

Speaking from Silence: On the Intimate Relation Between Silence and Speaking

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Abstract

In understanding the world through language, silence, regarded simply as the absence of speech, appears to be the enemy of understanding. But in fact, it can be shown that silence is always a function of language. As we learn from Merleau-Ponty, Heidegger, and others, the relation between silence and the word of language is a positive one. There are acts of silence that can generate the movement towards meaning in language. The focus of my remarks in this paper will explore three modalities of silence that characterize the positive relation between silence and the word of language. First, there is silence as the withdrawal of the word. This is the silence of the voice that wants to hold back from speaking and to hold back the word from falling into chatter. Second, there is silence as giving voice to words. This is the silence that enacts the spacing within language that possibilizes the intentions of meaning within speech and the efforts of communicative understanding. Third, there is silence as the beginning of the word. This is the silence that stands in relation to a hidden or absent origin, such as an unknown god, generating thereby a word from silence that is a beginning.

Keywords

Philosophical hermeneutics, silence, language, Merleau-Ponty, Heidegger, Gadamer

Presenting the Difficulty

If the essential condition for understanding requires not just the fact of language, but the activity of speaking and communicating, as we see modeled in the language of conversation, what are we to make of the phenomenon of silence? And what, if anything, does silence have to do with

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understanding? As a way of taking up this question, and the difficulty of understanding that lies within it, let me begin with a provocative musing on the nature of silence and its relation to words.

What if, at the beginning of creation, a beginning, let us say, before God announced light—a beginning that would have to be, for Christianity at least, a beginning before the Word—there was only the void. By all accounts, such a beginning would be a beginning in silence. This hypothetical beginning before the Word could also be expressed in a different framework: a cosmological beginning, let us say, where the beginning of creation might have originated from a compressed singular point. This beginning from the earliest time would also be a beginning in silence, a beginning from which an expansion occurred, perhaps as a vacuum fluctuation, a vibration, a tensional movement not unlike a wave on water, breaking open within itself by its own possibility and movement. By virtue of this movement, this beginning would have to be a beginning that in some sense had already begun, as if to say, in the beginning there was silence breaking into sound, just as the silence of the void would have to break open to all that pertains to created life.

To avoid entangling ourselves in such hypothetical beginnings, would we not at least grant that the creation that follows upon such beginnings is not itself capable of what one could only describe as dead silence—the sheer absence of sound. Certainly this must be the case for the creation that lies under the heavens where, befitting life, there is always air and movement. The impossibility of dead silence under the heavens was actually proved in a simple experiment. The experiment was conducted by the musician John Cage in 1951. Cage attempted to experience this kind of silence by stepping into a technically constructed soundproof room where the noise and sounds of everyday life were made to disappear. But even here there was no absolute dead silence. Once outside the soundproof room Cage reportedly told the sound engineer that he heard two faint sounds in the room which the engineer identified as Cage's own nervous system in operation and his body's blood in circulation (Gann, 2010, p. 162).¹ What is of nature is, in fact, never silent as such. There may be a stillness in the air or the quiet before the dawn, but this degree of silence is not silence as such. When one listens closely, one still hears the incessant sounding vibration in the growth and decay of everything living. One can hear it even in the heat of the noonday sun as one among the many murmurings in the world (Serres, 1995, p. 13).²

But what then of that other domain of silence, the silence not of sound as such, but of the silence that is involved in and accompanies the sound of speech? While it may be the case that nature cannot be silent, the same cannot be said with respect to language. In relation to the creation of spirit that is language, there is indeed silence, for our words fall silent on the page and as speakers we can keep silent before speech and in speech. But what kind of silence is this? Too often we think of this silence just like the other kind, a silence of sheer absence. As sheer absence, this silence is set in opposition to the word and the voice such that where one is the other is not. But in fact, when we look closer at the phenomenon of silence, we see that language and silence has a much more intimate relation. Here silence is not a mere possibility lying in wait for the actuality of speech to stop, but is itself an actuality such that by virtue of the voice there are acts of silence, and that speech itself may be born from silence. Here we approach the real problem: what does it mean to say, as Max Picard does in his groundbreaking work on silence, that speech is born from silence? (Picard, 1988, p. 24). And more important, how can we speak about this relation between silence and language which is voiced without expressing it as the limit of

understanding, as in the case of some forms of religious piety. In what follows I want to provide an analysis of the relation between silence and the living word in three different ways: first, silence as the withdrawal of the word; second, and more important for my purposes here, silence as giving voice to words; and then third, silence as the beginning of the word.

Silence as the Withdrawal of the Word

The purpose of speaking first about silence as the withdrawal of the word is to immediately introduce a way of qualifying the seemingly natural opposition between silence and the word. Our everyday understanding of this opposition, to say again, is that silence is simply the absence of speech. Philosophers have explained this opposition logically on the basis of how they explain reality in general. Once a word is spoken, silence, understood as the lack of speech, is not an actual reality; it is not present in the presence of speech. If you are speaking then you are not being silent. But it is possible to regard the relation between silence and speech otherwise as Heidegger does. For Heidegger there is a more intimate relation of presence and absence within reality such that the reality of language as discourse and voice is capable of holding silence within it. So regarded silence is simply the withdrawal of the word. In silence, the presence of the speaking voice simply withdraws, while the voice remains present. Here silence is a silence *of* the voice, a relational difference that we can readily understand. In Euripides' *Phoenician Women* the chorus lead asks Creon why he is silent without a word when faced with choosing between his love for the city and his love for his son. The Greek text literally says that he is silent with a speechless speech, a voiceless voice (*sigas gerun apthoggon*). His silence is such that he abstains not merely from speaking but from uttering any sound (Montiglio, 2000, p. 12, note 25). He offers no word of reply. The sounding voice has become silent, but also, his voice has become silent, he has abstained from speaking. Creon is doubly silent. The idea of a voiceless voice suggests that there can be a form of silence that is not simply the absence of sound. There is also the silence of keeping silent. This act of speech that keeps silent is silence as the withdrawal of the word.

Such becoming silent is one way, if not the primary way, of describing secrecy. A secret is a word that cannot be said, an outer word kept silent by being silent. The idea of secrecy and keeping silent is famously described by Kierkegaard in *Fear and Trembling*. In this book, Kierkegaard describes the distinctive character of the religious individual through the story of Abraham. Keeping silent is the task of Abraham when called upon by God to sacrifice his son Isaac. He cannot confess his intended action, but must keep it hidden so not to expose himself to the violation of the ethical universal "thou shall not kill." His rational duty, after all, is not to kill. But although his silence stands in opposition to the publicity of discourse, it is not, strictly speaking, in opposition to the voice. In not saying anything, Abraham, as Kierkegaard notes, "says what he has to say" (Kierkegaard, 1983, p. 118) He is "efficacious in his silence as a witness" (Kierkegaard, 1983, p. 80). While this silence can be the snare of the demon that grows more terrifying the longer the silence lasts, it is also for Kierkegaard, "the mutual understanding between the divinity and the single individual" (Kierkegaard, 1983, p. 8). His silence after all is not completely indeterminate, but simply a withdrawal of the outer word for the sake of the speaking of another. Abraham's silence is the silence required to hear the voice of God; it is a silence that is for Abraham the first condition for being able to obey (Derrida, 1995, pp. 58-59).³

There is of course a long history to this silence of the withdrawal of the word. For the ancient Greeks, this silence was at the center of the Eleusinian mystery cults. The silence practiced by the initiates was not predicated on there being a mysterious reality that was itself ineffable. It was not a practice of silence to convey the ineffable, as one finds in Christian mysticism, but simply a practice of guarding the secret, protecting its exclusive knowledge. The silence of the initiates was principally a matter of holding the tongue, of keeping silent appropriately, knowing what not to repeat to the non-initiate. The Greek word for the initiation into the mysteries, *muesis*, derives from *mu*, to make a muttering sound with the lips, a sound that imitates pure sobbing. This silence that would speak in a special way may in fact have been an attempt to draw the human back to the mute language of nature; though, undoubtedly, the aim of this silence served a social function. It excluded those who have no right to speak and those who are not able to speak (the foreigner who did not speak Greek) (Montiglio, 2000, p. 31).

This relation between silence and initiation was also practiced by early philosophy. It was said that the initiates in the school of Pythagorus were required to keep quiet for five years in order to see if they were capable of self-control and ready to listen (Hegal, 2006, p. 35).⁴ But more than this - - the silence was deemed necessary in order for the initiate to acquire a disposition for learning, which meant that the initiates were able to refrain from idle chatter where one talks incessantly about trivial matters. Pythagorus knew what we too discover from everyday experience: chatter and silence are deeply opposed to one another, and this opposition is not insignificant when it comes to the experience of understanding in language (Kierkegaard, 1978, p. 97).⁵ If silence is the withdrawal and withholding of words for the sake of real communication, chatter is the withdrawal of silence in our words, leaving in its place nothing but noise, for what is noise if not sounds without silence, verbal and otherwise. The noise of chatter reduces language of significance for it communicates everything and yet nothing; in chatter one speaks without really saying anything, not unlike gossip that simply passes the word along. As Heidegger notes, idle chatter conveys a fall into insignificance. In the noise of chatter there is no interruption in speaking, which, as we know from the experience of listening, is what is required for learning. With chatter there is no formation either in language or in the mind of the initiate who desires to see and hear, i.e., to understand.

Silence as Giving Voice to Words

As we are about to see, this second way of regarding silence is not without importance for the experience of understanding, and is the aspect of silence I want to treat most extensively. For silence to give voice to words it must be able to intervene within speech, but do so not in the manner of a simple break as if it were simply a pause between words that amounts to nothing, as if silence were nothing. Rather, it has to intervene by being involved in the work of language as discourse, so as to aid the generation of meaning in language. This is the silence that Merleau-Ponty describes as the silence that is there before speech has been pronounced and which never ceases to accompany speech “and without which it would say nothing.” Merleau-Ponty goes on to say that “we should be sensitive to the thread of silence from which the tissue of speech is woven,” for unlike habitual speech where the element of silence has been obliterated, the tissue of speech can say what has never before been said (Merleau-Ponty, 1973, p. 46). What Merleau-Ponty is saying here is slightly enigmatic: The tissue of speech is woven from the thread of silence? But this same idea is also expressed by Heidegger. When he tells us that silence, “which

is often regarded as the source of speaking, is itself already a corresponding [with what is being said],” he is saying along with Merleau-Ponty that in speaking to be understood what is spoken is interwoven with the unspoken (Heidegger, 1971, p. 131).

If we ask ourselves, then, just how silence intervenes and becomes interwoven within speech, we see that it does so in at least two ways. First of all, silence intervenes in the manner of a suspension, a kind of holding apart that allows something to be in free movement. Such holding apart is what occurs in a pause. The pause in speaking and the silence commensurate with it is precisely what the 20th century poet Paul Celan describes so eloquently as the breath-turn. Quite literally, the breath-turn refers, in Celan’s words, to the “the silent, whisper-like transition and alteration between inhaling and exhaling” (Gadamer, 1997, p. 162). In a speech given on the occasion of receiving a prize for his poetry in 1960, Celan refers to the breath-turn as a way of indicating the ability of the poetic word in its turning around (*Umkehr*) to resonate, a turning around by virtue of the “sensuous experience of the silent” (Gadamer, 1997, p. 73).⁶ Such turning around—that moment of a beginning of breath in an interval of silence—sorts out, in Celan’s own words, “the strange from the strange.” In effect the silent pause is alterity, otherness, not as pure foreignness but as that rupture and reversal that is an opening for meaning in the eminent language of poetry. In effect, it is what gives voice to words from within the plenitude of language. The reversal of the breath-turn, he says, is “never a spectacular occurrence,” but consists of “a thousand silent imperceptibilities.” So Celan says: “Poetry is perhaps this: an *Atemwende*, a turning of our breath. Who knows, perhaps poetry goes its way—the way of art—for the sake of just such a turn” (Celan, 1986, p. 47).

Less dramatically so, Gadamer, who writes about Celan’s poetry, sees for himself this same relation between silence and the poetic word. He insists that the poetic word is different from the word used in ordinary conversation and communication, which he describes as a perishing form of speaking. In everyday speaking and communicating, our words perish as they direct us to the thing meant in our speaking. The poetic word, though, does not refer to something in a manner that one is directed away from it, but is always directed back to language itself. For Gadamer, the poetic word has its own autonomy and is language in its eminent sense where its saying power is most prominent. Such a word has little to do with metaphors and ornate speech; rather, it is a word that makes a “return” to language where it conveys a powerful foreignness within our home-like familiarity with language. As in Celan, in the poetic word’s resounding, its turning around in language, the word is able to say something more, that is, to generate meaning in language. But how exactly is silence at work in this generation of meaning in language? Would we not agree with Gadamer that we do not read poetry in the same way we read an ordinary message? In poetry, which has something to do with intonation in language, there are always prominent breaks or pauses of silence. When we read poetry, we have to listen to these breaks in order to gain an understanding of what is being said. A few lines from Rilke’s *Sonnets to Orpheus* provide an example. Each line-break instantiates a pause:

Not understand are the sufferings.
Neither has love been learned,
and what removes us in death
is not unveiled.
Only song over the land

hallows and celebrates.

In a less noticeable way, we encounter a similar experience with silence in music. There is no rhythm in music without a break between tones. Silences are in play in all sonority.

There is, though, another dimension of silence in relation to poetry that Gadamer wants to bring to our attention. In an essay titled “Are the Poets Falling Silent” Gadamer asks the question in the title out of a concern for the task of the poet in our world today. His answer is that they have not become quiet but they have become quieter. But this is a good thing for it allows the poet to share something with someone who has an ear for it, for someone who is ready to pause, which means to linger with the word and thereby give voice to the word. Gadamer goes on to say that “in an epoch of the electronically amplified voice, only the quietest word still confirms the communality and therefore the humanity, which you and I find in the word.” He calls this almost silent word, that is to say, a word “spoken” in a low voice such that not everyone can hear it, a word of welcome and meeting (Gadamer, 1992, p. 81). But notice how this almost silent word is to be heard. The reader must have an ear for it, which requires a lingering with the word. The German word that Gadamer is using here is *verweilen*. It means to linger or to tarry, as someone in lingering might “while-away” the time. In an age of efficiency and production there is little use for someone who lingers; but for Gadamer, lingering is a good thing, for what he is describing is an attentiveness of being *there* with something so that you do not look past it. Hopefully, you can gather from these remarks that poetry is only a heightened instance of an experience with lingering or tarrying. In general, we do not understand much at all when we are in a hurry! The tarrying being described here, which goes hand in hand with an experience of silence, is the disposition to create a hold upon nearness to something.

There is another instance of the silent pause in language worth noting, one that more immediately demonstrates the way in which silence gives voice to words. It is the pause in therapeutic communication. The force of this pause is most evident not in the communication between the therapist and the client but in the client’s own speaking. In an attempt at understanding the meaning of some experience in a self-reported narrative, the client may realize that the initial understanding of the experience was not quite right. Making sense of the experience requires taking new steps to say again what the experience means. Before each new step there is a pause, a silence. It is this pause that is doing the contradicting, a “sensing” that happens during the silences between the words. The silent pause has the effect of articulating the experience that demands the right words. The force of this silent pause is all the more evident when contrasted with what one might call “empty silence.” This is the silence that expresses nothing because the person who expressing it feels nothing.

The second way that silence intervenes within speech is implicit in Gadamer’s idea of the quiet word as well as in therapeutic communication. Silence intervenes within speech as suspending that holds open, providing speech with a space of reception. Classically, the speaking we call discourse is nothing other than the declarative statement in which something is said about something. But speaking is more than making statements. In our enactment of language we do not simply say something about something when we speak; we say something about something to someone. Discourse is oriented to communication in which the intention to meaning in speaking is directed outwards toward another. But in every attempt to fulfill the intention of

speaking, silence has entered discourse as a matter of necessity. To speak about something to someone requires silence for the act of reception of speech. This silence actually engulfs speaking, for before one is able to speak to another, the speaker must first have been silent. Speaking never begins absolutely each time, but takes place from a reception of what has already been spoken. As in every encounter and dialogue, speaking starts from the silence of a receptive listening and requires the silence of reticence for its enactment and fulfillment.

This form of silence in the receptivity and the reticence of speech is not properly speaking, a silence of passivity. As Merleau-Ponty tells us, “I am not active only when speaking; rather, I precede my thought in the listener. I am not passive when I am listening; rather, I speak according to . . . what the other is saying. Speaking is not just my own initiative, listening is not submitting to the initiative of the other” (Merleau-Ponty, 1973, pp. 143-144). To merely submit to the initiative of the other is to regard listening as a matter of “hearing from” the other, rather than a “listening to,” which indicates in its simplicity just how silence intervenes in speaking and dialogue. It intervenes as the condition not just for the reception of speech but for being able to understand what is spoken about by the other. As such, it is the silence of listening that holds open the possibility for the return of speech within dialogical speaking, that is to say, it holds open the articulating of speech that can issue in a communicative understanding. Hermeneutic understanding, Gadamer tells us, depends fundamentally on the rigor of uninterrupted listening.

This holding open for the sake of understanding in the silence of listening amounts to a waiting in the active sense that Heidegger gives to this word. Here waiting is not the simple holding back while expecting something to appear, but an attentive anticipation, or better, an attuned responsiveness—what Heidegger calls in *Gelassenheit* a “reserved steadfast releasement” that receives (Davis, 2007, p. 222). In different words, waiting is something like an active generosity as one finds this in therapeutic conversation where it measures the infinite distance between the words of another and one’s own words. It measures as that discretion within speaking that is able to heighten what is said so that one is most able to hear the other. And in taking the measure of this infinite distance, one can say in some sense and with some caution in order to avoid romanticizing silence, that the silence of listening is also taking the measure of the silence within words—the enormous unsaid that lies within speaking when we try to say what we mean. In this waiting and measure-taking, the silence of listening is not concerned with guarding the secret, but just the opposite. It enacts the spacing necessary for the becoming manifest—the showing—that is the function of speech.

Let me repeat that last sentence in different words: the silence of listening, as a space of receptivity and reticence, allows for meaning to appear, for something to show itself, to reveal itself, in words. The key idea here is simple yet subtle: Vocal speaking and saying are not the same! The distinction here is a variation on the idea of chatter. As Heidegger writes: “Someone can speak, speak endlessly, and not say anything. In contrast, someone may be silent, does not speak at all, and yet, without speaking say a great deal” (Heidegger, 1971, p. 122). One can readily imagine what Heidegger is referring to here. This silence that would say something is more than a gesture, such as a nod of acknowledgment. This deeper silence would leave nothing obscure. It would be a reserve of being sure of one another that forgoes speaking superficially. It would forego expressing what would not fit the situation, and thus would hide more than it would show something. Sometimes it may be better to *not* speak in the face of death.

This difference between speaking and saying is significant for hermeneutics. Hermeneutic understanding is oriented to hearing the saying, what is being said in language! What is to be understood *is* what is being said when one speaks. Heidegger's point here is that silence, with its space of receptivity and reticence, has something to do with being able to understand what is being said. He writes: "In talking with one another, the person who is silent can 'let something be understood', that is, one can develop and understand more authentically than the person who never runs out of words" (Heidegger, 1927/2010, p. 159). The subtlety here for Heidegger is that speaking is not just the vocalization of thoughts; speaking is at the same time also listening. So, a dialogue is not simply that one person speaks and other person listens. "Speaking is of itself listening. Speaking is listening to the language we speak" (Heidegger, 1971, p. 123). We have to listen to language before we speak, consciously or not! In this sense, the silence of listening is the wellspring of the word.

Heidegger gives us the most intriguing description of the relation between silence and speaking in his analysis of the phenomenon of conscience. He treats the idea of conscience in connection with the need for the self to find a way to take up its existence in a genuine way. For the most part, we live our lives in everydayness in such a way that we tend to lose ourselves in it. Such a way of living is just what he means by existential inauthenticity. We are numbed by the noise of the everyday and are unable to bear witness to ourselves in our ownmost possibility for existing. We fail to hear ourselves because we only listen to the "they—the anonymous self of everydayness." Such listening, listens-away, an awkward phrase that Heidegger uses to convey the idea that we are not really listening when we listen to the "they." So, there must be another kind of listening that interrupts the listening to the they, a listening in which there is a summons that summons the self back to itself out of its everydayness. This summons is for Heidegger the call of conscience, and it is a distinctive mode of address: the call comes from me, yet beyond me and over me. And in this distinctive mode of discourse in which there is something to understand, there is no explicit phonetic speaking, nor does the call of conscience actually speak about anything. In this regard, the call of conscience is quite unlike the Freudian voice of conscience that internalizes the restraint from our culture. Heidegger's voice of conscience does not tell us what we did wrong.

What interests us here, then, is the nature of this call. The call speaks in the mode of silence and can only be heard in silence. Heidegger calls such silence reticence. This reticence is the intensity of hearing that is necessary for bearing witness to a self in the possibilities of its being. In the uncanniness of the silent call of conscience the self is receptive to the call of care.

Silence as the Beginning of the Word

In this third way of regarding silence I want to return to my provocative musing at the outset of my remarks today. I want to briefly explore the possibility and implications of a silence that is the beginning of the word. Now, immediately, a good Gadamerian will be skeptical of my intention here. Gadamer claims that we begin to speak as a response to a word already spoken. The movement of logos at its beginning, is, for humans at least, drawn back into the already taking place of language. Even for the child there cannot be a first word. When a child speaks a "first" word, it is folly to believe that the parents are witnessing the beginning of language

(Gadamer, 1976, p. 63). Such a word is always preceded by previous developments, by exchanges of looks and gestures, and nascent conversations from within the socialized linguistic world that the child inhabits. The child's first word is merely an opening into the child's ability-to-talk. So, I will have to be very cautious in what I am about to say about the beginning of the word.

The provocative idea of a word beginning from silence has its roots in the mythic character of Hermes, who, as a messenger of the gods, brings a word from the realm of the wordless. He is an interpreter who brings into word what was not yet word, a coming to birth of the word. This provocative idea of a word from silence also has its roots in theology, as I alluded to in my opening remarks. I am not interested in theology here, but I am interested in the work of the contemporary Jewish thinker Edmond Jabès in which the word's relation to silence is taken up in a theological context. For Jabès, the revelation of the spoken word must contest with the unsayable that stems from an unknown God, a God hidden in such a way that God is absent from the world. The spoken word must contest with the unsayable as infinite separation. Jabès describes this separation and absence in many ways, including that of silence, but this silence is no ordinary silence. "God," he writes, "is God's silence remaining silent" (Jabès, 1996, p. 9). A doubling of silence of sorts, one rooted in the Kabbalistic interpretation of creation, which Jabès often draws from. Quoting the Kabbalah in the *Book of Questions*, he writes:

("God was the first to break the silence," he said. "It is this breakage we try to translate into human languages.")

"Vowels make us see, make us hear. Vowels are image and song. In our ancestors' script, vowels are points."

"God refused image and language in order to be Himself the point. He is image in the absence of images, language in the absence of language, point in the absence of points," he said.). (Jabès, 1991, p. 353)

For such a God human life can only be that of exile, the place of which is the ceaselessness of the desert. The ideas expressed in the quote from the *Book of Questions* reflect the writing of the sixteenth-century Kabbalist, Isaac Luria. According to Luria, God created the universe by first concealing Himself and then by creating light from which came all creation. This concealing has the sense of withdrawing or retreat and by virtue of it Luria is able to explain how God "could have created things that were not divine, how a world could have been created out of nothing if there was no such 'thing' as nothing, since the idea of God excluded such a notion" (Stamelman, 1985, p. 102).

This image of contracting and withdrawing into itself is described in *The Tree of Life*, a work attributed to Luria:

Know that before all the emanations were emanated and the creations were created, the simple supernal light filled all existence and there was no empty space in the sense of . . . void, but everything was filled by the undifferentiated light And when it arose in his undifferentiated will to create the worlds. . . . He contracted Himself at the center-most

point that was within Him and the light was contracted and withdrew towards the sides surrounding the central point, thus leaving an empty space, a vacuum, an empty void (where) the central point had been. (Biale, 1984, p. 322)

For Jabès, writing repeats this withdrawal, and with it the separation between the human and God. In effect, writing is given over to expressing this other side of Creation where one is exiled from the pure word of God. And as such, the written word stands in a distinctive relation to silence. Writing is an “act of silence directed against silence” (Jabès, 1996, p. 75). But this relation to silence is not a deformation, where the word is stripped of its breath in still-life fashion, unable to participate in interrogation and reopened questions. In relation to this silence, and with it a particular dimension of unsayability, the written quite paradoxically speaks. Jabès describes this speaking as “vocable,” the word for the “oral dimension preserved in the written” that is to be distinguished from *parole* (Waldrop, 2002, p. 64). One can say a word (*mot*) but one can only read a vocable. For Jabès, the vocable is intended to convey the character of the written word that, in relation to the unsayable, calls out (*vocare*) “as words continually strain toward one another” (Motte, 1990, p. 59).

If we leave aside the theological interest that sustains Jabès writing in order to continue to probe the sense of speaking silence, we could begin by noting, along with Jabès, that what sustains the relation between word and silence is the absence of origin that is peculiar to the written word. The written word is, of course written by someone, but unlike the speaking person, it is removed from the originating voice of the writer, and one can say therefore that in some sense it gives voice to absence. This speaking silence is not unlike the command of the ancient Delphic oracle in which the source of speaking cannot be said directly. She neither declares nor conceals but gives a sign; that is to say, she indicates, she provides an index for something, like a silently pointing finger.⁷ Strictly speaking, an indication is not the same as a sign, which can merely point to something. An indication expresses an intention of meaning. So, the indication does not say anything, since it is specifically not a declaration; and yet, in indicating it does speak—a silent speaking. It is an indicating speaking that comes from an absent god, and occurs in relation to the absence of words, as if it were the beginning of speech—an awakening one to words through a silence that points towards the unknown (Blanchot, 2007, p. 40). If our ordinary writing and speaking seem distant from such speaking silence, the same cannot be said for the poetic word. A poetic word, unlike an ordinary word, can be said to be, in its creative force, originating, not in the sense that it comes from nothing, but as in the index, a word from silence that is a beginning. This silence of beginning, one might say, is silence breaking into the sound of speech. The silence at the beginning of the word is the word on the way to sense, to the tonality of words that refuses the void as well as noise as the undifferentiated, like the void (Gadamer, 2007, p. 381).⁸

What I have been saying here is really only a variation on the main idea that silence gives voice to words. The point about silence that is the beginning of the word simply underscores the fact that we often begin the experience of understanding from a certain experience of silence and unsayability. Hermeneutic understanding brings meaning to word, but what is meaning if not something that points in a direction. Meaning is what is present in, to use the French phrase *vouloir dire*, a wanting to say. This is exactly how Gadamer understands the experience of meaning that is understanding. Gadamer has said on more than one occasion that in “wanting to say” we never fully say what we had wanted to say. In wanting to say we express the approach to

and coming close to the meaning. Meaning is indicating like that silently pointing finger, pointing in a direction and in that way determines meaning (Gadamer, 2007, p. 381). In a very late essay, Gadamer makes a strong point about this “wanting to say.” This silence of the unsaid speaks along with the spoken, but not just to be uncovered, so that it will not speak anymore. It is there in every conversation that has its own direction. Let me say this in another way so to give the idea practical relevance. In speaking to one another, we are often confronted with the inchoate word—a word that is literally “in a beginning,” not unlike the indicative signaling of the oracle. This is a word that does not yet say what it wants to say is the word often encountered by therapists in the therapeutic situation, and by teachers in the classroom, and by anyone who listens to someone beginning to speak. For the sake of understanding we have to attend to this beginning word in its silent indication.

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Notes

1. See Gann (2010, p. 162). John Cage's experiment with silence was played out in his music. 1952 was the premiere of Cage's 4' 33". In the performance of this piece of "musical compo-

sition” the pianist David Tudor “sat down at the piano on the small raised wooden stage, closed the keyboard lid over the keys, and looked at his stopwatch. Twice in the next four minutes he raised the lid up and lowered it again, careful to make no audible sound, although at the same time he was turning pages of the music, which were devoid of notes. After four minutes and thirty-three seconds had passed, Tudor rose to receive applause” (Gann, 2010, pp. 2-3).

2. Michel Serres (1995, p. 13) characterizes this murmur as noise (*noise*) which he understands as more than auditory noise. It is in a sense, all of empirical life where there is always contention and strife: “We never hear what we call background noise so well as we do at the sea-side.... Space is assailed, as a whole, by the murmur; we are utterly taken over by the same murmuring. This restlessness is within hearing, just shy of definite signals, just shy of silence. The silence of the sea is mere appearance. Background noise may well be the ground of our being. It may be that our being is not at rest, it may be that it is not in motion, it may be that our being is disturbed. The background noise never ceases; it is limitless, continuous, unending, unchanging. It has itself no background, no contradictory. How much noise must be made to silence noise?”
3. As Derrida (1995, pp. 58-59) notes, this is here a double secret: the secret itself, which as a secret Abraham does not understand, and Abraham’s secrecy of keeping the secret.
4. Depending on the source there are two Greek words used to convey this sense of quiet. Diogenes Laertius uses *hesuchazo*, while Iamblichus uses *hechemuthia*. Both convey the sense of quiet rather than silence (*sigao*) as the absence of the human voice. See Hegel (2006, p. 35).
5. As Kierkegaard (1978, p. 97) notes: “What is it to *chatter*? It is the annulment of the passionate disjunction between being silent and speaking. Only the person who can remain essentially silent can speak essentially, can act essentially. . . . Chattering gets ahead of essential speaking.”
6. “The poem says to the poet, as well as to all of us, that the stillness [*Stille*] is welcome. It is the same stillness heard in the turn of breath, the ever so quiet recurrence of the act of breathing. More than anything, this is the breath-turn [*Atemwende*], the sensuous experience of the silent [*lautlosen*], calm moment between inhaling and exhaling. I do not want to deny that Celan does not only associate this moment of turning breath, this instance when the breath returns, with calm self-restraint, but that he also allows the subdued hope bound up with every return to resonate” (Gadamer, 1997, p. 73). For an analysis of Gadamer’s reading of Celan, see Alejandro Vallega (2009, pp. 81-102).
7. The Greek *semainai* is derived from *sema* that, among its several meanings, is a sign to begin something.
8. Understood in this way, when we “listen” to language we are listening to silence breaking into the sound of speech, like the breath of life in an ever new beginning. “The word, Jabès

(1991, p. 324) writes, is dry at its death.” “Then the void is nothing but life emptied of being, and its call perhaps a desperate call back to life” (Jabès, 1991, p. 334).