

The Rest Is Silence.

By Randall L. Bailey

Prologue

I first attended the Literary Club as the guest of Chris Miller about five years ago. He had asked me to sing with the Holiday Observance Chorale. For three weeks I attended rehearsals and stayed on to hear a variety of papers, which included the budgets from the Trustees and the President on the night of the Observance. As we all know, in the course of three weeks we can hear papers on a wide range of subjects in an array of styles. Fiction, non-fiction, personal reminiscence, travelogues, scholarly diatribes, rants. I don't remember what the papers were that were delivered over those Monday nights, but I can remember that it was of a fascinating variety.

Not long after, my wife Cate and I were invited to dine with Chris and Beth at the home of fellow Literarian Hal Porter and his wife Betty. Hal and Chris and I, during one of those breaks that seem to happen at dinner parties like that, were sitting away from our wives, when they asked me what I thought of the Literary Club. I said that I was equally charmed by the old-world quaintness and gentility, and appalled by the lack of women members. But my first question, and I'm sure it's not uncommon, was "Who chooses the topics of the papers?"

The answer, of course, is that the member chooses for himself. I would have guessed that there was some overall controller who made assignments based on the expertise or experience of the member, coordinating the topics to make sure that there is a variety of presentations to keep things interesting. I can chuckle about that now. I know that Chance arranges things very nicely for us, and that the variety of men who make up the membership guarantees a range of topics very nicely. Probably better than one of us trying to monkey with the process.

One aspect of paper topics that came up was really interesting to me. I expect that it will be intriguing to many of the members here, as well. Hal said that the members are expected to present on topics outside of their professional field. The paper is an opportunity to explore an area of interest that we might not otherwise have the excuse to spend time on. That was his word -- "expected." And I say this might be of interest to many of our members because it is so often not the case. Not surprising in a confederation like ours that is ruled by precedent and custom as much as by constitutions and bylaws. What is seen by one member to be a suggestion is taken by someone else as a hard-and-fast rule. I can't remember the number of papers I've heard by bankers on banking, architects on architecture, historians on history, or aeronautical engineers on aeronautics. Admittedly, many of them have been interesting and informative, delivered with skill. But the papers I have listened to with the greatest pleasure have been the ones where our friend has gone into another field to bring his paper. A lawyer on Renaissance art. A doctor on social media. Fiction from a retired academician. An exploration of jazz by a librarian.

With this in mind, I decided to write about Silence.

Why is this outside of my field? Well, many of you know me as an actor. That is the part of my life that seems to best qualify me for membership in a Literary society like ours. So to explore Silence would definitely be out of my area of expertise. Like most actors, I want to play roles that have a lot of lines. Not because I am in love with the sound of my own voice, but because I want to contribute to the show in a significant way. And while silence plays a part in nearly any piece of dramatic literature, the words are what do the majority of the work.

Also, my primary work is as a carpenter, remodeling and restoring old homes. An area definitely out of the realm of Silence. I expect many of you have had work done on your homes, or even done that work yourselves. So you know there is almost nothing quiet about most of those tasks. Sometimes the work requires subtle choice and execution, to keep from undoing work you don't want undone. But it almost always requires noise. Sometimes a lot. Often with swearing.

So, in spite of my work (or maybe because of it), I find myself drawn to Silence.

We don't have much silence in our culture. We don't trust it, somehow. A friend of mine pointed out a billboard along the highway on his regular commute, that says "Silence is weird." The fact that the billboard is advertising a cell phone service provider helps make the point. The cell phone service provider has a vested interest in our connection; the best way to grow their business is to increase our use of the cellular network. Ours is a "connected" world, with instant access to the phone, email, instant messages. Twenty-four hour news cycles, Muzak, texts bombard us almost from the moment we wake, in some cases may be what actually wakes us each day.

Now, I may be preaching to the choir here. The Literary Club is made up for the most part of a generation that predates most of this technology. But whether you have a smart phone or a dial phone, use email or snail mail, you are aware that there have been broad changes in the world.

Silence is weird. A "moment of silence" is most commonly used to memorialize a loss or some tragedy. To stand, particularly in a group, and practice silence is both deeply moving and disconcerting, both reactions resulting from our busy, hyperactive world. And when we are confronted by a moment of silence that we are not expecting, like the one I began my paper with, it can be especially challenging. A pause as short as thirty seconds, as mine was, I timed it, can stretch our perception of time inordinately, and then is filled almost immediately with noise. Maybe coughs or whispered questions to our neighbor. Certainly the internal noise that makes up much of the sound in our lives. Maybe something like this passed through your mind:

"Did he lose his place already?"

"Oh no, another panic attack."

"I thought this guy was an actor. Why can't he speak up?"

"Did my hearing aid go out again?"

In a world where silence is weird, is viewed as unproductive or lazy, I advocate for the rehabilitation of silence. A fallow time, a pause to reflect, space reserved for listening and processing, could materially improve our world. In fact, I believe this listening in silence to be one of the great strengths of our Club. To sit each week for a certain period of time and listen to someone make their case, share a story, reminisce, without the possibility or necessity of response, is a wonderful thing. We listen, our friend delivers their paper that is, hopefully, carefully crafted and reasoned, applaud, shake his hand, have a sandwich and only then begin to craft a response. In the best of circumstances the discussion can carry us through the meal and even the trip home, into the next day. All of this is possible because of the unusual tradition of sitting, and listening.

Of course there can be too much of a good thing. The anechoic chamber at Orfield Laboratories in south Minneapolis is recognized as the world's quietest room. It has a decibel rating of -9.4. A person spending time in the room has to be seated. The lack of auditory clues about your surroundings can quickly lead to disorientation, causing you to fall down. Someone spending as little as 30 minutes there can begin to hallucinate, and the longest anyone has tolerated being in the room is 45 minutes.

Anechoic chambers (anechoic equals "without echo") are used by industries to assess the sounds created by their products, like cell phone ringers, washing machines, stereo speakers. They are also used by NASA for training astronauts. Space is said to be one big anechoic chamber, so the astronauts are suspended in a tank of water inside the chamber. Eventually, they begin to hallucinate. How they manage to deal with this sensory deprivation is one indicator of how well they could handle time in space.

Avant garde composer John Cage visited an anechoic chamber at Harvard and reported to the technician that there was a problem with the room, because he heard two sounds, one high, one low. The technician explained the high noise was Cage's nervous system and the low, the circulation of his blood.

And so, while I am in favor of quietness, absolute silence goes a bit too far. My gradually growing tinnitus, a condition that results in a ringing in the ears, the result of too much time around saws and hammers, guarantees that I will never be in complete silence. But an existence without excessive extraneous noise is one I long for.

"Be still and know that I am God."

-Psalms 46:10

I have been a member of Mount Auburn Presbyterian Church for just over ten years now. That is how I first met Literarian Chris Miller, the Minister of Music there. And it was through him that I got to know Hal Porter, Literarian and pastor emeritus of Mount Auburn, as well as our member Brit Harwood. It is a wonderful collection of liberals with no place in mainstream Christianity, recovering Catholics, gay and lesbian couples, agnostics who just love the aesthetic experience. In fact, it is the only kind of church that my wife, a secular feminist philosopher, is willing to attend.

When our newest pastor, Susan Quinn Bryan, answered the call to Mount Auburn seven years ago, she made some changes to the worship to heighten the experience and highlight the liturgical year. One such change happens during Lent, the penitential season leading up to Easter, that we are in right now. She asked that congregants enter the sanctuary quietly, and maintain silence until the beginning of the service. A recording of wind emphasizes the quiet. This is a time of reflection, time to set apart the outside world and prepare for worship.

Now, I love my church family. Some of my best friends I've met there, and they as a group are always supportive of my theater work. They are active in the community, working for social justice and change for those least among us, appreciative of art and music at a high level, loving and welcoming in the best ways. But they can't keep their mouths shut to save their souls. It seems a thought that comes into their heads just has to fall out of their mouths. The Lenten silence just doesn't happen most weeks. I think that some people talk during that time just to be contrarian. If they are asked to be quiet they feel that is a threat to their rights and talk louder.

I love the Lenten quiet. The chance to separate from the outside world and take the time to listen for the outside voice that can come to us in those moments is wonderful to me. And unlike when I have still times at home, by myself, those still times with a group are special. To be with a congregation that is, all together, listening, is marvelous. There is the sense that when a gathering of people are concentrating their attention on listening, the attention of God is especially drawn to us.

There are many religious traditions that value silence, and I was interested to try a worship service that makes use of silence. So I decided to attend a gathering of the Religious Society of Friends, or Quakers, as they are sometimes called.

I went to the Eastern Hills Friends Meeting in Anderson Township on the 27th of January to try a worship service based on silence. First off, the Quakers I met with were anything but silent. I entered the meeting house to a steady hum of conversation. About a dozen people were there, and greeted me warmly. One congregant gave me a précis of what the service would consist of, and some informative materials about the Friends and their worship. It was a very welcoming and friendly gathering.

Then we entered the meeting room, and it was indeed based on silence. There was one reading, to begin our meditation, as I presumed. The children and their teachers left after about twenty minutes. During the course of the next hour, only two people spoke.

In such quiet surroundings, any sound stands out. The heating system would kick on, and the air moving through the ducts seemed unusually loud. The traffic moving by, someone re-crossing their legs, voices in the other room, were all more present than usual. Most surprising was the noise from inside my head. The reading that began our worship and the comments that were offered all concentrated my mind -- for about two minutes. Then a regular commentary began to roll through my mind. Do I need to have something ready to offer to the group? Did I offend someone by referring to them as Quakers? Do they prefer to be called Friends? I need to yawn. Is that OK? Should I finish the laundry

when I get home? Will Cate give me a hard time for not going to church with her this morning? Why keep going to church if it doesn't fulfill me? It it alright yawn?

Clearly, I need some practice at silent worship.

I realized the noise outside is much less than I originally thought. The real noise is what I carry around with me. It is always there. The constant monologue about what I am doing, or should be doing, or haven't done, or should have done. All of it in the past, or in the future. The silence is the marker of now, the present, and I am rarely in touch with it. As much as I tell myself that I want quiet, that silence is a goal, I don't make good use of it when it is there.

I need some practice at silence.

There are times when silence is a bad thing. To stand by quietly while a falsehood or slander is proposed is a great wrong. Years ago when I was in college, I was talking to an older friend of mine about some challenges I was having with some fraternity brothers who were disregarding the rules of the house and not being taken to task for it. I said that I was reluctant to speak up in meetings and confront the problem. He told me a profound thing. "Free speech is less of a right, and more of a responsibility." Sitting quietly by can be seen as tacit agreement. My silence was less a mark of respect for a view I disagreed with than a reflection of my lack of courage to stand up. To disagree, politely and with respect, is also something I need to practice.

"Act on the line."

-Note given by every director, in every play ever rehearsed

I love the moment, when I go to the theater, just as the house lights dim. The conversation in the rows begins to quiet, as the house lights go to black, and the stage has yet to be lit. And I feel like I'm in a roller coaster when the first cars disappear over the top of the hill ahead, and the train begins to accelerate toward what I can't see, and it could be the most terrifying or exciting or boring or prosaic thing ever. But at that moment, when the audience holds it's collective breath, the potential for the extraordinary is there.

Of course, the magic can be diminished by some Vandal, Goth, Hun who believes that their story about the baby sitter or parking attendant trumps everything else, and keeps talking until someone on stage utters the first line. Or they may have to meticulously unwrap the cough drop and, it sounds like, flatten and fold the cellophane into a perfect square before it gets tucked back into their pocket. Not to mention the texter who has to finish checking in on Facebook or Foursquare so they get the social credit for being at the theater. Whether it is a glowing screen or non-whisper or crackle they manage to break through the moment of suspense the rest of us are sharing.

Fortunately, these problems are relatively rare, and we are drawn into the imaginary world of the play that, in the best of circumstances, gives us insight to our real world through it's fictional lens. While silence plays an important part, words are the backbone of theater. With words the characters reveal their stories and themselves and

each other. Almost any actor will gauge the relevance or importance of the character they are playing by the number of lines they have. Some may profess otherwise. They are probably lying. One friend of mine, when working on a new play that was undergoing regular revisions during the rehearsal process, had one entire scene and several lengthy passages cut from his role. He turned to an actor next to him and remarked, "You really have to learn a lot of lines to get your pay. My word-to-dollar ratio just went thru the roof!" Suggesting that he was happy about the cuts. But he was lying.

Even so, one of the most common notes that a director has to give is "Act on the line." In rehearsal, I am still learning my lines, and I take some moments to remember what I must say. Or I may be working out the logic of the sequence, and connect it all thought-wise. Eventually, however, I should have all this worked out, and my line should follow briskly on the heels of my scene partner's. Of course, in everyday life, we most often are listening and formulating responses simultaneously. Or even skip that pesky listening part. As soon as a pause occurs, or even sometimes before a pause, we are making our point in reaction to our interlocutor. On stage, a pause between lines should not be common. I may be trying to build tension or attention with my pause. But the line is the action, the communication happens with the words and not with facial contortions. The pause has to be earned, and in most plays the words and the action need to build rapidly, continuously, simultaneously.

There are playwrights who specifically indicate where pauses are to go, and when. Even the length of the pause can be indicated. In his scripts, Harold Pinter includes "pause", "beat", "moment", "hold", "two beats". Of course, the actual duration of each of these pauses in relation to one another is difficult to pin down. Is a beat longer or shorter than a hold? Are two beats equal to or lesser than a moment? Something to work out in rehearsal. And the tendency is for the actor to reach for more pauses, and the director to lessen them. The director is right.

One specific pause built into a play that is worth noting is Iago's speech at the end of Act I Scene 3 of Shakespeare's Othello. Othello has chosen Cassio as his lieutenant over Iago, and Iago has been given the place of ancient, a rank similar to a noncommissioned officer like sergeant. At the end of Act I, Iago has been assigned the duty of delivering Desdemona to Cyprus, where Othello has been sent to deal with a new Turkish threat. After convincing Roderigo to bring all of his money to Cyprus in his pursuit of Desdemona, Iago has a moment alone to reflect on the situation, and how he might use it to revenge himself on Othello, and Cassio.

The top of the speech deals contemptuously with Roderigo: "Thus do I ever make my fool my purse." He goes on to enumerate his problems with Othello, not just that he has been passed over for promotion, but a rumor that " 'twixt my sheets he has done my office." Iago goes on to Cassio, and his smooth way with women, and how he might use Othello's jealous nature to drive a wedge between commander and lieutenant.

So Iago has the basic outline of a plan. But how to put it into practice? Here is where the scansion of Shakespeare's poetry comes into play, and leaves us with a quandary.

In brief, Shakespeare is writing in iambic pentameter, lines of five "feet" or ten syllables that follow a unstressed/stressed pattern. duh "I asked for porter and you gave me beer." Iago's speech follows the pattern fairly closely, until, there is a change.

"The Moor is of a free and open nature,
That thinks men honest that but seem to be so,
And will as tenderly be lead by the nose
As asses are.
I have't. It is engender'd. Hell and night
Must bring this monstrous birth to the world's light."

So in the fourth line we have but two feet, with a clear break before the next line begins, a line that is a common rhyming couplet often used by Shakespeare to signal the end of a scene. But what of those missing three beats? It would appear that Shakespeare intends that pause to be the place for Iago to calculate his plan for revenge. Fair enough. We have the outline of the plan already established earlier in the speech; use Cassio's charm to enrage Othello against him, making space for Iago to take his place. Fine. But as the play goes on, we learn that Iago's plan is to steal a particular handkerchief from Desdemona, with the aid of his wife. Then to use a girlfriend of Cassio's to plant the handkerchief on Cassio, who will then inadvertently display it in Othello's presence, driving Othello into a jealous rage that will be the undoing of Cassio and the path to promotion for Iago. All in the space of duh DUH duh DUH duh DUH.

Now, dramatic time is not real time. The compression of time is common in Shakespeare, as are leaps of months and even years in some cases. We accept that time moves differently in the theater. But this three beat pause is a stretcher, if we are to believe that Iago has built this plan in it's entirety in that time. Some argue that he has just sketched an outline of this plan in those beats, and uses coincidence to build in the details. But he says, immediately following the pause, "I have't. It is engendered." Pretty definitive words. Making something of a challenge for actor and director.

I once saw a production of Othello in a theater in another city. And in this production, Iago really took his time working out all of the details in his mind. During this pause, he strode about the stage and we could see him accept and discard approaches to the problem in his imagination, fretting over how to make all of the pieces come together. On and on, he worked out the problem in great detail, with no words to let us know what was going on. I'm sure that, for the actor, there was a great deal of fascinating work going on, and, in his mind, a fully-realized world was created. But for the audience it was agonizing. The pause was long enough to warrant it's own intermission. It was at

this time that I realized that my disbelief would have willingly suspended itself to believe Iago had concocted his plot in the three beats the author has allowed. Trust to the playwright: Shakespeare knew what he was about.

Everything has its wonders, even darkness and silence, and I learn, whatever state I may be in, therein to be content

-Helen Keller

Perhaps the best reason for writing a paper is to explore what it is that I really think. One of my college professors taught me that a thought isn't really complete until it is written down. This exposes the bias in an English professor for writing, but I've learned it has great truth. An idea rattling around in my head isn't fully formed. The process of writing it out crystallizes it, makes it concrete. And so it has been with my paper here. I knew I was interested in silence, that I valued silence, but didn't really understand why until I wrote it out. And now I know.

The base level reason I have for my interest in silence can be expressed in the concept of footprint. Footprint is often used to determine the energy needed to support one's way of life. By adding up the electricity used for a house of your size, the gasoline for the vehicle you drive, and including air travel, children, food types eaten, and even clothing and TV watching habits, it is possible to calculate the BTUs that go into your train of life, and then express that number in acres of forest destroyed, coal burnt, oil recovered, tons of carbon emitted. This illustration then allows us to visualize the costs of a way of life, with the goal of promoting changes resulting in reduced use, in order to reduce one's impact on the environment. Now, this is not necessarily a popular notion. Plenty of people deny the correlation between energy use and environmental degradation, or, if they think there might be a link, they don't care. We can't use up the planet in my lifetime, or my grandchildren's, so there is plenty of time for someone else to fix it. I can afford to buy the fuel and electricity, so it's no one else's business how much I use. My footprint is as big as I can afford it to be.

A similar attitude is expressed in the noise footprint, as I'll call it. Whenever a booming stereo in a car thuds past, or a pickup truck with a modified exhaust system roars by, the noise footprint of that person intrudes into my world. Loud talk on the cell phone when standing in line or noisy candy wrappers being opened in the theater step blithely on other's environments. Many of these people would use the same arguments against noise pollution control as the folks mentioned above would argue against environmental protection regulations. Don't interfere with my right to talk on my phone whenever I want. I paid for it. I came up with the money for this sound system and I'll

play it as loud as I like. If you can't hear the play over my Ricola wrapper, maybe you aren't listening closely enough.

The Bigfoots of noise and energy both miss an important point. No one lives in the world by themselves. If someone honks their horn incessantly in the forest, and no one else is there, no one else is affected by it. But the gas-guzzler and the loud talker are not in the world by themselves. We are social beings, living near and with others, and everything we do or say or consume affects someone else. Very rare is the person who wants to live entirely removed from others. Also rare is the person who could survive without others. And while most of us could eke out an existence like that, it would remove from our world nearly everything that makes life worth living. No concerts, parades, worship services. No phone or computer or lights in the evening. A solitary existence as intolerable as the anechoic chamber, with nothing to engage us but brute, subsistence level survival.

And while I would like to live in a quieter world, that uses less energy, I have no interest in the clapboard cabin in Montana heated with a wood stove and never visited by the neighbors. I want to live in society with others, keeping my footprint small, and accepting that, from time to time, my footprint will overlap with someone else's. That overlap doesn't have to be a source of irritation; that overlap is where life happens. But that only works if my footprint is small. If it is so big that I can't see the edges, when my footprint treads on someone else and I can't tell, then I am disconnected from my world and my fellow beings. That is when I begin to disassociate from others, and enables me to think I am all that is important in the world, because the world, all that I can see, is nominally under my control.

Which leads me back to the words of Hamlet, from whence I take the title of my paper. "The rest is silence." Is there is character in dramatic literature more beset with noise than Hamlet? Someone overwhelmed by things outside of his control? The railing of his father's ghost, college friends, lover, uncle/father, mother/aunt, political intrigue, military maneuverings, his own conscience and fears? All of those "words, words, words". Let's consider the phrase from the point of view of an actor playing the role. If he has been in an uncut production of the play, he has been working for a good four hours with some of the most difficult language in the canon. Here, at the very end of the play, he lies surrounded by dead bodies, dying himself. He asks Horatio to tell the tale of his end, and finishes with these four words. Let's consider each separately first:

"The", definite article, indicates the following noun is definite, discrete, specific.

"Rest", noun, freedom from activity or labor, peace of mind or spirit, the remainder, the next step.

"Is", present form of the verb "be", absolutely, for certain, definite.

"Silence", noun, the absence of sound, quietude.

The rest is silence.

The rest is silence.

The rest is silence.