

Introduction

THE ANCIENT Greeks had a culture of the spoken word. The use of *logos*, Aristotle writes, “pertains to man more than the use of the body.”¹ The spoken word was everywhere: in the theater, in the assembly, in ritual settings. Experiences that are normally silent for us were normally vocal for a Greek, at least in the archaic and classical periods. We usually enjoy poetry in privacy, in solitude; the Greeks enjoyed poetry in performance, as collective audiences rather than as individuals. We read more, they heard more. Reading itself was a vocal act. So were praying and mourning.

How does silence resonate against this vocal background? My study seeks to answer this question. Scholars have occasionally paid attention to the meanings of silence within a single author, genre, or social practice (especially religious rituals), but here I hope to establish general principles through comparative readings of a variety of different texts.

It is now widely accepted that certain notions that we would tend to conceive as universal and immutable are in fact culturally specific.² Silence is one of them. To give just one example, among the Western Apaches silence is expected, and even ritualized, in situations in which the social actors perceive contact as ambiguous and unpredictable, especially when two persons meet for the first time or after a long separation; in such contexts, silence betokens the difficulty of finding a new equilibrium.³ Nothing could be more alien to us: can we conceive of a mother who would not speak to her son for days after a yearlong separation?

Precisely because silence is culturally specific, its usage within a given society may be misunderstood by strangers. For instance, the proverbial reserve of the Finns turns out to be a problem in international meetings; foreigners less inclined to silence consider it as a lack of involvement.⁴ In a multicultural country like the United States of America, one can witness opposite ways of interpreting silence even at a dinner party. In observing the behavior of a heterogeneous group gathered for a Thanksgiving dinner at her house, Deborah Tannen noticed that New York Jews cannot stand lulls in conversation whereas Californians and British regard them as a sign of politeness.⁵

¹ *Rhetoric* 1.1355b1–2.

² As far as the Greeks are concerned, we owe this advance to Louis Gernet and his disciples, especially Jean-Pierre Vernant. Cf. most recently, Vernant 1996.

³ Cf. Basso 1970.

⁴ Lehtonen and Sajavaara 1985.

⁵ Tannen 1985.

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No generalization then can be safely applied to the notion of silence. Yet this has not always been true in the case of ancient Greece. Authors of earlier studies on this topic took for granted that their own experience of silence could be extended to the Greeks.⁶ An important exception is the collective book *The Regions of Silence: Studies in the Difficulty of Communicating*,⁷ which relies on modern methods of analysis to interpret a vast range of cultural manifestations such as myth, historiography, and medical writings.

If silence is a culturally specific notion, its meanings may be expected to change not only from civilization to civilization, but also within the same civilization across time. For this reason, I concentrate my inquiry on the archaic and classical periods. I am indeed convinced that a mapping of the values of silence in the Hellenistic and Greco-Roman world would produce, broadly speaking, a fairly different picture.⁸ The decline of the polis with its emphasis (at least in principle) on verbal participation, a growing fascination with solitude and retreat, the spreading of silent modes of worship along with an increasing speculative interest in silence—all these factors make it doubtful that Greece, in these later times, is fully entitled to the name “land of logos.”

Conversely, the archaic and classical periods share many features with regard to the practice and conceptualization of silence. For this reason, I have adopted a thematic approach. After all, poems as ancient as Homeric epic still constituted a mainstay of education in fifth-century Athens. I have therefore encouraged texts of different origins (and, within the limited time frame of this study, of different periods) to talk to each other about silence, in the hope of identifying patterns of perception and of reducing the risk of fragmentation that a strictly chronological organization would entail. For instance, six chapters divide the treatment of the *Iliad* from that of the *Odyssey*. Given that the two epics present striking differences in their interpretation of silence, I might have chosen to read them face to face to emphasize and explain these differences. Instead, I have situated the *Odyssey* at the beginning of a debate that develops in later periods, especially in fifth-century Athens, where Odysseus becomes the mythic locus for moral concerns about the legitimacy of cunning silence.

Obviously, a study of silence in classical Greece cannot rely on the direct evidence of fieldwork. The inquirer cannot roam about the streets of an

⁶ Cf., in the domain of religion, Casel 1919 and Greene 1938 (cf. *infra* ch. 1). Likewise, studies on silence in Greek tragedy have not always avoided anachronism: cf. *infra* ch. 5.

⁷ Edited by Maria Grazia Ciani and originally published under the title *Le regioni del silenzio. Studi sui disagi della comunicazione*. (Padova, 1983).

⁸ I have made exceptions when this is not the case: for instance, the Hippocratic writings have been treated as a corpus because they do not seem to show significant differences in the interpretation of pathological silence.

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ancient city measuring the pace of a conversation or asking “how do you experience silence?” Because of the nature of our documents, we cannot hope to map all the functions and meanings of silence in classical Greece. Furthermore, we cannot circumvent a concentration on Athens and its literature. This notorious problem is especially serious for a student of silence because the Spartans, and not the Athenians, were famous for their silent behavior. It is true that we do have sources (mostly anecdotal) about the Spartans’ high esteem of silence and their celebrated verbal conciseness; but our information (at least for the classical period) comes from Athenian authors who were generally critical of their own city.

The quality of the texts at our disposal also poses problems. Although I have occasionally worked with inscriptions and iconographical material, almost all the documents available for a study of silence in classical Greece are literary. The majority of these texts have a high level of sophistication, which requires detailed analysis and prevents them from being treated like mere sources. Nevertheless, what seems high literature to us was a part of Greek culture in a larger sense. *L’art pour l’art* is not a Greek ideal. Moreover, in the case of Greek literature the “tyranny of the genres” limits the free expression of the individual. By focusing on the genre as a whole rather than on single texts, and by resorting continuously to comparative readings of texts of different origins and purposes (for instance, tragic plays and medical files), we may hope to avoid mistaking idiosyncrasies for shared patterns of thought.

Another problem related to the nature of our evidence is equally disturbing: how far can we believe what the Greeks said about themselves if our aim is to understand behaviors and modes of perception? What the Greeks said about themselves—especially given the quality, often public, of their statements—does not necessarily coincide with what they actually did. For instance, Athenian authors tend to deny, or at least to disregard the practice of secrecy by their democratic polis. But this omission does not allow us to conclude that secrecy was not practiced in reality.⁹ In contrast to the Italian states in the Renaissance, where a flourishing of pamphlets on silence, secrecy, and dissimulation occurred in keeping with the political methods of princes and dukes,¹⁰ democratic Athens could not easily come to terms with a type of behavior that contradicted its advertised image of the “open” city.

For this reason, I have not limited my study to what the Greeks said about silence. Instead of relying on the maxims about silence that we find scattered in compendia and treatises dated from the Greco-Roman period

⁹ I discuss this issue in chapter 8.

¹⁰ One such eulogy of silence is the *Descriptio Silentii* by Celio Calcagnini, a professor of classics and a diplomat at the court of the Estense in Ferrara (cf. Nigro 1992).

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onwards,¹¹ I have tried to interpret what the Greeks did—and did not do—with it. For absences are as important as presences. To give just one example: The absence of empty scenes from Greek drama, in conjunction with other cultural manifestations in which sounds equally circulate without pauses, points to a widespread perception of silence as an abnormal phenomenon while sound seems to be the norm.

In chapter 1, I show that it is wrong to generalize the experience of religious silence across time, space, and different ritual practices. More specifically, I draw a contrast between a notion of the ineffable, in keeping with the worshipper's presence before an ineffable god (as in Christianity), and that of a taboo or interdiction, which aptly defines the experience of religious silence in most Greek rituals. From a survey of these rituals we can see how silence is constantly associated with specific behaviors and bodily postures: the silent person is seated, immobile, veiled, and often refrains from eating. This representation, which suggests the existence of a "code of silence," can be traced back to Homeric epic.

Chapter 2 is concerned with the representation of silence in the *Iliad*. The world of the *Iliad* is pervasively vocal: piercing shouts carry the warriors' strength and threats afar; Zeus fills the sky and the earth with his "wide voice" and sends an all-embracing utterance, *Ossa*, to gather all the heroes. In the assembly, speakers pour forth their sonorous voices in an untiring flow of words. The very act of "answering," insofar as it is conceived as an exchange (*ameibomai*), points to the same model of a continuous, uninterrupted verbal flow. Within the context of these vocal and verbal dynamics, silence marks a form of block; it is an anti-heroic behavior, one that befits the anonymous, voiceless multitude. By contrast, heroes speak even in the imminence of death to perpetuate the vocal memory of their deeds.

In chapter 3, I shift from the untiring voice of the hero to the equally untiring voice of the poet, who claims to be the enemy of silence as much as he claims to be the builder of memory and glory. Taking Pindar as the main focus of analysis, I study the opposition between silence and the voice as a poetic medium, and in particular, the ways in which silence, the ultimate threat for the poet's voice in an aural culture, is appropriated by this same voice as a tool for its own creative activity.

Chapter 4 also deals with the rhetorical exploitation of silence, this time by the Athenian orators. The frequent recourse to *praeteritio* ("I shall not speak about such and such") helps them shape an ideal image of themselves by showing their preoccupation with the limits of free speech and by

¹¹ Cf., e.g., Plutarch's *Concerning Talkativeness*, and the sections devoted to silence in Pollux's *Onomasticon* (second century A.D.) and Stobaeus' *Florilegium* (fifth century A.D.).

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asserting their moderation, respectfulness, and calm demeanor. Conversely, within the vocal context of the assembly the speaker's actual silence fails to be understood as a mark of oratorical charisma just as the actual silence of the audience fails to be understood as an orderly behavior.

Following on the opposition between "spoken" and "acted" silence, in chapter 5 I treat the staging of silence in the theater. In contrast to more recent traditions, in Greek drama silent characters demand verbal focalization in order to move to the foreground. Greek theater rejects the void and instead favors a continuity of sound. Consequently, we should resist the temptation of imagining long silences on stage, all the more so since Greek theater partakes of the wider cultural tendency to associate the unsaid with the unseen.

In chapter 6, I move from the staging of silence to its significance for the dramatic action, following the interpretations that the tragic characters themselves give to their choice of speech or silence. Unlike prophets, who show their superior knowledge by choosing silence only when silence is in agreement with the will of the gods, humans who do not see think that by their silence they can stop the unfolding of their fate. They cling to silence in the foolish hope of suppressing a word inscribed in the divine order, a word that no human silence could ever hold back.

Chapter 7 revolves around the most prominent dimension of silence in Greek culture: its uncanny heaviness. Such emphasis on the ominous dimension of silence recurs not only in tragedy, but also in narratives as diverse as the legends that surround the stillness of midday, scientific explanations of natural catastrophes, and medical files. In particular, both the tragic repertory and the medical corpus ascribe silence as a stubborn and self-destructive behavior to the feminine world, while men speak even on the threshold of self-inflicted death.

In chapter 8, I study silence as an essential feature of both cunning intelligence and endurance, and try to show how Odysseus, the mythic avatar of the silent hero, functions as the barometer of a significant shift in the valuation of this behavior. As opposed to Homeric epic, later interpretations of Odysseus' silences shatter their original complexity by reducing them either to manifestations of a crooked mind or to expressions of an enduring soul. On the one hand, tragedy condemns Odysseus' silent schemes in keeping with a widespread ideological rejection of ruse and secrecy, whereas philosophers, on the other hand, heighten the moral side of Odysseus' silences by effacing their ties with deceptive deeds.

The picture that emerges from this brief summary may seem to lack a center. Indeed, any study of silence risks being scattered and simply descriptive insofar as its object appears too variegated to be squeezed into a classificatory grid. The complexity of the phenomenon silence, however, has not prevented me from finding recurrent features and patterns of

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perceptions. The very existence in Greece of a “code of silence” that involves the body and pervades cultural manifestations as diverse as religious rituals, Homeric epic, drama, and medical texts, points to a shared tendency to associate an absence of words with specific gestures and postures; an association, in turn, which suggests that for the Greeks silence was a highly formalized behavior, much more so than it is for us.