

Introduction

Why did I write this book? It does not have a religious orientation or a meditative discipline to offer. It is not about rituals that aim to lift us up to a spiritual heaven. It is not primarily a scholarly book about what other people have said about silence. I want, rather, to speak of silence, often indirectly and in such ways as to let silence happen in our awareness undisturbed by objectification. I want to create poetic occasions whereby people might become more aware of silence pervading their lives and the world around them.

Why would I want to do that? People, including me most particularly, are able to become so stuck in the activities . . . the sounds and substances around us that we are not able to notice silence that accompanies activities, sounds, and substances . . . silence throughout the noise of a group of people at a party, silence with a wind blowing through trees, silence in our busy minds, silence of time. We can feel heavy, weighted with distractions, unaware of the ways attunements to silence can open us to dimensions of our lives that, although silence does nothing, can free us from the power of everyday affective bondages and boundaries. A friend of mine, when she felt overwhelmed with everything she *must* do now, would say, “there are too many things . . . just *too many things!*” No time to notice the silence in her life.

Attunements to silence often lighten the burden of those too many things, release the silent bonds that tie us down when our brains seem to be constantly busy with internal dialogues, with songs that frolic in our minds, unrelieved worries and anxieties, responsibilities, deadlines, games, debts, news, calls on our phones . . . always thinking of something or having something on our minds. I want to show that silence pervades spaces of sounds, permeates our bodies and the bodies and relations around us. It suffuses the earth and the sky. Silence is so much a part of

our lives that we are insensitive to it and insensitive to our insensitivity to it. I want to speak in such ways that what I call *telling silence* can happen *in* your and my awareness and that our awareness of silence can happen *in* silence as distinct to awareness about silence.

Awareness is an especially important word in this book, one about which I will have much more to say. Here I note that *awareness* as I use the word is immediate.¹ It happens unreflectively, not conceptually. Immediate awareness does not deliberate or ponder. It is neither objective nor subjective, and I will often use the middle voice formation, silence silencing, when I am speaking of immediate awareness in silence.²

This book encourages people to become *attuned* with silence in their lives and environments. I repeat for emphasis, it encourages us to become aware of silence *in* silence.³ I want to show that our lives and lives around us are porous in their happenings, often rather more diaphanous than dense in the pervasiveness of silence and in the absence of uninterrupted presence. I want to show that silence is not a thing, that our lives and our environments are infused with silence, and that awareness of it allows people to be attuned with themselves in their world, attuned with being alive in the insubstantiality of our experiences and the fragility that invests even the strengths of living beings inclusive of other than human lives.



A Short Excursus on the Word *Telling*

Telling in the sense I am using the word means affective disclosing, a revealing effect. *Telling* in this book has the connotation of *affective* and stresses an immediate, non-reflective disclosure. A telling occurrence is not necessarily peripheral in a given situation; it can touch in the heart of the matter. I will return often in the early fragments to the meaning of “telling” in connection with silence and awareness in silence.

1. I will speak of immediate awareness throughout the book. See “A Short Excursus About Immediate Awareness” in Fragment Fifteen for an extended discussion of it.

2. See the seventeenth fragment for an extended discussion of the middle voice.

3. In the course of the next several fragments I will elaborate the meaning of this phrase, awareness of silence *in* silence.



I structured this book by the use of fragments in my effort to “tell” of silence in a way that lets silence “tell” of itself.⁴ Fragment One, Fragment Two, and so forth. The book is fragmented in the sense that it has no continuing narrative that brings all the fragments together, no organized system of concepts with an architecture or an argument that defines the book as a whole. Although there are many stories in the book, the connections among them and among the fragments do not take the form of a continuous narrative. Indeed, were this book written as a carefully structured narrative, it—the book—would mislead readers and lose a sense for telling . . . for effectively disclosive . . . silence. The inclination to connect claims and subtopics logically like a strong argument, or to create a well-conceived system of concepts, or to build a set of ideas that is designed a bit like a well-laid-out city’s grid or a formal garden would make alertness to silence in its non-objectivity extremely difficult, if not impossible. Silence tells no stories. It “tells” of itself without narration. Silence “tells” itself with not a thing there to tell. So *what* I say, as what I say silently fades out *in* the telling, is often less important than what I don’t say, can’t say directly. The telling can happen when some poetic words, images, metaphors, intuitions, and their indirections clear an opening for the disclosure of silence silencing. My hope is that such indirections will encourage an intensified mindfulness of silence *in* silence.

“Indirections,” I said, that I hope “will encourage an intensified mindfulness of silence *in* silence.” *Poietic* thinking or poietic philosophy are the words that best describe this book’s approach in carrying out that hope. The approach has two primary emphases: poietic creation and silence silencing.

First, poietic creation. *Poiein* in Ancient Greek means *to make*. Its connotation suggests activities that bring into being something that did not previously exist and that will persist in unpredictable ways; one could speak of poietic activities that make—affect—differences in feelings with uncertain futures. Or one might say that an action resulted in certain

4. The fragments are part of this book’s poietic style about which I will say more. Philosophers like Jacques Derrida, Martin Heidegger, Søren Kierkegaard, and Friedrich Nietzsche use fragments to suit their particular purposes. I have my own purposes that were generated as I worked on awareness of silence and that are quite different from those of my respected predecessors.

effects.⁵ Poietic language and thought in this book function with creative interplays of imaginative, intuitive, and conceptual formations. The boundaries that poietic activities form are dynamic, porous, often fluid, and uncertain.

Second, poietic language in telling silence. Poietic language and thought in this book, hopefully, will incline people to let go of *what* the language is talking about and will incline them to let what the language is talking about reveal itself on its own, as it were. The hope is for people to release from objectification what is being talked about and to become aware *in* letting what they are talking about happen as *it* happens.

In both types of poietic activity, experiences of uncanniness, awe, anxiety, fear, uncertainty, and shock have importance equal with conceptual and imaginative formations. At its best, poietic language, thought, and activity are creative, practiced in releasing what is being talked about from objectification, and if fortune smiles, occasionally beautiful.

A final prefatory note on poietic language and activity. The poietic agents—the ones who speak and act—can themselves become poietic events who experience immediately their own transformations; they can live intransitively with awareness *in* a birthing process—perform the process, we might say—as they engage a threshold-occasion of bringing something new into the world or as they are aware of silences and silence silencing without objectification. The process itself then constitutes a poietic moment of transformation for agents who let go of their agency and the objects of their agency. Then people may feel silence *in* silence silencing—feel silence as silence “does” “its” own no-thing.

I will frequently use the term *silence silencing* to speak of silence in “its” unformed presence. Just silence. No identity. Not a thing. Silence happens silencing, we might say. Indeed, the book’s guiding issue is attunement with silence silencing, although I will often speak of particular silences that are defined by the circumstances in which they occur, such circumstances as the silence in a cave or in the kitchen. The guiding purpose of the book is to create moments that heighten and intensify the reader’s attunement with silence silencing. In such attunements, I believe that people might be inclined to question desires for unchanging and solid foundations that support established beliefs and values. Attunements to silence silencing and predispositions engendered by those attunements

5. Usually, affect is used as a verb and effect is used as a noun. I will also use the word *affect* in relation to feelings (affects).

might also diminish the power of those desires. They might incline people to affirm the silent volatility of the world around them, volatility that infuses their being and makes possible creativity as well as experiences of awe in the flow of lives, in the shifting, passing, often unpredictable lives of all creatures.

Inclinations toward unification are so powerful in most theoretical lineages and, I believe, so obscuring of the lives around us! Those inclinations tend to obscure silence silencing. Alertness to silence silencing can interrupt everything including the usually unchallenged value of unification. The universe, for example, when defined as all living things everywhere gives remarkable priority to “things.” Silence silencing does not unify or form wholes. “It” does not support images of “the” world or a universe as a whole thing of unified events. “It” harbors no secrets. Silence silencing harbors nothing. “It” is not an it. I will say a good bit about that throughout the book in language and thought that fall silent in awareness with silence silencing.

I engage many writers, poets, and artists in the course of the book, but not always because of what they say about silence. I engage many of these people, rather, because of the ways silence happens in what they say, paint, or build, how they form their expressions, and in the ways their works convey awareness of silence in silence (a phrasing about which I will have much more to say). There are many agendas in works about silence. Although I find some of the works of other authors helpful, many of the writings about silence do not seem to be attuned to silence silencing and have agendas quite different from mine. Silence, rather, is presented as an interesting subject, the absence of sound, an important thing to keep in mind, a fascinating object among other kinds of objects, a path to communion with Divinity.

Or silence is presented as something to cultivate, to bring peace of mind, release from the day’s distractions. I find at times, however, feelings of disorientation and discord much more helpful for awareness of silence silencing than peace of mind, a sense of clear orientation, or a sense that silence is something I can come to understand. I can feel estranged from silence by virtue of an orientation that is both normal and at home in my environment or feel estranged from myself and the world around me because of awareness in silence silencing. Silence silencing is not always a friend to normalcy or feeling settled and at home.

When the idea of writing a book on silence began to germinate, I was not entirely sure why I felt drawn to it. I could guess that my desire

arises out of my aging and increased awareness of death. But that would not be quite right. I came close to dying several times in my younger years due to illnesses and accidents. I worked in a medical school project on health-care delivery to terminally ill patients and their families in the early 1970s, participated in hospital rounds with doctors who attended severely, often terminally ill patients, and took part in the founding of Alive Hospice in Nashville, Tennessee. For several years I taught an undergraduate course called Death and Human Meaning, in which terminally ill people volunteered to come to classes during the semester and talk with us about the ways they were living with—engaging—their imminent death. I experienced my own mortality up close and personal many times, and awareness of dying as a part of my living is infused in my everyday sensibility. These experiences are alive in the ways they have influenced—deeply influenced—my thinking, and they have a significant role in shaping many of my attitudes and values. They play a usually quiet role in most of what I write and teach; and they will play an important role, sometimes quietly and sometimes, if not noisily, certainly intensely, in this book. But those experiences do not compose my primary motivation for writing about silence. When I become alert to silence, I do not usually feel inclined to think of death.

After cowriting with Nancy Tuana the book *Beyond Philosophy: Nietzsche, Foucault, Anzaldúa*, I considered for several months what I really wanted to write next. The importance of silence—the *question* of silence—appeared far more frequently in my books and articles than I had realized. Why the frequency? Why the silent draw now? Why was I so enticed by the question of silence? Further, the more I thought about silence and the roles it has in those books and articles, the more I also realized that I was not at all sure *how* I would write and think about silence now. How might I write and think about silence without turning silence into an object and thereby turning “it” into an image and losing attunement with silence? How might I write of silence in such a way as to let it be its own telling? Would I *interpret* silence? Could I write of silence non-interpretively? To explore the question of how silence might relate to interpretation, I wrote “Interpreting Silence?” for The North American Society for Philosophical Hermeneutics.⁶ Fragments Nine, Ten, Eleven, and Twelve are influenced by that article.

I became convinced that only “interpretation” by indirection is appropriate when the issue is silence. To *explain* silence would be in effect

6. Presented in October 2019 at the University of Oregon.

to flatten “it” out so that silence loses its strange elusiveness and seems conceptually clear, one kind of defined thing among other defined things. (The PIE root for the word “explain” is *pele*, to flatten, to make flat.) To flatten silence? To make silence plain and grasp it? To make silence a “clear,” well-conceived object so that we can *see* it? *See* silence? What became clear to me was that explanation and visually oriented approaches would not help us become more aware of silence. Further, *making* intelligible would be a misleading intention regarding silence. To make silence anything would be silently to miss silence. Perhaps hermeneutics, when it is understood as an *art* of interpreting, has some promise in speaking about . . . not speaking about silence but speaking about approaches to silence.⁷ I will take up this issue in Fragment Nine.

As I considered how to write this book, I read a variety of discussions about silence. I appreciated the quality of most of the scholarship and thought as the authors I read gave accounts of silence in other cultures, in religions, in peoples’ theoretical works, or as they wrote about why silence is important in our lives. I wanted, however, to write differently from what I read and to think differently from the way I had been thinking as I spoke of silence. “Something” was missing, “something” hovering beyond what I could conceive, “something” I could not quite reach. I could feel the lure of it. But I could not think it.

“Beyond what I could conceive.” To *conceive*, as I use the word, is to form a notion in a person’s mind, to *form* an idea, or to *take* something into one’s mind. To *convert* silence into a mental form? To *take* silence into my mind and *make* it into an ideal object, *a thing* of the mind? The limits of conceiving silence became the threshold for me to a different awareness, different from anything I had previously sensed. To conceive silence began to feel to me a violent, wrenching action. *What* is silence? Not a thing, not a what. What does silence silencing do? Nothing. I had not previously turned to the question “*How* does silence happen?” Not the question “What are the circumstances that define this particular silence?” But rather the question of silence beyond the borders that bind a silence in a place or situation. I needed an approach that is attuned with silence in silence’s happening, one that lets silence silencing tell of itself beyond conception, hearing, or seeing. The intransitive middle voice sense of the phrase, silence silencing, means that “silencing” does not have the active

7. The root word in *hermeneutics* is Hermes. The utterly disordered myths of Hermes and those of Metis will function in Fragment Nine as strange and unexpected guides on our way to the immediate sense of anomalous silence.

verbal sense of silencing something or someone by, for example, turning off the volume of sound or silencing a person who is talking too much. Nor is silencing the object of a transitive verb or a subject that receives an action (in a passive voice formulation). Instead, I could say clumsily, silence happens as silence . . . silence silencing. In the context of this book, speaking of the happening of silence is, *as it were*, a subjunctive contrary to fact. “It” “is” not a fact. When I speak of silence’s happening—of silencing—I speak in an irrealis mood. I say “as it were” as an irrealis adjective, a subjunctive mood that destabilizes the sense of temporal existence that the word *happening* conveys.⁸ Silence silencing is not a temporal happening. Elaboration of that statement will happen frequently in this book.

I want to develop language and conceptuality and to tell stories that are attuned with silence silencing and guided primarily by that affective attunement with silence silencing. What I want to say requires that I speak of silence without making silence the object of such an action as *attune*. So my intention is to be attuned with silence *in* silence, not, as it were, standing outside of silence and speaking sensitively about it.

I have said that silence silencing does not happen as a specific thing. To clarify that statement, I emphasize particularly the importance of recognizing *situated silences*, located silence like silence in the cellar, silence in the dark stillness of night, the silence of the one who will not speak. In situations like these, the circumstances mark the situated limits of a silence, give it a name particular to boundaries that mark it. Silence in the cellar, for example, is called *a* silence because the phrase, silence in the cellar, situates silence. Silence in the cellar, not in the garden.

When I speak of silence silencing, on the other hand, I am referring to silence as silence without boundaries that mark it and define it. I am not referring to a situated event that is characterized by silence. I will say more about the immanence of silence silencing in specific silences in Fragment Fifteen (“Touching Silence”) and Fragment Thirteen (last subsection “Silence, Silence Silencing”), where I use the term *sticky silence*.

I occasionally use “anomalous” when speaking of silence silencing, a word that connotes *deviation from what is normal, atypical*. I might say silence silencing is anomalous as it does its own thing. The aggravating problem is that silence silencing doing its own thing isn’t *doing* anything or being anything. Silence (“happens”) as (“its”) own (“occurrence”) as

8. *Irrealis*, when it is applied to a verb indicates that an act or state of being is not a fact. In English, *irrealis* can be expressed through the subjunctive mood as a statement contrary to fact.

neither a subject nor an object—silencing, beyond the bounds of discursive rules and literal good sense. One of the guiding thoughts in the following fragments is that silence silencing is anomalous in its lack of identity. Silence silencing [is] not something. Silence silencing [is] no thing, and silence silencing pervades our lives, the lives around us, and all the spaces in between.

Chaos and order happening together constitute one of the recurring issues in this book. *Order* derives from eleventh century Latin, *ordo* and twelfth century French, *ordre*. Those words variously mean series, arrangement, pattern, routine. They carry the connotations of uniform, established ranks and proportions, and proper sequence. *Chaos*, on the other hand, derives from the Greek word, *χάος* that is translated as formless, void, emptiness. It suggests “to be wide open” and “absence of order.” The other connotations of the word are lack, absence, hollow. It, the word *chaos*, is appropriate for silence silencing. Although silence might happen with all manner of things and formations, such as a conversation that falls silent or a well-timed silence for effect, or a silent street, or in an empty room, silence silencing [is] formless, void. For now, I want to emphasize that silence [is] no thing, [is] without order, and yet [happens] with formations, with identifiable things: chaos and orders happen together. Chaos with orders, and orders with chaos.

Tantalizing Silence Silencing: Riffing With “Of Mere Being”⁹

Tantalizing is a word that suggests baffling and alluring, drawing and vexing. The word also describes a frequent feeling I have in awareness in silence silencing and the ways such awareness often stimulates and provokes imagining, provokes, for example, the image of a tree, a bronze palm with a beautiful phoenix singing a strange song. “A gold-feathered bird / Sings in the palm, without human meaning / Without human feeling. . . .” A palm at the very edge of imagining, beyond all thought as though verging—teetering—at the end of space. The palm and the phoenix blend oddly in silence without meaning or feeling. The palm on the verge of nothing, “The palm at the end of the mind.” The tree fades as a breeze seems to linger in the branches, seems almost to pause before passing to nothing. I seem to be withdrawing from the tree and the bird in the image from

9. “Of Mere Being” is one of Wallace Stevens’s later poems, collected in *The Palm at the End of the Mind* (1979), 398.

the image. I want the image to brighten. I want to indwell the image at the silent ending of my mind, to feel the breeze, to touch the tree.

“Of Mere Being” does not speak directly of silence or of anything unimagined. It—the poem—is one of imaginative indirection. It speaks *at* the end of the poet’s mind as it speaks *of* the end of the mind, of a song beyond thinking, without meaning, without human feeling, without order’s rule—a song at the edge of its own imagery. It is a poem of joy just where joy ends. Who would not feel the joy? Stevens reaches the end of reason’s sway, beyond sense, and just at this limit on the edge of space, where sheer foreignness happens, a sun-bronzed palm rises. In his poem, the gold-feathered bird in the palm sings a strange, foreign song, a gift of imagination at the edge of imagination, singing beautifully on this boundary, perhaps like the beauty of the poem, singing absurdly in the ending of imagination’s reach. The poet is taken up into the song in the tree on the edge of space. “The wind moves slowly in the branches.” He sighs, smiling. Silence, mere silence beyond the poem beyond every thing

In the poem’s wake I am tantalized, enticed to go beyond my reach, beyond feelings as I seem for a moment to be on the verge of dissolving into the poem, not quite hearing the golden bird, but feeling very much at the edge of the orders that form the poem and that form me as I, reading, seem weightless, deforming at an edge where the sun-bathed tree does it stand? The golden bird singing? I cannot quite hear the notes or see the tree beyond Stevens’s poetic strong soft melting words . . . those words . . . silence in them. The elusive disappearing of tree and bird they did appear, didn’t they? I seem to float to float in the words’ dissolution and yet

I do not know exactly where I am. Am I imagined? I seem to feel a breeze coming from no where do I sense mere silence as the images fade and I think I think? At the edge of the mind? A bird singing?

I feel lost. Everything is so quiet. I want the phoenix to return. And the bronzed tree. I want the breeze. *I want to feel that breeze* I am tantalized at the end of my mind before nothing I can say as words gently melt in silence in silence the tree stands the bird sings

How will I speak of such things to you?