

# IMAGE AND SILENCE

GIORGIO AGAMBEN

In the Roman pantheon there is a goddess named Angerona, represented with her mouth bound and sealed (*ore obligato signatoque*).<sup>1</sup> Her finger is raised to her lips as if to command silence. Scholars claim that she represents, in the context of pagan mystery cults, the power of silence, although there is no consensus among them as to how to understand this *power*. Etymologically speaking, *myein*, the root of the Greek word *mysterion*, means “to close the mouth, to silence.” At the beginning of the sacred rites in Eleusis a herald “commanded silence” (*epittatei tēn siōpen*). It is said that that the initiates into these Eleusinian mysteries were required to maintain absolute silence concerning what they had seen and heard during their initiation. Our question is how to understand this silence. Was it a prohibition aimed at keeping a secret doctrine from the uninitiated? Or did it concern, instead, something truly impossible to say?

To begin we might ask what sense there might have been in the obligation to remain silent given that it was possible for anyone—including slaves, and thus, potentially, the entire population of Athens—to be initiated into the mysteries. In his early work, “On Philosophy,” Aristotle affirmed that, “the initiates do not need to learn something (*mathein ti*), but, instead, to be disposed to something, to experience and to undergo something (*pathein kai diatethēnai*).”<sup>2</sup> It would therefore be possible that in the ancient mystery cults the initiate did not learn a doctrine that could be expressed in words (yet had to remain secret), but, instead, experienced something essentially silent, something impossible to say. “A great awe in face of the gods,” we read in the Homeric ode to Demeter, “silences the voice.”<sup>3</sup>

The impossibility of speaking—and the power of silence—has two forms, one joyful and the other disturbing. In myth muteness is often associated with rape. The Romans tell the story of Lara who was punished for her inclination to gossip by being rendered mute and who was then raped in a sacred wood by Mercury (who took advantage of her impossibility of speaking). Before being transformed into a swallow Philomela was raped by Tereus, who cut off her tongue to prevent her from recounting his misdeed. Persephone, raped, kidnapped, and conducted to Hades, remained there silent as the dead. In every one of these cases silence is the painful experience of a privation of speech, of being unable to say what one wishes to say.

In Gnostic mythology, the preexisting, eternal, uncreated God contains within himself a female figure which is his silence, Sigē. From his union with Silence Thought is born. “Sigē,” we read in a Valentinian text, “is the mother of all the beings that have emerged from the Abyss. He who has failed to say the unsayable has silenced it; he who was understood the unsayable, has declared it unsayable.”<sup>4</sup> Here too silence appears as the experience of an impossibility of saying, as a privation. It is in opposition to this abyssal figure of silence that the church fathers affirmed the primacy of the *logos* in which God is revealed. Nevertheless, of the power of silence Heidegger would write: “This primordial silence is more powerful than any human potentiality. No one, on his or her own, has ever invented language—that is, has been strong enough to break the power of this silence.”<sup>5</sup>

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In Kafka's parable on Ulysses, we are told that the silence of the Sirens is more perilous than their song, and that Ulysses—who realized, as his ship neared them, that the Sirens were silent—put on an act to protect himself from this silence, plugging his ears with wax and having his men tie him to the mast.<sup>6</sup> In Kafka's retelling of the tale, the silence of the Sirens represents a zero degree of song and, following a stubborn tradition that sees in absence the most extreme form of presence, also represents an at once zero and ultimate degree of reality. In this sense Heidegger could write that we truly experience language precisely when words fail us. Psychologists call *Wortbegriff* the experience of having a word on the tip of one's tongue without being able to produce it. Here too a word seems to press upon us with maximal force precisely at the moment when it is lacking. The silence in question is then merely an impossibility of saying.

The example employed by Étienne Decroux to define the transcendental conditions of the mime and the actor is well known. We are to imagine, he says, two prisoners. One has the body free but is gagged; the other is free to speak, but is bound to a stake. The first is the paradigm of the mime, the second that of the actor.<sup>7</sup> According to the rule that dictates that only when a faculty is impeded do we perceive it as such, the mime has access to the possibilities of gesture only because he or she cannot speak. But this also means that the silence of the mime expresses language itself; that the mime does not imitate things, but, instead, the names of things.

How are we then to think of a silence that is not merely an impossibility of saying, that doesn't remain separate from language, but that brings language itself into view? That is, how are we to conceive of a silence not concerning things, but the silence of language itself? According to an ancient definition of painting, one that Plutarch attributes to Simonides, "painting is silent poetry (*poiēsis siōpōsa*), and poetry is painting that speaks (*zōgraphia lalousa*)."<sup>8</sup> That Simonides had in mind not only a generic opposition linking the two arts, but something like an essential relation, is suggested by Plutarch's comment that "the two have the same end." What is this common end of painting and poetry? And, more generally, what sort of relation is instituted between image and word, between silence and language? An answer to these questions is only possible if, returning the aphorism to its literal meaning, we do away with the reductive reading according to which Simonides is simply observing that images do not speak. The silence in question is not, in fact, that of the image, but that of the word. Painting, says Simonides, is the making mute of poetry, the silencing of the word. This is not simply because in painting poetry ceases to speak, but because in painting the word and its silence are visible. And yet how is it possible to silence the word, to display, in the form of an image, silence itself?

Painting silences language because it interrupts the signifying relation between name and thing, returning, if only for an instant, the thing to itself, to its namelessness. But this anonymity of the thing is not one where something is lacking, it is not a distressing impossibility of saying. It is, instead, the presentation of the thing in its pure sayability. Separating name from thing, painting does not cast the thing into the abyss of *Sigē*, but, instead, allows it to appear in its luminous, beatific sayability. This reveals itself in the naïve need for a title, one that the spectator obstinately seeks, knowing full well that it is by no means necessary. The title does not refer to a hidden meaning to be brought to

light, but to the pure nameability that reveals itself in the silence of the word. (Ingeborg Bachmann must have been thinking of such a silence when she wrote, turning to the words themselves, “not a word, oh words!”) Language is silent here as *language*—that is, bringing the word its silence.)

That what is silenced in painting is the word (poetry), and that what is spoken in poetry are the images (painting), means that their common end is a silence that has eliminated its unsayability, and which coincides with pure sayability.

It is not only that the thing is returned to its anonymity, but that the word, revealed in its not-referring to the thing, recovers its originally silent status, the one on Adam’s lips when, contemplating the creatures in their pure sayability, he waited for them to whisper their own name.

The history of the genre of the *still life* expresses in special fashion the particular silence contained in the idea of painting as “silent poetry.” The “silent life” (*Stilleben*) that this genre offers to the eye is, in truth, in intimate contact with the word. According to art historians, the still life, or *Stilleben*, is derived from a book of Dutch emblems—that is, from a particular literary genre in which the representation of an object, estranged from its habitual context, transforms it into allegory. In this manner, the silence of the image becomes the coat of arms in which the allegorist inscribes his motto (an emblem is composed of an image and a saying or motto). In this dialectic between image and word—where they mutually abolish and, at the same time, mutually exalt each other—the Simonidean project of a word that silences and an image that speaks is confirmed.

The portrait as well—and, in particular, the self-portrait—can be seen in precisely this manner. That which is at once cancelled and displayed is nothing less than the proper name. The speaking subject—coinciding at once with the painter and the painted—is, on the one hand, returned to its own anonymity and, on the other, as in an emblem, it presents its proper name. For this reason the face of the painter that in the self-portrait succeeds at once in separating its proper name from itself and in exhibiting it in the metaphysical scroll of its own silence (we need only think of the extraordinary self-portraits of Edvard Munch, Pierre Bonnard, or Avigdor Arikha) is at once stunned and blessed, surprised and happy, unnamed and over-named.

A beautiful face is perhaps the only place where true silence is to be found. Character marks the human face with all the words not said, all the intentions never acted upon; the face of an animal always seems on the verge of speaking; but human beauty opens the face to silence. The silence that prevails is not the simple suspension of discourse, but the silence of the word itself: the idea of language. For this reason, in the silence of the face, and there alone, is mankind truly at home.

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## Notes

This text is published here for the first time in any language.

- 1 Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia*, 3.65.
- 2 Aristotle, "On Philosophy," 87; frag. 15A (Synesius, *Dio*, 8. 48a). All translations of quotations attempt to reflect the author's translations into the Italian. —Trans.
- 3 "Ode to Demeter," line 479.
- 4 *The Excerpta ex Theodoto of Clement of Alexandria*, 62; §29.
- 5 Heidegger, *Hölderlins Hymnen "Germanien" und "Der Rhein"*, 218.
- 6 Kafka, "The Silence of the Sirens."
- 7 Decroux, *Words on Mime*, 47.
- 8 Plutarch, *Moralia, De Gloria Atheniensium*, 3 346f.
- 9 A literal translation of the original, "Kein Sterbenswort / Ihr Worte" would read, "No word of death you words." Bachmann's lines recast the expression "Kein Sterbenswort sagen," or "don't say a word" (Bachmann, *Werke*, 1:297). —Trans.

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