



Mum's The Word

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30 seconds of silence

That was 30 seconds of silence. Discomfiting? Unsure of whether I had forgotten my lines or was in a state of narcolepsy or for some obscure reason speechless? What were you feeling during those 30 seconds? Or sensing? Was this truly 30 seconds of silence?

Of course not, if you focused your senses you would hear dishes rattling, or sense the pulsations of your heart , or perhaps hear a humming from some electrical apparatus or intrinsic to your middle ear. On the other hand your other perceptions might drown out the silence, so to speak- the ambience of the room, the play of light on the wall, the architecture of the façade of the building across the street, not to speak of the mystique of this podium. Perhaps from your initial discomfiture you might have had thoughts of some perceived discomfiture you experienced in the past related to a lecture.

Mum's the word. It is a Middle English word for "silent". It appears in Shakespeare in Henry VI Part II, "*seal up your lips and give no words but mum*". Perhaps the title suggests an essay about cloak and dagger or secret societies. – but no, I do not propose to delve into the arcane mysteries of Langley, Virginia or High Street, New Haven. My topic is silence. You no doubt have heard about the 4 minutes 33 seconds of silence, a composition of the composer John Cage. More of that later. The perception or the concept of silence has been attributed also to language in general and even extended to the realm of architecture.

In all of these attributes, silence is an entity in itself, not considered by its proponents as the absence of anything but the presence of an entity. Can it really be described in terms of the presence of something rather than the absence of something else? In another context, Albert Einstein summarized the dealing with concepts that may be applied to silence... "*To know what is impenetrable to us really exists, manifesting itself as the highest wisdom and the most radiant beauty...*".

Applied to silence? How can silence have any possible relation to wisdom or beauty?

Well of course religion, which we would admit, fulfills the Einsteinian formula, does use silence, and we can certainly attribute this definition to the silences in great music, but I doubt that any of you looking at the speaker during the 30 seconds of "silence" would have experienced the highest wisdom or even considered beauty of any sort. Nonetheless, if I am successful in my presentation, these attributes to silence may be acceptable to you, and silence itself may be recognized by you as a positive, palpable entity with energy of its own and a form of creation.

We start with John Cage. I take you back to August 29, 1952 at the Maverick Concert Hall, a rustic barn-like structure south of Woodstock, New York. Surrounding the open-air theater are maple, oak, shagbark and hemlock. A pianist, David Tudor, sits down at the piano, closes the keyboard lid, and looks at his stopwatch, pausing at 30 seconds, 2 minutes and 33 seconds, and finally at 4 minutes at 33 seconds, with each pause, opening and then closing the lid. He then arises to receive applause. The applause comes from an audience consisting of the musical avant-garde, local music lovers and members of the New York Philharmonic who may have been in the area.

There is no indication of specific audience reaction other than applause (there is no evidence that anyone walked out). However, when it was broadcast in 2004 by the BBC orchestra, the 4 minutes and 33 seconds of silence was met with several comments on the Internet, including:

“This is clearly a gimmick; when he wrote this piece he was testing who was stupid enough to fall for it. I think you’ll find he wrote it on 01 April 1952”; and,

“I’m sorry, but this is absolutely ridiculous. The rock ‘n’ rollers and the punks were wrongly bashed in their day, but this genuinely deserves a big thumbs down”

Cage himself felt that it was his best work:

“I wanted my work to be free of my own likes and dislikes, because I feel that music should be free of the feelings and ideas of the composer. I have felt and hoped to have led other people to feel that the sounds of their environment constitute a music which is more interesting than the music which they would hear if they went to a concert hall”.

Presumably, the environmental sounds of trees rustling, birds calling, and even audience coughing would provide a realm of environmental music that would constitute the real score.

However, Cage later revised the score to a list of instructions during the piece, involving a radio, whistles, a duck call, and manipulation of a deck of cards along with other sound produced in which the performer blows the duck call into a container of water, sticks objects into a piano’s strings, and blows a whistle in random order.....need I go on? Cage therefore wanted to create his own environmental music- However, this later 6 minute 40 second revision may never have been performed and 433 remains his magnum opus.

When Cage died in 1992, an obituary in the NY Times stated in part that 433 *“...was to call attention in a formal context to the richness of ambient sound: to tune an audience’s ear to ever present sonic wonders, and to enrich lives through meditative awareness.”*

There are at least 24 musical compositions which consist mostly or entirely of silence, such as the “Nutopian National Anthem” by John Lennon, “Two Minutes Silence” by Lennon and Yoko Ono, and “The Ballad of Richard Nixon” by John Denver.

For Cage, there was really no such thing as absolute silence. Sometime in 1951 or 1952, he visited the Harvard anechoic chamber where no sound could enter the room. Cage actually heard two sounds, one high and one low. The engineer in charge told him that the high one was the nervous system in operation and the low one the blood in circulation. Someone with more of a background in physiology indicated that Cage was actually hearing sounds emanating from his auditory nerve due to middle ear problem. Nonetheless, this indicates that even in a room where 99.8% of sound waves can be absorbed, silence cannot be achieved.

In a lecture in 1957 entitled “Experimental Music”, Cage expanded on the ramifications of soundlessness. *“Sounds occur whether intended or not... This....leads to the world of nature, where...one sees humanity and nature, not separate, ...(but) in a world together”*. This may be a reflection of Zen, where silence and sound are part of the same continuum, where silence is a positive effect, not an absence.

Certainly, silences in music could be considered quite positive: the silence in Handels Messiah before the tympani pounding climax, the ending of Haydn’s String

Quartet, when the audience applauds a brief silence before the music begins again, and, the silence as a setup in his Surprise Symphony. Beethoven used silence in the first movement of the Eroica and at the beginning of Coriolan as part of the basic conception of the music, as did Chopin in the last part of his F minor Ballade, where after a triple fortissimo measure, a double pianissimo set of chords is followed by four measures of silence, a setup for a fortissimo exposition.

In connection with this, an editorial appeared in the medical journal Heart in 2006 entitled “The sound of silence is music to the heart”. It is in response to a study by a team of researchers entitled: cardiovascular, cerebrovascular, and respiratory changes induced by different types of music in musicians and non-musicians: the importance of silence. They studied a random discontinuation of music for 2 minutes and found that respiratory frequency, blood pressure and heart rate decreased to below baseline levels of when music was being heard. The authors of the research study suggested that the tempo of music was important in determining physiologic response.

When extrapolated to 433 this suggests that the silence can be useful in moderating a fast heart beat or a higher blood pressure. In fact, when we record blood pressures in our hypertension clinic we have the patient lie in a quiet room for at least 5 minutes before the first blood pressure is taken.

Thomas Clifton, a contemporary musicologist, wrote an essay entitled The Poetics of Musical Silence. To quote him “*To focus on the phenomenon of musical silence is analogous to deliberately studying the spaces between trees in a forest: somewhat perverse at first until one realizes that these spaces contribute to the perceived character of the forest itself, and enable us to speak coherently of ‘dense’ growth or ‘sparse’ vegetation*”. In other words, silence is the servant of sound.

In addition to the examples of the use of silence in classical and romantic music that I have cited, there was a further utilization of silence by the Viennese School of atonalists in the early 20th century. Alban Berg’s compositions, for example, frequently end by fading into a void so that the listener may even perceive an extension of the music when it actually becomes silent. With Anton Webern, there are frequent silent rests producing a dispersal of sound.

Arnold Schönberg’s Sechs Kleine Klavierstücken begins with a rest and the sound that follows alternates with silence, each breaking into the other. Unfortunately, it is difficult for the listener on first hearing the work to realize that the score begins with a silence.

It is possible for sound to supplement silence in a musical composition. A string Quartet by the Italian composer Luigi Nono (not a republican) *Fragmente Stille, An Diotima*, consists in part of long silences surrounding short fragments. This tends to make the composition discontinuous. Here again, the listener hears the memory of the sound grouping through the silences. To quote Nono “*There is more sound volume in many silences than in a fortissimo from a Beethoven piece*”. The periods of silence may produce a particular variety of the previous sound that may vary from listener to listener.

One must also consider relative silence as when various instruments appear and end in a symphony, concerto or string quartet. The silence of one instrument adds

emphasis to the instruments that are still playing, and there is also the anticipation of the silent instrument again arising in sound.

Of course, in music, the obverse of silence is sound. However, the persistent repetition of sound can lead the listener either to forget that it is there or to cast a hypnotic spell. For example, Philip Glass's repetitive motifs do create a feeling of mystical calm perhaps like a series of closely following waves lapping a shore. On the other hand, the background noise that accompanies commercials on the radio or muzak in the supermarket or elevator is now so pervasive that one hardly recognizes it as an entity of sound.

The idea of background music has some interesting forebears. In the early 20th century, Erik Satie, the Dadaist composer and the painter Ferdinand Leger were dining in a restaurant where the orchestra was playing too loudly for Satie's comfort. Satie commented to Leger that there was a need to create "furniture music" that would blend with surrounding noises, "*masking the clatter of knives and forks without drowning it completely. It would fill up awkward silences...and neutralize the street noises...*". Unlike Cage, Satie created environmental sound with music. A manuscript of Satie found after his death was entitled *Vexations*, an apt title, for the work consisted of 34 bars of music repeated 840 times. It is performed occasionally and listeners and performers sometimes get a feeling of hallucinogenic effects or a suspension in the passage of time.

It should be noted that the impact of this work is in time lengths of the fragments, not the harmony. In fact, Cage recognized this impact as contrary to early music in which the interplay of harmonies had the great importance. To quote Cage: "*With Beethoven the parts of a composition were defined by means of harmony. With Satie and Webern they are defined by means of time lengths. The question of structure is so basic....that one must now ask: Was Beethoven right or are Webern and Satie right?*" As you might expect, Cage answered unequivocally that Beethoven was in error and felt that his influence "has been deadening to the art of music".

At this point some of you may have been pondering the reason for the 4 minute 33 second length of the Cage composition. In fact, the old 12 inch 78 rpm vinyl records allowed for music of that length. Around the time of the first recital of 433, the Supreme Court was deciding upon whether Muzak piped into elevators and restaurants was a public nuisance. The majority decided that broadcasting music was not inconsistent with public convenience, comfort and safety and "*tends to improve the conditions under which the public ride*". In fact, in early 1952, a juke box at the University of Detroit had three records of 3 minutes of silence with a beep tone every 15 seconds so that people would know that the record was playing.

Cage's work and the idea of silence as a musical form had significant consequences. For Cage himself, his contributions to music (and its counterpart silence) were rewarded not only by his appointment in 1961 as a Fellow in the Center of Advanced Studies but as a Charles Eliot Norton lecturer at Harvard, an honor accorded to such other composers as Hindemith, Copland, Bernstein and Stravinsky. When Cage died of a stroke at the age of 80 in 1992 the *Village Voice* urged its readers to observe 4 minutes and 33 seconds of silence.

Cage himself wrote a sequel if I may call it that to 4 33 in 1962 with a title 4'33" (No. 2) or alternatively) 0'00" in which no music was performed but the performer

could provide some planned action (aside from a musical composition) and that no two performances would be the same. Cage had dedicated this to one of his students, Toshi Ichihyanagi whose wife at the time happened to be Yoko Ono. Seven years later, Ono, was now married to John Lennon and they composed a recording entitled *Unfinished Music No. 2: Life with the Lions* which included a track called “Two Minutes of Silence”, as noted previously.

Others of the avant-garde of music composition included not only silence in their works but also an invitation to the audience to do anything they wanted during the piece, presumably in a concert hall, not a restaurant or ice skating rink. Planned activities written into the score include the release of butterflies into the performance area and the offering of a bale of hay and a bucket of water for the piano to eat and drink

Let us go into a more broadly evaluation of silence. In my research for this essay, I came across a thesis submitted for the degree of Master of Arts in the Department of Communication of Simon Fraser University, British Columbia, in 1993 by Wreford Miller. The thesis is entitled *Silence in the Contemporary Soundscape*. The text itself is 111 pages long and begins with a quote from Max Picard’s book *The World of Silence*. More on that book later.

The quotation:” *Nothing has changed the nature of man so much as the loss of silence.*

The invention of printing, technics, compulsory education – nothing has so altered man as this lack of relationship to silence, this fact that silence is no longer taken for granted, as something as natural as the sky above or the air we breathe.

Man who has lost silence has not merely lost one human quality, but his whole structure has been changed thereby.”

Miller’s thesis is an examination of the social patterns that shape and interpret silence.

The basis of sound or of any energy is vibration, and the absence of vibration constitutes true silence. It has been suggested by R. Murray Schafer, a Canadian composer and environmentalist and Miller’s mentor, who started soundscape studies at Simon Fraser University, that aside from no sound at all before the big bang at the beginning of the universe, there was an *”undifferentiated endless sound that could be the underlying condition of silence”*. After all, if there is a background constant sound throughout the universe, it would not be heard as sound. Continuous sound levels create adaptation that decreases the threshold of sensitivity to the ear.

The idea of a constant background sound at the beginning of the universe was also postulated by Lucretius. In the Indian Tantra, the stir of the Divine will is termed Nada, which after three stages of “sound” that are unhearable until a “gross form” emerges that can be heard as sound. Tantra is Sanskrit for “weave” and encompasses an Asian body of beliefs working from the principle that the universe we experience is nothing other than the concrete manifestation of divine energy of the Godhead that creates and maintains the universe. The practice of mantras results in an increasing awareness of cosmic vibrations (the sub threshold sound not becoming manifest).

In some ways this may be experienced in the anechoic chamber that John Cage visited. As was indicated to him, he experienced the sounds from his own body and with their monotonous repetition the sounds faded and a daydreaming or

hallucinatory state was experienced in which sound was either be suppressed or new sound imagined. This may parallel the mystic experience of the Tantra. I emphasize that the sound from the body that appear monotonous after a while are the sounds of breathing, the heartbeat, and possibly the mild stimulus from the nervous system, including a possible tinnitus from the middle ear. It is difficult to postulate that the circulation of blood other than the sound of a possible throbbing of an artery picked up by the acoustic nerve would be perceived.

It is possible to experience self-induced periods of silence while going to sleep although still conscious wherein there is a cessation of hearing. This experience has also been noted by astute observers before a dramatic moment such as before an experienced accident or an embarrassment.

It has also been remarked from analysis of sounds that sounds that relate to communication such as the barely audible murmur of distant voices may be perceived as quiet but that the sound of wind moving through trees or rocks evoking more of a sense of silence.

We have discussed the significance of silence in music. In speech itself, silence is of course necessary in the spacing of words and phrases. Interposed silence gives rhythm to speech. Three prominent profiles of silence within speech have been considered: intervening silences, before-and after silences and deep silence.

Intervening silences establish the timing of phrases. These silences are the oral equivalent of commas and semicolons. Before- and – after silences set off figures of speech. Thus, while intervening silences relate internally to an utterance, before-and-after silences separate the flow of discourse with a parenthetical comment. Deep silences include what is called stunned silence, awkward silence, turn-taking pauses, pondering an idea, and the silence in an elevator. These silences are more noticed than the two types of silence in a conversation earlier.

We have all experienced “body language”, the facial expressions and body positions that convey information sometimes more robustly than speech. We change our body positions in response to the body language of others. This resynchronization of position can be accomplished within 50 milliseconds of the body motions of others. The body language of conductors to the same music betrays differences in emotional intensity. Even the distances between individuals in conversation or in a group betray attitudes between these people. The concept of individual space protection is important in regard to this. Notices how people’s positions in an elevator shift as people get off elevators so that spaced is equalized- a non-verbal communication among individuals that space will be shared equally.

According to Max Picard, the human face itself is “ *the ultimate frontier between silence and speech*”. Aside from the mouth, “*silence does not strive outward; it trickles inwardly like dew*”. The eyes bring “*brightness into the gathering of silence in the face*” “*The lines of the mouth are like closed wings of the butterfly [in silence] and when words come out, the wings open and the butterfly flies away*”.

The design of buildings and spaces can in some ways be a gesture toward silence. These spaces are designed in various degrees of subtlety for modulation of voices, such as library spaces, tombs, hospitals (I wish that were still the case!) and museums. The grandeur of cathedrals and certain railroad stations may lead one to awesome silence but even if not the sound of individual speech is muted. Monastic discipline is

associated with at least some reticence in speech, and Catholic vespers carry a gentleness bordering on silence. Silent contemplative orders are found in Catholic history and many Saints were noted for their silence. In modern Trappist monasteries, silence is used to still profane speech and facilitate “*soundless communication in mystery between humans and God*”.

Silent prayer is of course a part of Western religious observance and certainly in the worship of Quakers. This is called a “silent meeting” and consists of sitting in stillness instead of preaching sermons which may not meet individual needs. In one’s private relation to God in silent meditation, revelations can be revealed and then shared with the congregation. The purpose of meditation is a quiescence of thoughts leading to what might be called a superior awareness. This has been accomplished by a repetition of an aural or mental sound leading to a state of thoughtlessness. It can also involve heightened sensitivity to all mental activity leading to the same state. David Atkinson in his book *Silence, the Word and the Sacred* (1989) wrote that “*the divine is revealed when the cacophony of life is silenced in a single moment of illumination, which resonates ever outward to encompass the totality of being*”. It was St. Augustine who declared that only in silence are we able to transcend the worldly and to reach a higher reality.

There is an archaic practice of a national custom of silence on the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month to observe the end of the Great War in 1918. Edward R. Murrow described the sense of silence before the final exuberance over the end of World War II as something akin to the silence between the counts of 9 and 10 at a prizefight before it is over. Of course, historians have written about “A Stillness at Appomattox”.

Freddy Lindstrom, erstwhile third baseman for McGraw’s Giants and later postmaster of Evanston, described seeming moments of silence before cheers at baseball games during the depression : “*Maybe it’s my imagination , but it always sounded like (the cheering began) a split second later than it should have been, as if their minds were out of synchronization with what they were seeing*”.

Certainly there are cultural differences in the use of silence. From first hand experience, I can assure you that New York Jewish conversation avoids silence, like the plague, especially the long pause, which is considered a sign of social malfunction, and that a millisecond of silence by the speaker is followed by a tolerated interruption. My wife is constantly reminding me not to interrupt her – she of course hails from more genteel New England. This leads to the laconic New Englander, typified by Silent Cal Coolidge, whose response to a woman who bet him that she could get him to say three consecutive words was “*You lose*”. There may be a gulf of silence between people of diverse cultures possibly because of differences in appearance, awareness of body language, and differences in introductory remarks in breaking the ice so to speak.

Silence can be a means of dissent or resistance. The student in the classroom who remains silent in resistance to a teacher’s request may be a line of defense against either the learning process or the teacher as an individual. With larger groups involving boycotts for example, silence can be a strong tactic of resistance. Silence in print can be a powerful weapon. In 1932, the editor of the *Columbia Daily Spectator*, Reed Harris, was fired from the University because of some of his editorials attacking

President Nicholas Murray Butler for presumed anti-labor stances. The next day the editorial page was completely blank. Looking at that page many years later, I found a striking eloquence of silence.

Silence has been used as a way toward mediation. In Philadelphia some time ago a deadlock in negotiations arose. A mediator, who happened to be a Quaker, asked both groups to begin a session with a half hour of silence before initiating discussions. The shared silence seemed to catalyze resolution of the conflict. Shared silence has also been used as a way to resolve divisiveness in a Church congregation. The pastor announced at Sunday service that the mid-week meeting would involve a long meeting of shared silence. The meeting was fully attended and the shared silence led to reconciliation. It has been suggested that these approaches are successful in reducing tense situations among contending groups by encouraging listening with a corresponding increase in concentration and, subsequently, cooperation.

As far as I know, the only club in which silence prevails by decree is the Diogenes Club in London, in which Mycroft Holmes, Sherlock's more intelligent brother, was a member. There is a stranger's room however for speech with guests. To become a member of that club, one must visit Arthur Conan Doyle in a séance and get his approval. This silence was an acknowledgment of antisocial feeling, however, not a means for divine contemplation, the only spirits involved being of the alcoholic vintage.

By this time you may wonder who was this this Max Picard that we have been quoting so freely . He was a German Swiss theologian who lived from 1888 to 1965 and published a book entitled *The World of Silence* in 1948. In it, he contrasts silence with language. He sees silence as a restful state of the universe. The world of myth lies between the world of silence and the world of language.

“The silence of nature is a conflicting silence from the human point of view. It is a blessed silence because it gives man an intuitive feeling of the great silence that was before the world and out of which everything arose. And it is oppressive at the same time because it puts man back into the state in which the word might be taken away from him again into that original silence”.

He sees history as living in two different modes - visible daylight and dark invisible silence. *“The silent side of history is seen a little in the silent suffering of men and nations”.* Time is interspersed with silence, the days move in a rhythm of silence.

TS Eliot puts in his perspective in *Burnt Norton*:

Time present and time past
 Are both perhaps present in time future,
 And time future contained in time past.....
 -Words move, music moves
 Only in time; but that which is only living
 Can only die. Words, after speech, reach
 The stillness.....

Incidentally, Picard, in the *World of Silence* sees the opposite to silence in noise and in a parallel though less poetic comment writes:

- There is no silence in radio or true words either....
- Not only what exists already but also what will exist in the future is occupied by radio in advance...

- Past, present and future are all mixed up together in one long drawn-out noise. However, as an aside, there is a redeeming quality about radio. When a child was asked about television at its inception he replied, the pictures were better on the radio.

Picard draws a distinction between the silence in men and of that in animals. *“The silence of men is transparent and bright because it confronts the word...Silence is isolated and lonely in animals with a heaviness of stone. Animals are the images of silence.”*

Despite this it is the song of the humpback whale that was projected into space by the spacecraft Voyager as the best communicator to great aliens.

Certain passages from Picard exemplify the mysticism of silence:

“-Chinese pictures are like figures in a moonlit mist over the world of silence, woven from moon threads over the silence.

- The seasons move in silence through the changing year. Spring does not come from winter; it comes from the silence from which winter came....In winter silence is visible: the snow is silence become visible...Snowflakes meet in the air and fall together on to the earth which is already white in the silence. Silence meeting silence.”

This is reflected in *The Dead* from James Joyce’s *Dubliners* where the snow was: ...falling faintly through the universe and faintly falling, like the descent of their last end, upon all the living and the dead

It is also reflected in TSEliot’s *Little Gidding*:

-Midwinter spring is its own season...

Suspended in time, between pole and tropic

In poetry and literature, silence as a concept abounds. Listen to Edgar Lee Masters:

- I have known the silence of the stars and the sea

And the silence of the city when it pauses,

And the silence of a man and a maid,

And the silence for which music alone finds the word,

And the silence of the woods before the winds of spring begin,

And the silence of the sick.....

And I ask: For the depths

Of what use is language?

We are voiceless in the presence of realities –

We cannot speak.

ee cummings’ poetry is filled with references to silence and voice. While cummings was still a college student at Harvard he wrote a paper entitled “The Poetry of Silence” in which he discussed the comparative forms and techniques of traditional Asian and twentieth-century modernist poetries.

He provides an indication of his poetic activity in the following poem:

....myself is sculptor of

your body ‘s idiom:

the musician of your wrists;

the poet who is afraid

only to mistranslate

a rhythm in your hair,

(your fingertips
 the way you move) the
 painter in your voice
 beyond these elements
 remarkably nothing is.

and:

silence
 .is
 a
 looking
 bird:the
 turn
 ing:edge, of
 life
 (inquiry before snow

Cummings is saying that the most efficient way to render the unspeakable is to make it visible. In cumming's poetry, visible silences are found between and within words in the form of blanks.

The portrayal of color in some sense involves a silencing of language. Language cannot convey the emotions produced by color. Words like "vivid", "pretty" do not at all articulate the way colors speak to the senses. No one can describe a color. However, colors described in poetry can convey mental images that may produce varied emotional reactions by different readers or listeners.

For example, here is a poem by William Carlos Williams:

so much depends
 upon
 a red wheel
 barrow

glazed with rain
 water
 beside the white
 chickens

Very much like cummings in the lack of capital letters and the spacing of words. To me, the poem's protagonists so to speak, the rainwater, the red wheelbarrow and the white chickens invoke a vivid memory from my childhood of drops of rain on a red metal chair with a border of white flowers and more generally the sense of freshness after a rainstorm and the electric stillness. But I cannot describe the sensation of the colors themselves.

In art and architecture, there is a sense of creation out of a visual silence. Andre Malraux in the *Voices of Silence* published in 1953 grapples with the concept of how great art and sculpture of the past can break through the silence of centuries to reach

us with understanding of its intentions. It is my feeling that although the “voices” of art and sculpture are the same whether seen in our times or in the times past, these voices are saying different things to the observer depending upon the century of observation. Certainly the iconography of the medieval period displayed in art and in the stained glass windows of the cathedrals portrays though its “voice” an emotional content that we have not had the environmental milieu to appreciate. For Picard, images such as these remind man of *“life before the coming of language”*. It is my experience as I walk through the galleries of a museum that the silence that is ever present even in the most crowded galleries tends to minimize the “voices” within the paintings.

Picard in his book on silence noted that in the past when silence was “a more active influence than noise” there was an importance attributed to silent omens: the silent flight of birds, the appearance of clouds in the sky and the other “silent motions of nature”.

The architect Louis I. Kahn, in his book *Silence and Light* contrasted silence as the immeasurable with light as the measurable. Architecture for him was the threshold between silence and light, as for Picard the world of myth lies between silence and language. In some sense, we get this feeling in some of the surrealistic paintings of Chirico where shadows starkly demarcate the emptiness of space and the concrete structures. Kahn equates silence in the development of architecture as an ambience out of which light and structure are developed, containing in itself a desire to be. *“All material in nature, the mountains and the streams and the air and we, are made of Light which has been spent, and this crumpled mass called material casts a shadow, and the shadow belongs to Light”*.

Again we see a reflection in the poetry of TS Eliot, from the *Hollow Men*:

Between the desire and the spasm...

Between the potency

And the Existence

Falls the Shadow

For Max Picard, the Pyramids *“seem like fortifications, built by silence for itself when it retired from the earth; from which silence can conquer the earth again some day... The silence of the stars look down upon them and casts a spell on them”*.

As night descends upon us, if we listen carefully, we can hear the shadows of silence amidst the budding leaves, and between the lapping of waves. And so we end this disquisition, not with a bang but a wimper.

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