

The Other of Dialogue: Opening Silences of the Dumb Foreigner¹

Kyoo Lee

This paper is not about the silence of the other. Neither is it a phenomenological, hermeneutical, political, aesthetical or ethnographical account of silence taken as a form of existential practice. It concerns an ethics. It explores, rather than an ethics of semiotic care or recognition, an ethical structure, possibility or resources of silence, the still auditory, disclosed in the disrelational ontology of language: a richness and complexity of that dramatic tension, the postlapsarian interplay between fallen time and fallen language; the key question is how not to sanitise, fetishise and economise on the dialogic inadequacy of the other, of the dumb foreigner in us. Silence, thus approached as a universal speech act, as the inclusive preclusion of the word across time, space and cultures, is more specific, precise and resonant than quietude or muteness, the absence or eradication of sounds. Silence, thus understood, is then not a mystified non-language, a solipsistic disproof or disqualification of mediated communication but the language that is forever foreign. The originary force of silence, its speechless power is an evolutionary index to ethical dialogue, or rather dialogue as an ethical act. We, of we-are-the-world, should be able to communicate not in spite of, but through, silence.

Surd: 1. *Mathematics* An irrational number, such as $\sqrt{2}$. 2. *Linguistics* A voiceless sound in speech.

Medieval Latin *surdus*, speechless, surd
[translation of Arabic (*ja-r*)'s'amm, deaf (root)]
[translation of Greek *alogos*, speechless]

The experience of terminal silence is the experience of a postpredicative, postexpressive terminal surd. It can be, and has been, interpreted in various ways. For example, there are sceptical interpretations as well as mystical ones. But this surd must be interpreted somehow. (Dauenhauer, 1980, p. 76)

Dr Kyoo Lee, Department of Religion and Philosophy, LaGrange College, 601 Broad Street, LaGrange, GA 30240, USA. Tel: +1 706 880 8198. Email: Q@kyoo.demon.co.uk

A Person

Sir Rabindranath Tagore tells the story of a country girl, Subha, short for Subhashini, ‘sweetly speaking’. Literary uniformity is another point her parents had in mind: her two elder sisters were Sukeshini (lovely-locked) and Suhasini (sweetly smiling). As if staging a profound protest against the parental demand, the sweet speaker came out in this world with a question firmly placed in her mouth: ‘who could have guessed that Subha would prove dumb?’ (Tagore, 1981, p. 145). The rest of the story is about how Subha, born dumb, is forced to remain dumb by the community that remains blind to her silence; she speaks to cows, goats and a cat instead, or else spends some quality time with a village idler whose full-time preoccupation is to catch fish, who not only therefore valued her taciturnity but, somehow, understood the dumb girl’s language. Later, Subha is hurriedly married off to a wealthy business man in Calcutta, who has fish-curry twice daily and, consequently, twice the number of enemies one person would normally have. The husband, upon realising in less than ten days that the unstoppable tears gushing from the beautiful black eyes were not merely a sign of purity of the heart, swiftly springs into action by ‘using both eyes and ears this time’ (p. 155): this time, the lord marries ‘a second wife who could speak’ (p. 155).

Like Subha the Dumb Girl

Tune in, please. It is not the sweet irony of Subha, the lyrical beauty of her Asiatic silence: it is the irony of such sweetness that should concern us, the unspeakable poignancy of non-speaking which the life of *a* Subha embodies; what difference are you seeing? What pain are you feeling? What silence are you hearing? What else is there? What troubles?

What troubles me is not the silence of the other *per se*, the thick, seductive, often monstrous interiority of other human beings that is supposed to remain exterior, an untouchable ‘secret’, to ‘me’, as the ‘hidden intention/meaning’. That is banal, futile even; given that a secret revealed is another secret concealed, what the secretive other can show one, as Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Confessions*² does for instance, is nothing but the very disorganising movement of progressive silences, that which remains unsaid—yet to be heard by and from the ‘viewpoint’ of one who needs, demands *the* truth, the narrative justice: the police, the priest, the father, ‘the coloniser, the paranoiac’ (Bhaba, 1994, pp. 98–100),³ etc. It is not the implicit (i.e., complicitously generated and explicitly competitive) narratology of silence that engages my attention. I have no story to hear, or tell, here.⁴

What interests me is not some phenomenology of silence, either. A Husserlian ‘intentional analysis’ of it has already been undertaken by, for example, Bernard Dauenhauer (1980) who focuses on the temporal ontology of silence’s intersubjective dimension that marks the mortal finitude of understanding, which, the author stresses, is and must be acknowledged by the collaborative interlocutors. My lack of rigour and originality forces me to leave intact, happily, such a path of thinking; what I am still unhappy about, however, perhaps as a post-deconstructive reader of

phenomenology, is the vectorialised drive of that ‘acknowledgement’, that need for ‘binding and joining’:

Intervening silences, fore-and-after silence, and deep silence have at least four important characteristics in common. In all three of these ways of appearing, (1) silence is an active human performance which always appears in connection with an utterance, (2) silence is never an act of unmitigated autonomy, (3) silence involves a yielding following upon an awareness of finitude and awe. The yielding involved in silence is peculiar inasmuch as (4) it is a yielding which binds and joins . . .

In performing silence one acknowledges some centre of significance of which he 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. . . . But correlatively, the agent is aware that the doing of silence opens him to meet that which lies beyond his control. This other reaches the agent only through the agent’s yielding . . .

Fore-and-after silence binds the utterance into a unity. Perhaps the unity is fragile, but it is final. And deep silence binds him who performs it to that which is other and not inferior to him, however this other is interpreted. (Dauenhauer, 1980, pp. 24–25)

Who, or what, binds? Organised silences are silences digitalised; produced, consumed and retro-interpreted as signficatory entities. But does one and can one and must one ‘perform’ silence, as John Cage does? Silence does and will persist lingeringly, precisely because it remains misunderstood, interrupted when measured as such. ‘Perhaps the unity is fragile’ indeed, but not final. Perhaps the issue is not entirely phenomenological or hermeneutical, or political even. What do we, and can we still, make of that stillness?

Making Us

What engages me instead is an ethics, of some sort. What arrests me is an ethical structure or possibility or resources of silence, the still auditory: a richness and complexity of that dramatic tension—post-lapsarian interplay between, put theologically, the ‘fallen time’ and the ‘fallen language’ (MacKendrick, 2001⁵)—called silence, the inclusive preclusion of the word, the disrelational ontology of language that is more specific, precise and so more resonant than quietude or muteness⁶ that is the absence or eradication of sounds, relatively flat. What captivates me is the originary force of silence, its speechless power taken not simply as an enabling condition of, but as an evolutionary index to, ethical dialogue or rather dialogue as an ethical act. Silence, as I understand and will use here, is not a mystified non-language, a solipsistic disproof or disqualification of mediated communication, but the language that is forever foreign: ‘the word written in a foreign language.’⁷ Silence is often constitutive of an ‘exceedingly’ good talk, not as ‘part’ of it (‘fore-

and-after-silence') but as something that falls outside of it guidingly, as that towards which 'conversation strives' (Benjamin, 1996, p. 5), limpingly. Silence is then language, language here taken as 'not only communication of the communicable but also, at the same time, a symbol of the noncommunicable (p. 74). Why? What does it mean? The language *of*—if not in—a dialogue is silence; one must listen, too, while the other talks.

Sometimes then, it is just good not to talk, better to listen—not merely to what we talk about but to why we talk, and better still to *that* we talk. That is to be a responsive hostage to the happening of an unfilled pause in a torrent of words, to the clamour of the Babel that remains inaudible, 'muffled' each time yet each time anew;⁸ 'The totality of being envisioned from cultures could nowise be a panoramic view. There could not be a totality in being, but only totalities' (Levinas, 1987, p. 88). What can I, do I and must I, hear in such an absence of the total or rather in a presence of 'totalities'? What is to be heard in the foreign other's inability to speak 'my' language, or the foreign other's (total?) disregard of it, or better still, the foreign other's ability to speak it, or hear it, otherwise? Put differently again, what is this generic, powerful disability of the foreign that, through such an incomprehensible 'saying of transcendence', interrupts the dormant ontology of the said? Our surplus: the incomprehensible Other, *à la* Levinas (Bernasconi, 1988).⁹

Make no mistake, though. When I say silence is, first, incomprehensible and that is good, I am not (just) privileging the proverbial Asiatic¹⁰ silence as a superior¹¹ *cultural* ethos or praxis, the kind often used as a convenience store for poets, good or bad, Eastern or Western, or else as a disciplinary means, as a tool for stratifying the domestic sphere or domesticating the outside. I am not (simply) trying to Romanticise silence as a marker for victimised authenticity or to use it, in turn, as an empowering device monopolised by the oppressor, which necessitates an invested prelapsarianism, a myth of the (ab)original, often too simply associated with the name Rousseau, the father of European Romanticism. Such a thing, if it still remains a thing, has been radically questioned, quite justly, in post-colonial and post-feminist intellectual projects since the 1980s that complicate—through explicating, for instance, the mimetic appropriation by the colonised of colonial power/grammar (Bhabha, 1994) and the inseparability of colonial history from feminist issues, local or otherwise (Spivak, 1988)—the teleological linearity and mono-perspectivism, in the 'post-factual guilt', of dominant political ideology; the guilt of having once 'had' the other whose resistance to a reciprocal speech, however, ironically enough, makes one suspect that *that* other, the colonised, might not have existed.

Having said that, I must explain this, too: an emancipatory *political* lesson we can, do and must draw from the theoretical discourse around the 'silenced voice' of the Other (silence as victimised authenticity) or 'the silent resistance of the non-narrative voice' (silence as an empowering device) is that such an act of silencing or use of silence is a speech act in itself, pure and simple: one senses¹² a staged power that most loudly and transparently speaks for itself. Silence as an apparatus employed in a political positional play produces the Other; the Other, in turn, remains productive.

That is, the productive Other secures the power of silence by virtue of being made more sensitive, receptive, to its mode of production; this is one way—and one good way—to explain how and why the moral perception of the oppressed remains superior to that of the oppressor. How is it possible that the archaic, ‘deadly’¹³ silences of mad homosexuals, for instance, remain audible, still today? Our power: the produced/productive Other, *à la* Foucault.¹⁴

Silence is incomprehensible and productive, I have said so far. Sometimes—not just in some places or circumstances where the ‘impure’ (Dauenhauer, 1980, p. 82) silence is produced and controlled intently¹⁵ by the self-founding power—it is good as I said, even better I would say, to shut up and listen, for the reasons I have pointed out so far. Now, the third point: keep straining your ears, retuning your inner auditory faculty, I am suggesting again, when the un-heard-of-ness of the foreign speech, silence, troubles you, tests you. What are we still hearing, with the ear of the other, if not ‘*plus d’un* (the excess of one, and more than one)’? Our inventions: the exorbitant Other, *à la* Derrida.¹⁶

Again, make no mistake. I am not trying to polarise One vs the Other, ‘them’ vs ‘us’, ‘the insiders’ vs ‘the outsiders’, and to make the Other us or them be recognised as such, as in ‘who we or they really are’. No. Nor am I pointing to the structural reciprocity of irreducible strangeness as a mutually recognised condition of a talk, of a ‘let us *therefore* talk face to face, hand in hand, as autonomous individuals, fully-rational citizens of the civilised world’. I do not subscribe to the Gadamerian assumption, rather aggressively posited (and once used against Derrida, the evasive interlocutor) as the Kantian ‘good will’, namely that ‘whoever opens his mouth wants to be understood; otherwise, one would neither speak nor write’ (Michelfelder & Palmer, 1989, p. 55), which amounts to saying that whoever does not open his, or her, mouth need or would not be understood even by the good Kantian, who would then be *dangerously* indistinguishable from—let me introduce another Subha (& Associates)—the playground bullies in Maxine Hong Kingston’s autobiographical story, ‘A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe’ (1976, p. 1), which illustrates, with disturbing clarity, a way in which silence becomes the last weapon of mass protection for the massively oppressed:

My father asks, ‘Why is it that I can hear Chinese from blocks away? Is it that I understand the language? Or is it that they talk loud?’ [...] It is the way Chinese sounds, chingchong ugly, to American ears, not beautiful like Japanese sayonara words with the consonants and vowels as regular as Italian. We make guttural peasant and have Ton Duc Thang names you can’t remember. And the Chinese can’t hear Americans at all; the language is too soft and western music unhearable. We American-Chinese girls had to whisper to make ourselves American-feminine ... (pp. 172–73)

I joined in at lunchtime when the other students, the Chinese too, talked about whether or not she was mute, although obviously she was not if she could read aloud. (p. 173)

'You're going to talk', I said, my voice steady and normal, as it is talking to the familiar, the weak, and the small. 'I am going to make you talk, you sissy-girl'. She stopped backing away and stood fixed. . . . 'Talk!' I shouted into the side of her head. . . . I squeezed her other cheek. 'Are you? Huh? Are you going to talk?' . . . 'You do have a tongue', I said. 'So use it'. I pulled the hair at her temples, pulled the tears out of her eyes. 'Say, "Ow"', I said. 'Just "Ow". Say, "Let go". Go ahead. Say it. . . . Say, "Leave me alone", and I'll let you go. Just say, "Stop". . . . 'I'll let you go if you say just one word', I said. 'you can even say, "a" or "the", and I will let you go. Come on. Please'. She didn't shake her head anymore, only cried steadily, so much water coming out of her . . . I shook her shoulder. I pulled her hair again. I squeezed her face. 'Come on! Talk! Talk! Talk!'. 'Why won't you talk?' I started cry. What if I couldn't stop . . . (pp. 173–80)

At this point, will the silentists, whoever and wherever they are, at least stand up, please? (as/if the real Kantians wouldn't? (Bernasconi, 2003)¹⁷) The equalising hyperbole granted, now I can, do and must reaffirm my starting point, sort of one step short of Gadamer's, whose weakness is his strength, namely, unstopability: indeed, what if he couldn't stop?

My concern, interest and question is rather: how not to 'sanitise', fetishise and economise on the dialogic inadequacy of the other, of the dumb foreigner in us (or dumb animals from the stupid cow's point of view!): how not to silence the other who remains in the fog of silence, but to bear witness, with the other, to that distant fogginess of the other, *as if* my own. In the rest of my pages that will work, obliquely and critically, towards an idea drawn from a writer of self-distancing silences, Julia Kristeva who, not unlike Derrida, is curiously,¹⁸ autobiographically, foreign, I shall be advancing two, interrelated points of observation and suggestion which, I suggest, you should read as a parasitic prolegomena to the more substantial articles in Part II of this issue that follows.

An observation, first: any demand for verbal communication and linguistic (or symbolic) self-representation, whether Socratic or Kantian-Habermasian or ultimately Hegelian, together with the positive assumptions about the worth (or signifiatory value) of talking and articulating, *turns* monologic if and when the non-participating silence of the other is considered, treated simply as a negative marker of incompleteness, a desire of dialogue left unfulfilled, a Hegel dissatisfied. Consider, as a contemporary index to that risk, that loophole, what Jean-Luc Nancy says about 'the West at its Ends' in the essay, whose title is that last, vertiginous scene played out over and over again since Kant:¹⁹

The West in its accomplishment asks us neither to revive its significations nor to resign ourselves to their annulment, but rather to understand that from now on the demand for meaning has to go through the exhaustion of significations.

When Kant declared that 'the philosopher is to be found nowhere,²⁰ while the idea of his legislation is to be found everywhere in all of human reason' (which, in the final analysis, says about the philosopher nothing essentially different from what Plato was saying) he did not make a resigned observation (despite a tone of

resignation at the impossibility of meeting the Master of Meaning . . .); rather, he exposed the very law of this metaphysical 'legislation' namely, that its proper and ultimate signification only ever presents itself from a distance. This law is so because the idea of philosophy that is here implied is precisely the idea of willing signification . . . It is the end-lessness of the will-to-signify the philosopher man that constitutes the end, in all senses of the word, of philosophy as metaphysics. Humanism is henceforth that which makes man flee. In the end, he finds himself dumbfounded, faltering before the violent bedazzlement or the naked horror of impossible Meaning. (Nancy, 1993, pp. 48–49)

'The distance': From whom? From what? From 'the Rome to which all the roads lead' (Levinas, 1987, p. 89)?, we can and must ask. 'The flee': from whom? From what? 'The impossible': from what perspective? For what reason? The signified exhaustion is not convincing enough. The endlessness of 'its will to exhaust' does and will remain somehow pointless, in so far as man himself—Kant the man, too?—did not and will not travel far and frequent enough; or man does and will eventually, as with Hegel, come 'home'. Adding that the distance in and created by Kant is not 'absolute' yet is yet to be made relative by Hegel's much-totalised, much-misunderstood dialectic that, in fact, 'opens onto the (very) end of signification' (p. 49), Nancy observes conclusively, acutely:

His [Kant's] thought is reduced to this: 'one must signify, *but not too much*' . . . Its pitiful content alters nothing; in the will to signification, the presence of Meaning and its distance fall back on one another, endlessly exchanging their properties, and if the Subject wants to gain a Meaning, Meaning wants to feed on the desire of a subject . . . That is, it is important to recognise our destination through all that the West has signified and brought about, through the worst as well as through the best; it is not that there is nothing to be chosen, on the contrary . . ., but it must be understood how the worst was and remains possible in the name of Meaning, and how the best remains hanging on the fleeing of Meaning, in the same metaphysical closure.

Yet still: what still, however, joins the worst possible to the still best, in Nancy's near-and-anti apocalyptic political imagination that is increasingly restlessly Hegelian even in its fugitive and rapturous mode, is the very urgency, the very intimate, irreducible 'sense of the absolute between us' (2002, p. 78). It is an impatient ultimacy of politics that is Nancy's consistent priority. It refuses to see, still remains insensitive to, how and why that impossibly still-Kantian distance of the noumenal Other is and is to be created in the first place ethically, prior to any transformative formation of a political community. In a still hasty move, therefore, to make 'sense' of, in the absence of the common Meaning, some common 'beat', 'rhythm', 'between us', . . . us, who? . . . Nancy demonstrates the same dazzling rhetorical footwork, dangerously seductive for its power of recognition:

We never stop losing the 'fixity of self-positing'. And this is unrest that *we are* and that we desire is where the proximity of the absolute finds, or happens upon, itself: neither possession, nor incorporation, but proximity as such, imminence and

coincidence, like the beat of a rhythm. So beats the passage of sense: as the interval of time, between us, in the fleeting and rhythmic awakening of a discrete recognition of existence. (2002, p. 79)

My counter-point is: those who flee flee—from ‘us’; they have already fled into another territory, and will always have done that. They ‘transcend’ us, to bring Levinas here.

To put my point differently, the originary dumbness and teleological opacity of the foreigner, at best the bringer of a new fashion, a new ‘rhythm’ to the same old music, has never been and will therefore always remain a threat: ‘foreigners are all funny’, are they not? The foreign Other who cannot but be dumb, whether literally or metaphorically, may well just be an innocuous, returnable gift from elsewhere, a mummified object of zoologico-anthropologico-musiological curiosity; the natives just need forget, that foreigners are indeed *all* funny. But time and again, it is, precisely, this forgetting that will not happen: ‘they will never let you forget, that you are a foreigner’. The foreigner is then, in a more disturbingly powerful sense, the bringer of a dialogical scandal: the forever dumb, when catered for philosophically rather than commercially, turn into a constant structural threat to the formal stability (mirror symmetry) of dialogue, a mockery of, even. In that figure, often reified into ethno-cultural or gender-political stereotypes,²¹ is disclosed the abrupt irony of dialogic reason: *dia*-logue’s gesture of welcoming, of friendly reciprocity, often carries within itself the force of uniformity, of asymmetrical mimesis, supported by the reflexive-tautological presuppositions, the ‘set-up’ that requires a collaboration between the two parties, called a ‘common sense’ that is, I am saying, on the verge of turning, constantly persistently, into a common non-sense.²²

The world . . . have lost the *univocity* . . . Absurdity consists not in non-sense, but in the isolation of innumerable meanings, in the absence of a sense that orients²³ them. What is lacking is the sense of the meanings, the Rome to which all the roads lead, the symphony in which all the meanings can sing, the canticle of canticles. The absurdity lies in multiplicity in pure indifference. The cultural meanings put forth as the ultimate are the break-up of a unity. (Levinas, 1987, p. 89)

The issue here is that of the inherent monolingualism of the inquisitive subject: who is speaking? Who enforces the talk? Who is deaf, in fact? Consider Gayatri Spivak’s trademark sentence, ‘Can the subaltern speak?’ or ‘The subaltern cannot speak!’, whose affectively (semiotically) punctuated irony—? and !—has not been properly heard, as the author, too, observes in 1993, five years after the publication of the essay in question.²⁴ What tends to be deafened out, ironed out, by the idealistic aggression of dialogical fervour, is that ‘root’ problem, that originary absurdity, that initial muddle, that irreducible confusion, that mutual blindness of potential interlocutors to the formative dimension, edge, of *a* dialogue, that ‘pure indifference’ happening prior to a difference recognised *per se*: a dumb foreigner exposes the fact that there is such a thing as (a) language; a homosexual exposes the fact that there is such a thing as having (a) sex.

'Speaking is never neutral' (Irigaray, 2002), then. The proscriptively 'inscribed' demand for speech, wrapped in a gesture of invitation, of acceptance, veils as well as viceralises the gender-tropological, geo-political, racial, class struggles for recognition, identification, domination and assimilation. And that is what does and should alarm us every time, as if for the first time. Dialect and dialectic, for instance, can hardly sit together: if the former is funny,²⁵ the latter is phoney—in the sense that the symbolic formality, oneness, of an 'ideal speech' covers up as well as plays on its semiotic localities, instances, by pretending to, or by having to pretend to, be blind to it. Justice is and ought to be doubly blind: a blindness of the universal to the particular, which is the unrelieved aporia, if not just a 'blind-spot', of idealism. Let's just face it, then, as a sensitive German poet once did, inwardly: like 'the house a guest has just entered',²⁶ we speakers and listeners both become strangers to ourselves—exposed, dragged and pushed to the bewildering outside that immediately turns, through a reflex 'sensing', into a bruised inside; this outside is, however, not necessarily cutting,²⁷ freezing cold. How so?

Listen

We, the speakers as the implicit containers of promises,²⁸ and not the carrier of the will, good or bad, first, do and must care about this problem; but further, we should welcome and celebrate this persistent absurdity of foreign soliloquy, which resists being articulated even as *a* problem, which is precisely its lasting, notable strengths; we only need be reminded of how *Sophist*, one of the strangest (or most 'esoteric') Platonic dialogues, where Socrates, forced to listen rather than to speak, is constantly plagued by the uncontrollable and uncontrolled voice of the Eleatic stranger, the unlocatable. Why, allow me to remind us, should the allegory—that is, 'saying otherwise' through a staged silence—of Subha still concern us, trouble us, leave us in wonder? Because . . . with and against Kristeva (1991), the silent polyglot or polylingual silentist,²⁹ let us *say*, conclusively: she is, as she herself says, *in* all of us the 'strangers to ourselves' (*Étrangers à nous-mêmes*). Self-estrangement given this way as an irreducible (as well as shared, not just mutual) condition of self-relation, 'might not' then, as she goes on to ask, 'universality be . . . our own foreignness?' (*notre proper étrangeté?*) (pp. 161–91, 249–85). Asked differently: how is it possible to read the silence of the other properly, sensitively and successfully without conveniently disposing³⁰ of it in the now highly capitalised multiculturalist bin, a judico-ethical complacency and hypocrisy, of 'your right to remain silent? What if I do remain silent? (even if or before you can stop). What can you do?

So here come the promised suggestion I said I would make: an 'appeal' rather, an echo of Bhabha's Derrida or Derrida's Bhabha, the resounding 'Ouboum':³¹ We, of we-are-the-world, should be able to communicate not in spite of, but *through*, silence. Against and with Nancy, we should push ourselves to and 'beyond' our wit's end, as it were, but also be able to remain free from its metaphysical, retro-inscribed closure:

Cultural difference, as Adela experienced it, in the nonsense of the Marabar caves, is not the acquisition or accumulation of additional cultural knowledge; it is the momentous, if momentary, extinction of the recognisable object of culture in the disturbed artifice of its signification, at the edge of experience. (1994, p. 126)

The powers and limits of the word are to be registered at once, through silence, if our hope and dream is to stage a certain originary—not to be confused with ‘original’ understood in the exclusively Christian or in the reified ‘Platonic’ senses of the word—as well as cultivated dialogue between beings infinitely, infinitely potently. To my self-referential, perhaps monolingual question, ‘was there really the Word in the beginning?’, responded a wise friend of mine,³² as I recall: ‘well, a babel rather (or a babble, was it?)’; enticed by this move, I am stepping into a third possibility of beginning—beginning with silence.³³

Notes

- [1] I dedicate this essay to the faculty and graduate students at the Department of Philosophy, University of Memphis, who made me do ‘it’, and with whom I am still doing it. The uncontrollable traces of silent dialogues notwithstanding, I alone remain responsible for any mishearing of the voice from the South revived here.
- [2] Rousseau the writer’s original guilt of theft (of a ribbon), allegedly cleared once and for all through a corrective act of confession (*Confessions*, Book II), re-emerges through his restaging of the primal scene of crime (*The Fourth Rêverie*): the last paragraph of Book II, *Confessions*, begins with ‘I have behaved straightforwardly in the confession which I have just made, and it will assuredly be found that I have not attempted to palliate the blackness of my offence’, and ends with ‘I have little fear of dying without absolution. This is what I have to say on this matter: permit me never to speak of it again’ (Rousseau, 1931, p. 77). The Rousseauesque silence is unstoppable, structurally and generically, as observed (auto-bio-cryptically) by Paul de Man (1983), whose youthful ‘crime’ of journalistic collaboration during the World War II with Nazi Germany remains an unspeakable event (in the form of a datable historical ‘guilt’).
- [3] ‘Tell us exactly what happened’, quoting Jacques Derrida (1979, p. 87) quoting the dialogic cliché of the truth-hunters, Homi Bhabha explicates (1994, especially pp. 96–100), in his ‘Sly Civility’, the way in which the colonised, the lying Other, use colonial silences—both the silence of the coloniser and that of the colonised—to their advantage:

The narratorial voice articulates the narcissistic, colonialist demand that it should be addressed directly, that the Other should authorise the self, recognise its priority, fulfil its outlines, replete, indeed repeat, its references and still its fractured gaze. . . .

In the native refusal to satisfy the coloniser’s narrative demand, we hear the echoes of Freud’s sabre-rattling strangers . . . The native’s resistance represents a frustration of that nineteenth-century strategy of surveillance, the *confession*, which seeks to dominate the ‘calculable’ individual by positing the truth that the subject *has* but does not *know*. The incalculable native produces a problem for civil representation in the discourses of literature and legality . . .

The native refusal to unify the authoritarian, colonialist address within the terms of civil engagement gives the subject of colonial authority—father *and*

oppressor—another turn. This ambivalent ‘and’ traces the times and spaces between civil address and colonial articulation. The authoritarian demand can now only be justified if it is contained in the language of paranoia

The litigious, lying native became a central object of nineteenth-century colonial, legal regulation. Each winter an Indian magistrate was dispatched to the Caribbean to adjudicate over the incalculable indentured Indian coolies It is this ambivalence that ensues within paranoia as a play between eternal vigilance and blindness

- [4] ‘One can only say what it could or should be, the history of the lie—if there is any’ (Derrida, 2001, p. 98).
- [5] *Immemorial Silence*, despite its remarkable, textual sensitivity towards the canonical tradition of religious silence in the Christian West, is still invested in the redemptive power of language that carries the memory of forgetting: the author concludes, ‘In its very fall, in falling silent, the word redeems the time’ (p. 114).
- [6] Be quiet! You are so quiet today. Will you please mute that noisy CNN?
- [7] This is the last sentence of or inscription in Ingmar Bergman’s 1963 film on desire and crisis, *The Silence*.
- [8] Here is a topical, everyday example I came across in *The Daily Helmsman*, the campus newspaper at the University of Memphis, Tennessee, USA, where I am currently working as well as writing this essay: under the headline, ‘SAC Sponsors talk about possible war’, the staff reporter writes (13 February 2003, p. 3):

Many see our nation’s universities as microcosms of the United States where diverse people and ideologies come together. The experience of examining and confronting points of view different from one’s own is an important part of the college experience Tuesday’s symposium on the possibility war with Iraq, hosted by the Student Activities Council, is the latest example

Angie Dunlap, one of the SAC’s coordinators admitted that ‘even though we tried to ensure as many different opinions as possible’, the talks turned out ‘slightly not balanced’ He compared the *muffling* of Muslim American voices on campus to that of the Japanese of the ’40s and blacks of the ’60s. (emphases added.)

- [9] Following Emmanuel Levinas and his reader Robert Bernasconi, I am using the word ‘incom-prehensible’ in the ‘proper’ sense, ‘foreign to knowledge and to possession’ (Bernasconi, 1988, p. 122):

If thinking fails to reabsorb the Other in the course of thought’s return to itself, then this is regarded as a deficiency, the result of blind passion or the consequence of distraction—‘fallenness’ in Heidegger’s terminology. The significance of the philosophy of dialogue, according to Levinas, is that it challenges this model. . . . The philosophy of dialogue runs counter to the standard models of thinking and allows us to acknowledge the saying of transcendence as an interruption of ontology. (p. 119)

. . . . In ‘Dialogue’ Levinas situated this absolute distance less in the failure of one person to know another—a failure of the synthesis which would bring about a coincidence or identity—than in the surplus of the relation. Such a surplus would be exhibited, for example, in a gratuitous gift. Further, Levinas found such a surplus in Buber’s notion of grace (p. 121)

- [10] In case you did not know: ‘Silently shall I endure abuse as the elephant in battle endures the arrow sent from the bow: for the world is ill-natured’ (Chapter 23: verse 320, *Dhammapada*); ‘Those who know do not talk. Those who talk do not know. Keep your mouth closed’ (Tzu, 1989, p. 56), and so, Lao Tzu says again, this time with some explanation of the reason why, ‘Keep your mouth shut, guard the senses and life is ever full. Open your mouth, always be busy, and life is beyond hope’ (p. 52).
- [11] The inevitable superiority of the *unknown* frontiers that remain *unsynthesised*: the *insurmountable*, almost un-Hegelian negativities of the *inscrutable* Orient, known so far, are almost *inexhaustible*—‘inadequate, incapable, incomparable, incompatible, incompetent, incomprehensible, inconsistent, inconvenient, incorrigible, incorruptible, incredible, incurable, indecipherable, indestructible, ineradicable . . .’ The list I came up with, following my own sense of the Orient, the unknown, seems not entirely arbitrary.
- [12] Those who sense power are those sensitive to silence, to the singular, implicit, intersecting modalities and modulations of it. Read, for an illuminating description of the affective (or semiotic) dimension of ‘sensing’, Gloria Anzaldúa, in *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987), especially on *la facultad*:

a capability to see in surface phenomena the meaning of deeper realities, to see the deep structure below the surface. It is an instant ‘sensing’, a quick perception arrived at without conscious reasoning. It is an acute awareness mediated by the part of the psyche that does not speak, that communicates in images and symbols which are the faces of feelings, that is, behind which feeling reside/hide. The one possessing this sensitivity is excruciating alive to the world . . . Those who are pushed out of the tribe for being different are likely to become more sensitised . . . Those who do not feel psychologically or physically safe in the world are more apt to develop this sense. Those who are pounced on the most have it the strongest—the females, the homosexuals of all races, the darkskinned, the outcast, the persecuted, the marginalized, the foreign . . . When ‘re up against the wall, when we have all sorts of oppressions coming at us, we are forced to develop this faculty so that we’ll know when the next person is going to slap us or lock us away. We’ll sense the rapist when he’s five blocks down the street. Pain makes us acutely anxious to avoid more of it, so we hone the radar. It’s a kind of survival tactic that people, caught between the worlds, unknowingly cultivate. It is latent in all of us. (p. 39, re-cited from Sundstrom, 2000, footnote 38)

I thank Ronald Sundstrom for this gift which none of us had known could be used this way.

- [13] The homosexual equation: Silence = Death. By ‘simplicity’ I mean the disjunctive binarity of violence, political or otherwise: Kill or die, *now*.
- [14] To illustrate what I mean by ‘production’ here, I would like to read with you in some detail Michel Foucault’s ‘The Art of Telling the Truth’, written and delivered in powerful brevity, which prompted a posthumous debate with Jürgen Habermas (the debate compiled in Kelly, 1995). It throws a spotlight on the reflective *duality* or disruptive ontology of the ‘present’ in Kant’s ‘What is Enlightenment (*Aufklärung*)?’. The production of meaning, in this case, is the sharpening of the political edge of the now point felt as such. How does it happen? On Foucault’s reading, the seminal status of Kant’s article is to be found not really in its schematised abstraction recorded as such—the announced advent, the state philosopher’s conscious marking, of the project of modernity to be completed, philosophy’s ‘work-in-progress’ report—but rather, in its historically situated, revolutionary ‘disposition’ thus ‘permanently potentialised’ (Kelly, 1995, p. 146), more *explicitly* than ever, through gestural repression and compression, ‘a moral disposition in mankind’, ‘a sympathy’, ‘that is, to quote Foucault quoting Kant, “of aspiration bordering on enthusiasm”’ (p. 145):

Such piety is of course the most touching of treasons. What we need to preserve is not what is left of the *Aufklärung*, in terms of fragments; it is the very question of that event and its meaning (the question of the historicity of thinking about the universal) that must *now* be kept present in our minds as what must be thought (p. 147, emphasis added)

when we, overhearing Foucault overhearing Kant's revolutionary whisper, ask anew the same old treacherous question of

'What precisely, then, is this present to which I belong?' Now it seems to me that the question that Kant is answering—indeed that he is led to answer, because it was asked of him—is a quite different one. It is not simply: what is it in the present situation that can determine this or that decision of a philosophical order? The question bears on what this present actuality is . . . What is it in the present that *produces* meaning now for philosophical reflection? (p. 140, emphasis added)

The Kantian present, the cutting now of intuition and revolution, intuition as and in revolution—that enables the universal 'Kantian Enlightenment project' and at once destabilises it through a signifiatory particularisation of the thinking subject—is irreducibly irreversibly political. For at stake is

a question of showing how he who speaks as a thinker, as a scientist, as a philosopher, is himself part of this process and (more than that) how he has a certain role to play in this process, in which he is to find himself, therefore, *both* element and actor. (p. 140, emphasis added)

[15] The Foucauldian equivalent would be: 'dispositionally' (see the previous footnote).

[16] In what sense can we say Jacques Derrida is a thinker of silence? His thought *passes*, constantly and indefinitely, back and forth, into the other side of the inscribed border, the unfamiliar or defamiliarised language, 'suspended in mid-air in its signifying élan'; consequently, he finds himself 'unable to rid himself of the quotations marks (Agamben, 1995, p. 104)'. This act, he describes as an elliptical reflection:

Our task is rather to reflect on the circularity which makes the one *pass into* the other indefinitely . . . We allow the production of some elliptical change of site, within the difference involved in repetition; this displacement is no doubt deficient, but with a deficiency that is not yet, or is already no longer, absence, negativity, nonbeing, lack, *silence*. Neither matter nor form, it is nothing that any philosopheme, that is any dialectic, however determinate, can capture. It is an ellipsis of both meaning and form; it is neither plenary speech nor perfectly circular. More or less . . . : it is perhaps an entirely different question. (Derrida, 1973, p. 128, emphases added)

[17] Will the silent ones ever have an equal footing in the Kantian court of reason, the kingdom of respectful and respected madame-and-gentleman speakers? In a sobering essay that calls for a step-by-step (almost legalistically thorough), philosophical investigation into Enlightenment racism not only of Kant the person but *in* his philosophy, hitherto pushed aside and justified systematically by the tidy-mindedness of 'good' Kant scholars that is dangerously indistinguishable from intellectual hypocrisy, Bernasconi writes:

If the problem is that a thinker appears to contradict himself or herself, then one can always drop one of the competing claims. The rule is that one saves the proposition

that is most worth saving, and it is only a slight extension of this practice to drop all claims that are in the least bit embarrassing, whether there is a contradiction or not. What remains is the ‘authentic’ doctrine of the philosopher in question. We are served a new, slimmer, more elegant Kant, after he has undergone liposuction and had the surplus removed. This is quite normal philosophical practice, which is why no eyebrows are raised when it is applied to Locke’s role in writing *The Fundamental Constitutions of Carolina*, Kant’s insistence of the racial superiority of whites, and, for that matter, Hegel’s exclusion of Africa, China and India from history proper. What remains is a benign, sanitised philosophy. (2003, p. 16)

- [18] Those ready to think the other are those familiar with the outside in and of themselves. On that point, Kristeva is spot-on: ‘the foreigner’s friends . . . could only be those who feel foreign to themselves’ (*Les amis de l’étranger . . . ne sauraient être que ceux qui se sentent étrangers à eux-mêmes*) (1991, pp. 23, 37).
- [19] Being no longer thought to be as an essence, but to be given, offered to a world as to its own possibility. Such a program (if we can use this word) is not to be completed in a day. It does not take ‘a long time’, but the totality of a history: our history. The history of philosophy since Kant (if not indeed since the remote condition of possibility of Kant himself at the beginning of the ‘Western’ as such, of the Western ‘Weltanschauung’) is the history of the various breaks out of which emerges, out of the ‘possible worlds’ (the ‘*Anschauungen*’), as well as out of a simple necessity of the world (another kind of ‘*Anschauung*’), *the world as possibility*, or the word as chance for existence (opening/closing of possibility, unlimitation/disaster of possibility) (Nancy, 1991, pp. 1–2).
- [20] As Giorgio Agamben notes in the fragment, ‘The Idea of Silence’, this idea is certainly not foreign to the Western philosophical tradition; it is, as Nancy also observes, also deeply Socratic. Agamben (1995, p. 111) introduces and reflects on an ‘apologue’ from a collection of fables from late antiquity:

It was customary amongst the Athenians to give a good thrashing to whoever desired to be considered a philosopher; if he bore the beating patiently, he could then be considered a philosopher. Once there was a fellow who underwent the beating, and having endured the blows in silence, exclaimed: ‘Well worthy am I, then, to be called a philosopher!’ But he was rightly answered: ‘You would have been if you had but kept quiet!’

The fable certainly teaches us that philosophy undoubtedly has something to do with the experience of silence, but undergoing the experience in no way constitutes the identity of philosophy. In silence philosophy stand exposed, absolutely without identity.

- [21] The popular culture and imagination, both old and new, is never short of ready-made, exchangeable images of the foreign Other that accompany or reinforce, even create, the cross-cultural flow of the capital and human resources: a stupid American tourist, a snobbish Frenchman, a smiley Chinaman, clueless big-nosers, or noseless noodle-venders, etc.—all these people, when travelling ‘freely’, move around within a certain discursively (implicitly, symbolically) imposed framework to which they are supposed to belong, respectively: ‘(when) are you going *back* (home)?’ When it comes to gender stereotypes, the essentialisation of gender traits (e.g., *The Woman Who Wouldn’t Talk* (McDougal, 2002) who ‘refuses to testify against the Clintons’) or metaphorical localisation of them (e.g., the Mars vs the Venus) leads, in dialogical contexts, to the naturalised division of dialogical labour, that is, one speaking and the other listening. (e.g., the literary vagina-envy of Ben Marcus, 2002).
- [22] Here is an illuminating case in point. I must have been inspired by the eccentric—even by British standards—middle-eastern looking man in the popular British TV comedy,

The Ali G Show: the dumb foreigner (whose nationality or identity is everyone's guess) is meeting a perfectly gentle (or otherwise unperturbed) English gentleman; the dumb one is posing a question to the gentle one who, in his best self-effacing moment, has just introduced himself as Nick, adding, with a conspiratorially self-assured sense of humour, that he would be preferred to be called simply 'Teddy', as his nickname is 'Teddy Bear': 'So tell me, Nick, why is you bear?' Dumbfounded is not the dumb foreigner, of course, but the native.

- [23] 'Orientation' does serve, initially, as a communicative bridge between different cultures, or beings, in the phenomenological—Merleau-Pontyan, to be more specific—landscape of Levinas' ethics. As he says,

there does exist the possibility of a Frenchman learning Chinese and passing from one culture into another, without the intermediary of an esperanto that would falsify both tongues which it mediated. Yet what has not been taken into consideration in this case is that an *orientation* which leads the Frenchman to take up learning Chinese instead of declaring it to be barbarian (that is, bereft of the real virtues of language), to prefer speech to war, is needed. (1987, p. 88)

Now, Levinas moves on further, immediately:

One reasons *as though* the equivalence of cultures . . . were not themselves the effects of an orientation . . . One reasons *as though* the multiplicity of cultures from the beginning sunk its roots in the era of decolonisation, as though incomprehension, war and conquest did not derive just as naturally from the contiguity of multiple expressions of being . . . (emphasis added)

What is the structural force of that preference, that rational Kantian force of 'as though' doubly disguised in the well-mannered talk of a mere choice? Levinas, while not ignoring the politics of choice, approaches the issue of the originary rift in cultural multiplicity from, as we see from above, an ethical point of view.

- [24] In an interview on this controversial and influential piece, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', Spivak says:

I am revising that piece for inclusion as a chapter in another book. I am making it much more straightforward now. It will of course lose the passion and the anguish of that effort. Having said this, let me explain.

. . . When we act we don't act out of thinking through details; we act in something that Derrida calls, following Kierkegaard, the 'night of nonknowledge'. We act out of certain kinds of reflexes that come through, by layering something through learning habits of mind, rather than by merely knowing something . . . And therefore, in a certain kind of rhetorical anguish after the account of this, I said, 'the subaltern cannot speak!' This is always read as a rational remark about subalterns as such—Meaghan Morris has made the witty comment that my critics rewrite the sentence as: 'the subaltern cannot talk'. And, as I have just indicated, even within the definition of subalternity as such there is a certain non-being-able-to-make-speech-acts that is implicit.

. . . So, 'the subaltern cannot speak' means that even when the subaltern makes an effort to the death to speak, she is not able to be heard, and speaking and hearing complete the speech act. That's what it had meant, and anguish marked the spot. (Landry & Maclean, 1996, pp. 289–92)

[25] Quite literally:

One entered French literature only by losing one's accent. I think I have not lost my accent; not everything in my 'French Algerian' accent is lost. Its intonation is more apparent in certain 'pragmatic' situations . . . But I would hope, I would very much prefer, that no publication permits my 'French Algerian' to appear. . . . An accent—any French accent, but above all a strong southern accent—seems incompatible to me with the intellectual dignity of public speech . . . Incompatible, a fortiori, with the vocation of a public speech: for example, when I heard René Char read his sententious aphorisms with an accent that struck me as at once comical and obscene, as the betrayal of a truth, it ruined, in no small measure, an admiration of my youth. (1998, p. 46)

[26] The moments when something new has entered into us, something unknown; our feelings grow mute in shy perplexity, everything in us withdraws, a stillness comes, and the new, which no one knows, stands in the midst of it and is silent . . . The new thing in us, the added thing, has entered into our heart, has gone into its inmost chamber and is not even there any more—is already in our blood. And we do not learn what it was. We could easily be made to believe that nothing has happened, and yet we have changed, as a house changes into that which a guest has entered. (Rilke, 1994, pp. 64–65)

[27] In the way Kristeva describes:

. . . Silence has not only been forced upon you, it is within you: a refusal to speak, a fitful sleep riven to an anguish that wants to remain mute, the private property of your proud and moritified discretion, that silence is a harsh light. Nothing to say, nothingness, no one on the horizon. An impervious fullness: cold diamond, secret treasury, carefully protected, out of reach. Saying nothing, nothing needs to be said, nothing can be said. (1991, p. 18)

[28] I would proceed rather with the Derridian modality of mouth-opening than with the Gadamerian:

Each time I open my mouth, each time I speak or write, I promise. Whether I like it or not: here, the fatal precipitation of the promise must be dissociated from the values of the will, intention, or meaning-to-say that are reasonably attached to it. The performativity of this promise is not one speech act among others. It is implied by any other performative, and this promise heralds the uniqueness of a language to come. It is the 'there must be a language' (which necessarily implies: 'for it does not exist', or 'since it is lacking'), 'I promise a language', 'a language is promised', which at once precedes all language, summons all speech and already belongs to each language as it does all speech. (Derrida, 1998, p. 67)

[29] Aside from the inevitable elitism vaguely diluted later in the diction of the immigrant housewives, the constitutive—or Hegelian, as Sara Beardsworth determined it in a private conversation—limit of Kristeva's brilliant, explosively witty analysis of 'the silence of polyglots' (1991, pp. 17–18) is, if not self-irony, its self-silencing irony: the difference is tonal, that between under-stated insight and over-rhetoricised pessimism.

Thus, between two languages, your realm is silence. By dint of saying things in various ways, one just as trite as the other, just as approximate, one ends up no longer saying them. An internationally known scholar was ironical about his famous polyglotism, saying that he spoke Russian in fifteen languages. As for me I had the

feeling that he rejected speech and his slack silence led him, at times, to sing and give rhythm to changed poems, just in order to say something . . . Stuck within that polymorphic mutism, the foreigner can, instead of saying, attempt doing—house-cleaning, playing tennis, soccer, sailing, sewing, horseback riding, jogging, getting pregnant, what have you. It remains an expenditure, it expends, and it propagates silence even more. Who listens to you? At the most, you are being tolerated. Anyway, do you really want to speak?

‘S/He wanted to rise—a malicious, ironic voice insisted that s/he rise—and, at once, to leave this temple and go out into the world’. (from the final chapter of James Baldwin’s *Go to Tell it On the Mountain*; opening epigram in Sundstrom 2000. s/ added)

- [30] Ethical naturalism or cultural relativism, which I problematised earlier in different terms, in terms of Romanticised cultural ethos and politicised national stereotypes, is a case in point. Bhabha also discusses that briefly, in reference to Bernard Williams’s *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, where, as Bhabha puts it, ‘cultural difference is disposed of as a kind of ethical naturalism, a matter of cultural diversity [despite or rather precisely through its rhetoric of relative distance]’ (1994, p. 125, my addition). The ‘disposal’, in this case, of the disposable or consumable takes place in the form of insertion and building of that ‘part’ into a reconstructed, colonial ‘fantasy of projection’ or a project (p. 125).
- [31] In the first section of ‘Articulating the Archaic’ (Bhabha, 1994, pp. 123–38) that concerns colonial silence, Bhabha articulates the ‘point of culture’s ‘fading’ (p. 125), the produced and productive point at which, for instance, the frustrating silence of ‘Boum, ouboum . . . the sound as far as the human alphabet can express’ (re-cited from the Marabar cave scene in E. M. Forster’s *Passage to India*) intersects with the enabling quietism of British Imperialism which ‘does it quietly’. In a rather moving passage that deftly exposes the comedy of ‘a colonial non-sense’, ‘the kernel—ouboum—of non-sense’ (p. 125), he writes:

Ouboum or the owl’s deathcall—the horror of these words!—are not naturalised or primitivistic descriptions of colonial ‘otherness’, they are the inscriptions of an uncertain colonial silence that mocks the social performance of language with their non-sense; that baffles the communicable verities of culture with their refusal to translate. These hybrid signifiers are the intimations of colonial otherness that Forster describes so well in the beckoning of India to the conquerors: ‘She calls “Come” . . . But come to what? She has never defined. She is not a promise, only an appeal’ (Forster, *Passage to India*). It is from such an uncertain invitation to interpret, from such a question of desire, that the echo of another significant question can be dimly heard, Lacan’s question of the alienation of the subject in the Other: ‘He is saying this to me, but what does he want?’ (p. 124)

Our question is, of course, slightly modified, heavier: ‘She is not saying to me, so what does she want?’

- [32] Roger Starling.
- [33] Why, let me ask you then, Mary Beth Mader (who has been a willing hostage to this essay which I did not know how to finish or begin), can we not say, ‘I silence’, when we Koreans, for instance, say, ‘I silence’ (*Na chim-muk-handa*), with no problem at all? Whose problem is this? Whose silence are we listening to?

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