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Reclaiming the Tacit Dimension

The odor of silence is so old .

—O. W. De L. Milosz

The goal of this book is to authenticate silence as a mode of knowing. As such, I am arguing, silence is a condition of emptiness that is, paradoxically, full.

This concept of silence as a mode of knowing conflicts with the current Western perception of silence as a condition of annihilation. Particularly in the wake of poststructuralist theory, the concept of silence has become synonymous with psychic death. In such theories, silence is most often represented as a condition the speaking subject must overcome, an abyss or lack that inhibits one's power to make meaning. Poststructuralist interpretation often positions language against silence as a means of avoiding such a nihilistic state. The writings of Foucault and Blanchot, for instance, include frequent reference to "gaps" and silences in a discourse; many Western interpretations of their work, then, conceive of these silences as threatening the endless play of meanings of words themselves.

However, the West's perception of silence as a negative condition is not limited to current interpretations of poststructuralist theory. We can, in fact, trace the mistrust of silence in the writings of classical rhetoric, particularly in the theories of Plato and Aristotle. Beyond the distrust classical rhetoric places on the condition of silence itself, current distrust is largely due to the impact of classical philosophy on the postmodern sensibility, particularly in Plato's rendering of an ideal, unchanging reality that lies outside the domain of language. This ontological status he grants to reality is, to the postmodern sensibility, fraught with problems, particularly the stratification that this elevation of a concept of reality may yield. With this stratification comes a social and political hierarchization that often

disenfranchises speaking subjects from the power to make meaning. In the wake of poststructuralist concerns, the contemporary reader understandably rejects Plato's concept of an ontological reality separate from language. Furthermore, to her,¹ an Eastern mystical concept of an "ultimate" reality that lies in a realm of silence too closely resembles an ideal Platonic universe. Thus, commensurate with a poststructuralist rethinking of classical rhetoric, Eastern concepts of silence, too, have become suspect.

By insisting that there is an ideal condition distinct from language, Plato not only separates language and reality, but also suggests that the condition of silence has a mysterious aspect, an aspect to which language users may not have access. This inaccessibility has deepened the West's mistrust of mysticism, casting it as an elite practice that again privileges only the fortunate few. A poststructuralist rhetorical position, what C. H. Knoblauch, in "Rhetorical Constructions: Dialogue and Commitment," might refer to as "dialogical" or "sociological" (127), locates "language," as Knoblauch describes, "as a social practice rooted, as are all social practices, in material and historical process" (134). Such a position suggests that if people can come to know their world through acts of language, and thus gain power, then relinquishing this capacity without access to an alternative mode of knowing can lead to a debilitation of meaning-making capabilities. This lack of access to the power to construct knowledge can lead to a social and political disenfranchisement in which the speaking subject is silenced and, consequently, disempowered.

This inaccessibility to power is a concern shared as well by several contemporary feminist critiques. Much feminist criticism casts silence, as in the sociological argument, as an obstacle to meaning making; the feminist critique, furthermore, extends more specifically to cast silence as a condition that the patriarchy consciously or unconsciously manipulates in order to maintain male privilege. Silence, according to Xavière Gauthier for example, is a "mutism" that enables men "to speak and write," removing women from "the historical process" (162), a point similarly expressed by Tillie Olsen and others. Adrienne Rich, in this vein, rightly argues that such a removal from historical and cultural contexts results from a "culture of manipulated passivity" (14), a "deadly 'radical passivity of men' (Daly's phrase) that has given us an essentially passive-voiced dominant culture" (13).

Women need, as Gauthier, Olsen, Rich, and others note, to *break* the silence that has for so long disenfranchised them. As Rich argues, "Today women are talking to each other, recovering an oral culture,

telling our life-stories, reading aloud to one another the books that have moved and healed us, analyzing the language that has lied about us, reading our own words aloud to each other" (13).

Beyond poststructuralist and feminist concerns, Aristotle's development of Plato's rhetorical theories in the direction of increased rationalism and categorization has served to deepen this Western distrust of practices, such as those of meditative silence, that appear to have an open disregard for "rationalistic" thinking. Aristotle's schemata, although highly problematic to what Knoblauch describes as objectivist, expressionist, and sociological rhetorical positions,² suggests to the classical rationalist sensibility empowerment in language acts steeped in categorical renderings. Eastern concepts, on the other hand, insist upon the condition of ineffability with regard to the mystical state, and this insistence conflicts with Aristotle's philosophical attempt to articulate all knowing of the world and to effect this articulation through a naming of difference.

Furthermore, the philosophies of objectivism, which themselves pose problems with the classical model of an ideal reality lying outside the domain of language, also cast silence as a condition of annihilation. Rather than positioning reality as a condition separate from language, as does the classical tradition, objectivist philosophy—most apparent in the current influence of Descartes on modern science—professes that one can indeed know reality through sense impressions and the conceptual translation of these sense impressions. Descartes' axiom "*I think, therefore I am*" (24) stands as a formidable opponent to mystical practices. Objectivist reliance on conceptual understanding and sensory observation as the means for accumulating an ever-increasing knowledge of the world, then, is suspicious of meditative practices that appear to make meaning through a condition of nonsensory and thus nonconceptual awareness.

Expressionist rhetorical positions, most apparent in the philosophies of the "Self"³ in the romantic tradition, are more sympathetic to the concepts of intuitive understanding advocated in practices of silence. However, expressionist celebration of the individual spirit finds in mysticism's erasure of self a concept of absence difficult to accept. Consequently, a philosophy of the development of Self through individual acts of expressivity perceives concepts of a nonself and a silencing of expression as problematic.

However, this casting of silence by the West as a negative condition is largely erroneous. When we examine Eastern mystical philosophy more closely, as well as the particular meaning the practice of

silence makes, we find a generative capacity to make meaning that is every bit as valuable as the meaning the practice of discourse yields. Furthermore, in examining Eastern practices, we also locate a significant limitation in the Western mind: the reluctance to conceive of a condition of awareness not rooted in categorization and distinction. Because of this reluctance, I argue, the West has misinterpreted the meaning of silence, and therefore its casting of silence as a negative condition—specifically the *practice* and *awareness* of silence—is misguided.

The West's reluctance to conceive of an awareness unbound by categorization is most apparent in the rhetoric of classicism and objectivism, which begin from a point of binary distinction to which the East does not subscribe. However, it is also present in sociological, expressionist, and feminist ideology. For the classical rhetorician, reality and language are separate. For the objectivist, conceptual thinking stands opposed to the realm of intuition. Theories of sociological rhetoric, although more complex than classical and objectivist depictions of reality, are also implicated in this reluctance; by often positioning language against silence, they too admit a dichotomization into their theories of knowledge. Although expressionist theory is more sympathetic to silence—most apparent in the American Transcendental movement—its appropriation of Eastern concepts of Self to reinforce concepts of originality and individuality attests to romanticism's inability to fully grasp the complexity of the reciprocity and nondistinctiveness that accompany practices of silence.

Finally, although feminist theories in their most radical arguments expose what Hélène Cixous describes as the "dual, *hierarchized* oppositions" of language itself (91) and even, at times, argue for what Claudine Hermann calls the "respectable value" of "the void" (169) (thus, perhaps, coming closest in temperament to the nondualistic aspect of Eastern mysticism), they too are implicated in the reluctance to conceive of an awareness unbound by categorization. This is, perhaps, most apparent in the manner in which feminist theory, like various interpretations of the sociological position, situates silence and language as not only distinct but conflictive.

However, this feminist positioning of language against silence is understandable and, I might argue, even necessary—at least with regard to certain *aspects* of silence—given the current and historical marginalization of women's voices, as well as those voices of ethnicity suppressed at the cultural and economic borders of an Anglo-, patriarchal sensibility. If marginalized populations do not speak, contest,

and argue, their voices are destined to go unheard, and all of culture suffers the consequences of this aspect of silence.

At the same time, this conflictive stance toward silence that many feminist theorists posit is perhaps more indicative of the lack of understanding in Western culture as to the meaning of the condition of silence itself, as depicted by mystical philosophies. Gauthier, Olsen, Rich, and others rightly argue for the voicings of women and the suspicion of discourses (including conscious and unconscious imposed silences) that prevent such articulation. However, in examining the values of mystical silence and its particular practices, I am speaking not of "the unnatural thwarting of what struggles to come into being, but cannot," as Olsen contests, but rather of those "natural silences" she commends, "that necessary time for renewal, lying fallow, gestation, in the natural cycle of creation" (6).

These natural silences, as Olsen implies, are not gender-specific, nor are they in conflict with the values of feminist and ethnic culture. They are, in fact, avenues for deepening the authority of one's voice and vision and, when practiced, cannot only grant all populations—marginal and otherwise—greater access to and facility with privileged discourses, but can even affect the sensibilities of those currently in power in ways that are more reciprocal and nurturing rather than hierarchical and conflictive. These natural silences are not opposed to language but help shape it in dynamic and generative ways.

Hence, the categorizing tendencies of several major strains of Western rhetorical and critical theory—which position silence against language—cannot adequately grasp the mentality of the Eastern mystic who, in the final analysis, does not perceive difference in "opposition."

This observation of Western inability to fully grasp Eastern concepts is, of course, nothing new. However, with regard to the particular interpretation of mysticism to which much of the West subscribes, it is significant nonetheless. Indeed, the texts of Eastern philosophy appear to the Western sensibility binary themselves in that they repeatedly distinguish between the acts of language and silence. In this categorizing capacity lies both a similarity and a difference between East and West. The categories exist in the theories of each. However, there is a significant difference between the philosophies of the East and those of the West with regard to the perception of the condition of these distinctions. It has to do with the concept of paradox that is central to nearly all theories of Eastern mysticism, most notably those from which I will draw for my current analysis: Hinduism (partic-

ularly the philosophies and practices of yoga), Buddhism, and Taoism.

Paradox, in the West, is often conceived of as a condition based in conflict. Indeed, the etymology of "paradox" comes from the Greek *paradoxos*, "incredible, conflicting with expectation," suggesting opposition, particularly with regard to the temperament of the condition, "conflict." Furthermore, within Western discourse, we find a privileging of the rationally "expected," while paradox is reserved for special, often aesthetic concerns, such as those of poetry, visual art, or music.

However, paradox to the Eastern mystic is neither "incredible" nor illogical. In fact, because of the ineffable quality of the mystical experience, Eastern philosophy often privileges the use of paradox over a more conceptually-oriented discourse as perhaps the only way it can attempt to communicate the dimensions of its nonconceptual awarenesses (Stace 253). If we examine the etymology of *paradoxos* even further, we find that it comes from *para*, "beyond," and *doxa*, "opinion," which comes from *dokein*, "to think." Since practitioners of silence claim to achieve mystical consciousness only in the realm "beyond" conceptual thought, the paradoxical status of mystical awareness, to them, appears quite logical.

As I said, the distinction between language and silence certainly exists in the philosophies of both East and West. However, because Eastern concepts begin from a perception that privileges paradoxicalness, the condition of opposition itself is also significantly different in Eastern philosophy from that of the West. Opposition, to the Eastern mystic, is a paradoxical condition in which competing tendencies reside in a state of simultaneity: they are always at the same time separate and united, this and that. The ancient Sanskrit *mantra*, *ham-sa*, as mantric scholar Sir John Woodroffe notes, literally means *I am He/She* (*The Garland of Letters* 113, 165–74). Therefore, to the Eastern mystical mind, the Self is always at the same time both itself and other.

This condition of simultaneity is difficult, if not impossible, for the rational mind to grasp. To understand it, ultimately, is to embrace the concept of paradox as a genuine mode of knowing. To directly experience it is more complex and is the goal of Eastern meditative practices. This is the point from which Eastern philosophy begins and which at the same time presents an obstacle to Western rational understanding. To begin from such a perception of opposition, and to actually cultivate paradox through highly refined techniques as do the meditative philosophies of the East, is to posit that such distinctions

as those between silence and language are not distinct in the way that conceptual thought renders them. To the Eastern sensibility, concepts of opposition and distinction are conditions not of conflict but of reciprocity. Competing tendencies, such as those of *yin* and *yang* that we encounter in Chinese Taoist philosophy, do not oppose but rather complement one another. Thus, opposition as a condition of conflict does not exist in Eastern mystical philosophy but is a rhetorical construction through which the West often misinterprets this philosophy.

This concept of reciprocity, common to nearly all mystical philosophies of the East—especially Hinduism, Buddhism, and Taoism—is also a rhetorical construction, but one free of the bifurcation inhabiting Western rationality. Eastern philosophy, consequently, does not begin from a sensibility of distinction that seeks unification, but speaks from the awareness of unification itself. It perceives experience first from the vista of “the thousand-petaled lotus” of which Hindu yoga and Mahāyāna Buddhism speak, or perhaps from what Emerson calls “the flower of the mind” (319). Because of this, the language of mystics often sounds irrational and inherently dualistic to Westerners when it attempts to translate unified mystical experience into a discourse bound by pervasive binary constructs.

The examination of such a sensibility from the perspective of the rational mind, as I propose in this book, has its obvious advantages and shortcomings. It is my attempt to grant fresh significance to the concept of silence in the West and, in doing so, to authenticate its practices and awareness as a legitimate mode of knowing. Since my goal is Western authenticity, a rational discourse seems appropriate as a means of recasting the status of silence from a nihilistic to a generative condition; however, in the context of a theory of reciprocity, the advantage of appealing to rational understanding also contains a shortcoming. Although the categorizing capacity of discourse can certainly shed new understanding on the concept of silence, it also has its limitations: in the final analysis, the mystical awareness is ineffable. My goal, then, is not to communicate a full description, much less an evocation, of the mystical experience. In describing the paradoxical and interpretative aspect of the practice of silence, I will attempt to authenticate it as a mode of knowing, and in this resuscitation reclaim, for modern discourse theory, the tacit dimension by locating it as a *rhetoric*.

By *rhetoric*, I mean a symbolic act that is a way of making meaning. Rhetoric, as I will use the term, is a capacity to make meaning that is not necessarily dependent upon vocal or written utterance. From this perspective one can speak of multiple rhetorics—a rhetoric

of discourse, a rhetoric of music, a rhetoric of dance, even, for instance, a rhetoric of shoemaking. Rhetoric, then, as I will use the term, is a way of constructing knowledge through acts of symbolic interpretation, not simply methods of "public discourse" as the term has come to more narrowly connote, as a result, in part, of the influence of classical philosophy and techniques of oration. In light of my use of the term, I will argue that silence, too, is a rhetoric, and thus a way of making meaning.

It is my argument that silence is an authentic mode of knowing. Because of this, my reclaiming of the tacit dimension does not preclude logic nor seek to privilege the irrational. My aim is similar to Robert Pirsig's in his description of "Quality" in *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*: I want to "expand the nature of rationality" by broadening its potential through examination of its relationship with the "irrational," so to speak (163).

Because I am arguing for a more expansive perception of rationality, I have chosen not to claim the awareness of silence as irrational since this term implies an understanding that is somehow distinct from that of rationality. Rather, I will refer to two particular modes of understanding: *conceptual* and *nonconceptual*. As I will use the terms, conceptual understanding or awareness will mean those perceptions formed through process of thought. Nonconceptual will mean those perceptions that are not bound by the categorizing capacity of intellect or thought. By not equating nonconceptualization with irrationality, I hope to suggest a more complex view of rationality.

As an authentic mode of knowing, silence is not opposed to language, which I define as the human capacity for vocal and written utterance. Rather, silence and language act in a reciprocal fashion in the construction of knowledge. Although I will emphasize two central aspects of this reciprocity, it is not my intent to present a complete investigation of the dimensions of this reciprocity between silence and language. Rather, in emphasizing these two central aspects I hope to open the way for a reconsideration of the more complex dimensions this reciprocity suggests. I will attempt this by validating the domain of silence, itself, as a generative condition, claiming it as a symbolic form and a rhetoric.

In order to demonstrate my theory, I will first examine the significance of the awareness of silence and its concept of change through a discussion of the pedagogical implications of nonconceptual understanding in one area of practice, that of the role of writing consultants in writing across the curriculum programs. In so doing, I will discuss the connections between the awareness of silence and

dialogical theory. Then, I will examine the ways classical rhetorical theory, objectivism, and Western mystical practices have contributed to the current mistrust of silence in the West. Following this analysis, I will discuss, as an analogue to the condition of silence, the significance of nonconceptual awareness in various expressions of poetics, with an eye to modern and contemporary developments. In the final three chapters, I will explore various dimensions of one major constituent of silence, namely, paradox, and with it the symbolic complexity of nonconceptual awareness. I will render—in the process of this discussion of paradox—a more reciprocal understanding of the construction of knowledge derived from practices of silence and offer an interpretation of silence compatible, in large part, with poststructuralist theory; therefore, I will suggest further validation for the connections between the awareness of silence and contemporary dialogical theories of composing that correspond to poststructuralism and, thus, inform concepts of curricular change in ways that are increasingly fluid and highly unstable.

I would like to mention one further point before proceeding with my discussion, particularly in reference to my analysis of “the East.” The philosophies of the East are as multiple and diverse as the cultures, societies, and histories that inform them. India alone, perhaps the cradle of Eastern philosophy, is presently comprised of numerous philosophical, mystical, and religious traditions. These range from rudimentary cults, which may foreground a primitive, pantheistic fertility or idol worship, to ritualized religious practices proper; to highly refined techniques of psychospiritual mysticism; to various sects and numerous permutations of the aforementioned.

Primary among these traditions are Hinduism, the most dominant, as well as Buddhism, Islam, Sikhism, and Jainism—all of which exist side by side, sometimes comfortably and sometimes less so. The differences among and even *within* these great religious and philosophical traditions by themselves attest to the complexity of Eastern philosophy and the difficulty of generalizing about India and its “philosophical stance,” let alone that of “the East.”

In the midst of this religious variety, not only India but the East in general (perhaps longer than anywhere else on earth) has a continuous and to a large extent shared tradition of mystical practice, *within* various religions, that dates back thousands of years. *Mystical practice*, as I will use the term, constitutes only one aspect of religious thought and ritual, in both East and West, and suggests particular contemplative practices that seek to interiorize consciousness in order to contact and have a *direct* experience of the divine ground of being. As James

Moffett notes, many mystical traditions maintained the more purely spiritual practices of such direct contact even when the religious traditions themselves did not; as in the cases of yoga (Hinduism) and Gnosticism (Christianity) (*Coming on Center* 149). However, this kind of mystical orientation, as E. A. Burttt describes, has had a more minor impact on such significant world religions as Christianity, Islam, and Confucianism, and a more central role in Taoism, as well as in the great religions of India, including Hinduism and Buddhism (16).

Therefore, largely marginal in the Western church (Moffett, *Coming on Center* 149) and even at times considered heretical, mystical practice in the East (although occasionally eyed with suspicion within more mainstream religious practice) has had a deeper and more lasting impact on religious thought. In the process of its more sanctioned development and longevity, it has, consequently, not only influenced the religions of the East to a large extent but has maintained many similarities across various mystical traditions.

Throughout the East, the mystical practices of Hindus, Buddhists, and Taoists, for instance—to name three significant mystical traditions—bear remarkable similarities. The specific rituals and practices of these various mystical traditions indeed often differ, no doubt a result of local as well as broader cultural and historical influences; however, in general, the philosophy and enactment of contemplation is certainly more similar than distinct. Furthermore, although individual meditative practices and metaphysical doctrines themselves may differ, as well as philosophical interpretation of sacred texts and techniques, Eastern contemplative practices still share such deep connections in their basic tenets and technical enactment as to suggest a thread of philosophical commonality. This commonality centers primarily on two concepts: the meaning of the condition of materiality and the significance of paradox—both of which are central to my current enterprise.

The first shared tenet is that the material world as we know it is illusory, and that a condition of ever-new, ever-changing bliss awaits the practitioner of meditation who can cultivate a heightened sense of interiority by quelling perception of and attachment to outward sensory experience. The second is that at the core of all experience lies a condition of paradox. This paradox manifests in quite similar ways among Eastern meditative traditions, particularly as concepts of an “empty-fullness,” an atemporal “time” or condition of simultaneity, or an experience of reciprocity between inner and outer realms. Therefore, although Eastern mystical traditions may differ in the specifics of their practices and beliefs, their goals and underlying philoso-

phies are quite similar: the quest for a heightened interiority, a direct experience of “cosmic consciousness,” in which meditators are free of attachment to the solidity and illusion of materiality so that they may experience a “divine” cosmic ground of being, most often described as “bliss.”

For the purposes of this present analysis of silence, I will claim as my philosophical ground in discussing the basic precepts of “the East” the teachings of the nondualist (*advaita*) yogic tradition of Hinduism, a system of philosophy and meditative techniques (both physical and psychospiritual), which I have studied and practiced for several years. Specifically, I will emphasize the yogic teachings within *Advaita-Vedanta*—radical (or absolute) nondualism—the dominant school of Hinduism.⁴

Although the East is rich in meditative traditions, we find, perhaps, in the system of yoga one of the most explicit renderings of specific techniques to cultivate silence and heighten the practitioner’s experience of nonconceptual modes of knowing. As a dominant aspect of Hinduism, yoga generally expounds various physical and mental disciplines for achieving Self-realization, or enlightenment, a condition in which the practitioner has a direct experience of unification between herself and the processes of the universe. The description of some of these specifics, then, may in some ways more clearly concretize the practice of silence for the reader. Thus, in discussing the tenets of the East, I will often be emphasizing the yogic tradition of Hinduism, specifically, *Advaita-Vedanta*. However, I will also draw extensively upon elements of those mystical philosophies that are most closely aligned in purpose with Hinduism, and particularly yoga—those philosophies that share common concepts regarding knowledge, as well as silence as the ground of such meaningfulness. In this regard, I will be drawing from Taoism, Buddhism (especially some of the Mahāyāna, or Northern, schools such as Zen and Tibetan Buddhism), and Tantrism (a distinct school of obscure origin within both Hinduism and Buddhism, emphasizing the concept of *shakti*, or the feminine principle of divine experience, in both outer rituals of devotion and those of a more inner or symbolic nature).

In describing Eastern contemplative practices, I have, consequently, chosen not to limit my discussion to Hindu-yogic philosophy. For one thing, the yogic tradition, only one—albeit vital—aspect of Hinduism, is itself (as is Hinduism) diverse and varied. Furthermore, and perhaps more significantly, I have chosen not to limit my analysis to yoga, since drawing on the intersections between yoga and other meditative practices will often illuminate my points with

greater complexity and concreteness. Therefore, in discussing “the East” I will often be collapsing the distinctions between various Eastern meditative philosophies, foregrounding, instead, those central mystical concepts they share. An analysis of the fine lines of distinction between Eastern mystical practices, and even those of the yogic tradition alone, seems more appropriate for a book on comparative religion. Given the intent of my present investigation, focusing on the commonalities of the core tenets of Eastern mysticism, as I will do in this book, should more properly facilitate my goal: to authenticate silence as a mode of knowing and demonstrate its relevance for modern discourse theory and Western theories of composing.