with whom you cannot speak? The open questions raised in the second chapter included the ‘question of evil’ – if evil is subjective, and how to respond to individuals who are identified as evil, is particularly clear in de Kok’s poem “What Kind of Man?”. The question of ‘what kind ...’ is not one that is easily answered, and I am wary of discourses which dehumanise perpetrators. The question of what speech counts as human was first implied in my first chapter on animals, and was made more explicit in my discussion of the *Muselmanner*. That speech should count for so much, be the basis of whether one is

human or animal, human or dehumanised/traumatised, is problematic – though it might be possible to shift the focus on bodily vulnerability, to being ‘sentient and mortal’. In the third chapter there was not great attention paid to the negative aspects of secrecy – but the extent to which secrecy can often be classed closer to trauma, and pain, repression, and violence, does render it necessary to be clear about what is being achieved by this silence, what rights does someone have to it. The last chapter, preoccupied with listening, focused more on the theoretical point of listening – rather than in terms of praxis, or how such listening is to be fostered.

These questions have been beyond the constraints of this thesis, though this work has also given rise to them through what it has discussed. The question of what other silences there are, how they are defined, what they create, remains open for other studies.

*“We commit what we do not commit ...  
Somewhere there is a terrible silence.  
Towards that we gravitate.”*

*Janos Pilinszky (2002: 414)*

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