

The Syntax of Silence

CARL LEGGO

University of British Columbia

*

in the Wiseman's house
at the end of Main Street
in York Harbour faraway
on the edge of the Atlantic
I am learning in slow ways
how to live sabbatically,
drawing silence like
the sun calls the sea

*

some days I talk too much
like I often eat too much,
fending off the terror of silence
like car wrecks on a long lost lonely highway
in a March snowstorm

*

since I have no language

Journal of the Canadian Association for Curriculum Studies
Volume 5 Number 1 Spring/Summer 2007

for silence, how can I utter
a poem about silence?

*

why are some letters written
but not pronounced: silent letters?
is a silent letter a vestigial organ
like an appendix or tonsils
serving no purpose except
to confound spellers,
a disreputable cousin lurking
in shadows, not invited
to the party, an eccentric uncle
nobody acknowledges, nobody
can forget, known only in the writing,
unknown in the speaking,
seen and not heard
a sonnet of silence?
is a letter ever silent?

*

because language begins
in silence and ends in silence,
there is no language without silence

*

silence is a Gregorian chant,
one more language
I do not know
like Latin or Sanskrit

*

silence convenes the alphabet,

lexicon, syntax, speech, writing,
and signification, to spell language

*

silence designates spaces
for dynamic meaning-making,
revelation and concealment,
disseminating significance

silence divides discourse,
the seamless web of textuality,
like a December blizzard blows
boisterous waves into the harbour

*

sometimes silence
is born out of fear,
submission, resignation,
oppression, convention,
avoidance, rejection,
censorship, ignorance

*

silence is the unarticulated,
the unspoken, the unwritten
that cannot be articulated,
spoken, or written but

silence is not inarticulate

*

silence tastes like Demerara molasses,
Good Luck margarine, my mother's

homemade bread in long winter afternoons,
the mouth full with soft sweet steam

*

like an E-bay auction
most talk is valuable since
somebody somewhere wants it,
but I cannot sell silence

*

silence is both a verb and a noun,
a subject and a predicate:
silence silences

*

silence is the breath of dark
moist rum-soaked fruit cake,
a poet's language
I am trying always
to hear, to learn:
no light without shadows
no shadows without light,
always one

*

silence of intimates, silence of mime, silence of private reading, silence of
liturgical worship, silence in death, silence of the to-be-said, silence of
God, silence of the unknown, silence of an unanswered letter, doorbell,
telephone, silence of nothing-to-say, silence of nothing-I-want-to-say,
silence of consent, silence of omission, silence of reservation, silence of
good manners, silence of the mute, compelled silence, compelling
silence, silence in sleep, silence of the absurd, silence of nothingness,
silence on a crowded bus, silence of the deaf, silence of fear, silence of the

past, silence of indifference, silence of an unwritten text, silence of not-listening, silence of absent noise, silence of the abyss, silence of the universe, silence of autism, silence of a monk, silence of the abused, silence of memory, silence of imagination, silence of silence

*

Job sat in the ashes
scraping his leprous flesh,
totally puzzled by God,
and Job's friends,
Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar,
sat with him
for seven days and seven nights
in sympathetic silence,
but eventually insisted
on explaining Job's predicament:
if only they'd remained silent

*

still silent, silent in stillness
silence suffices, sufficiency of silence
satisfying silence, silent satisfaction
silent suggestion, suggestive silence
silent scene, seen silence
silent stirring, stirring silence

*

John Cage performed
his composition 4'33"
by walking on the stage
and sitting at the piano
in silence
for four minutes
and thirty-three seconds

many call it Cage's masterpiece

*

as a student in elementary school
I learned silence,
learned to sit patiently,
learned to pretend listening,
learned to speak the sanctioned answers only,
learned silence well,
too well, a well of silence,
almost drowned in the well

*

have I ever known silence?

what do I hear even in this quiet room?

refrigerator, clock, furnace, laptop, water in pipes.

body gurgles, cracks, squishes.

the glossolalia of ghosts and spirits, conscience
and memory, the unconscious and imagination.

is silence ever silent?

*

are silence and utterance inextricably related,
two manifestations of language, diastole and systole,
like two pistons in an Acadia double-cylinder engine,
pumping with the immutable rhythm:
PUT put PUT put PUT put PUT put

*

be silent.
being silent.
what is the difference?

*

am I one of the silenced
or one of the silencers?

*

surgical silence:

1. mouth opened wide
with a gag
2. tongue transfixed
with stout silk
3. tongue pulled well
out of the mouth
4. tongue at the base
cut with short snips
5. tongue seized with Wells'
forceps and removed

(Gray's Anatomy)

*

a discourse
sanctions some statements
and

excludes some statements

and subsequently silences
the sinuous and sensuous possibilities
of shifting shapes in sentences

*

silence falls like December snow,
full of surprises seen finally in the window

*

whole books
have been written
about silence.

why does silence
generate so much
noisy discussion?