

The Meaning of Silence — Luis Villoro

Translated by Sierra Nilsson

[1]When the Greeks sought to define man, they called him *zoon logon echon*; which, in its primitive sense, does not mean “rational animal” but “animal bestowed with language.” The language, in effect, is an endowment that man shares with no other creature. The human world extends only so far as language reaches; and it would not be our world if it did not conform to the meanings that language gives it.

In order to study language, many philosophers tend to start with propositions and limit discourse to propositional language that conforms to logical rules and invariable meanings. All that has meaning could be translatable to this language. This is how meaning is reduced to discursive language; any other form of expression only holds meanings to the extent that it can be translated to that language.

But in order to explain propositional discourse, it is necessary to admit the prior possibility of existence: the possibility of understanding the world while meaningfully referring to it. And this meaningful reference to the world is prior to propositional language; it finds itself in perception, in practical conduct, in gesture. I do not have a need for words for meaning; any conduct directed at the world can do so. This is why Heidegger said that meanings do not result from words, they precede them: “To meanings...sprouts words, far from these things called words are provided with meanings.”[2] Discursive language is only one of the actualizations of the prior meaningful frame of mind that Heidegger calls the “dialogue.” Mimic and dance, music, singing and poetry are all modes of dialogue; and, as we’ll see, also of silence. The possible origin of dialogue is as much having spoken as having kept quiet, writes Heidegger. All forms of language tend to be between these two extremes. We can ask: what relation do these two terms hold at the heart of language? In particular: if silence is the absence of words, how can it be a possibility of dialogue? We will not pretend to resolve these difficult problems here. We will only expose some reflections— albeit provisional— that will help, we hope, to better establish them.

First, let’s direct our attention to discursive language. Like all language, discursive speech tries to designate my surroundings.

Before discourse, we are in direct contact with things, we experience and manage them, we are emotionally moved by them or act in them; yet we always require their presence. Without language, we could not refer to the world in its absence. With speech appear the possibilities of detaching ourselves from things and of referring to them without counting on their actual existence. Speech puts things at a distance and at the same time maintains our reference to them.

According to Wundt[3] and his following, one would have to locate the beginning of language in the moment that man, instead of understanding something in order to manage it, limits himself to make reference to it by a sign. The indication initiates language. I try to grasp something, for some purpose, but I notice it is out of my reach; therefore, I point to it, first with my finger, then with an articulated sound that replaces the unmanageable object. Research shows, in effect, that in many primitive tongues, the first words were demonstrative. Speech emerges from a failed attempt to manage; it replaces the immediate presence of the object through a simple reference to it through a medium. With this intent, a possibility exclusive to man opens up: of possessing things in a way more subtle than a grasp: to possess it figuratively, by means of a sign before consciousness as a term of reference.

Upon linking a phoneme[4] to an object, we can direct ourselves towards it in its absence. The phoneme first indicates the object (like the gesture of a finger indicates), but after—and this is the decisive step—assumes the role of replacing it; then, it has been converted into a “symbol.” The symbolic function, that is, the possibility of referring to things by way of signs that replace them, constitutes the essence of discursive language. Thanks to that, man can allude to the entire world without being obligated to suffer its presence. And this possibility belongs only to man. Many animals can associate words with determined objects and use them as signs of the presence of those objects; just like Pavlov’s dogs associated the bell sound to the presence of food. An existing fact always reminds another that is equally existent; it is a signal, not a symbol, of the other. We observe how the dog reacts upon hearing the name of its master: immediately, its ears perk up, it smells the air, alert, in order to find the master. The phoneme is associated with the presence of the master, to the smells and forms that accompany him/her; it is, ultimately, one more element in the complex of qualities habitually linked to the perception of the body of the master. The dog links the phoneme to the olfactory and visual content, it does not “understand” a word.

It is also probable that man first passes language through a similar phase. But after he exceeds that, the phoneme then converts into a symbol. If someone mentions the name “Socrates” in a conversation, it would not occur to anyone to search for him in the room. The word does not function here (although at times, when used circumstantially, it can assume this function) as being associated with a presence, but as a sign situated “in place” of it.

“Understanding” a symbol means this: to be able to refer to an object without the necessity of perceiving it. The symbol “represents” the thing, literally; it provides a presence that takes the place of another.

This is how the liberating function of the word emerges. Thanks to it, man had what the animal lacked: the power to refer to things without being enslaved to perceive them, of understanding the world without having to personally live it. Man, with speech, created an instrument to substitute the lived world and to figuratively manage it.

That is why the ideal of discursive language would be to replace things in such a perfect way so that the structure of the words corresponds to the structure of the things they are replacing. A language of this type is the regulative goal of all discursive, coherent language. Propositional language, Wittgenstein[5] has said, is a “figure” or a “model” of reality. Language “configures” the world in the sense of translating a structure of objects by a structure of signs. Wittgenstein gives us a simile: language replaces reality like musical notation substitutes a symphony and the irregularities of the lines of the record player substitute one another. The delivery structure of the symphony stays translated in the score and in the physical ripples of the disk by other structures. Every structure “configures” or “models” the other. But let us not be fooled by the simile. This figurative capacity of language is not supposed to be understood as if every word duplicated one feature of reality. Language is not a kind of “drawing” or “imitation” of things. Instead, we must think of two parallel formations — that of linguistic signs and that of reality — that can be translated between each other according to determined rules, but in such a way that neither one “copies” the other. It is more of a projection of one formation in the other, in the sense that mathematicians employ the word. Any geometric form can configure itself in algebraic signs and, inversely, any equation can project itself in a geometric figure; to do so, it suffices to know the specific rules that regulate this projection. But we cannot say that the components of the equation “copy” or “draw” the elements of the spatial form, it is more like the structure of algebra is convertible into that of geometry and vice-versa. Similarly, language would be a “projection” of reality that, upon representing it in a distinct structure, could replace it. And logic would be the junction of rules that govern this projection. An illogical language would not, therefore, be able to “configure” reality.

But to translate the geometric figure, the algebraic equation has to disregard its proper mode of existence, the intuitive space; no mere perceptive quality of space can be translated. Discourse is much the same. By configuring it in a symbolic structure, discursive language makes abstraction of the actual presence of things; upon disregarding its presence, it must disregard all experienced qualities linked to it, and only thanks to this disregard can it communicate reality through representation. Because the recording makes an abstraction of the actual lived experience of the orchestra, it can communicate the symphony; because the equation disregards spatial perception, it can present its geometric form.

In order to meet its end, discursive language should be made up of invariable meanings and objectives in such a way that the interlocutor can at all times project with exactitude the same reality that the language has configured. In a perfect discursive language, the slightest ambiguity, the most minute misunderstanding, would not fit. No existing language fulfills, of course, this ideal, but all of them, to the extent that they are instruments to figure and communicate reality, tend to it. Modern logicians have tried to indicate the characteristics of the ideal language. In such a language, there would be no room for the significant hesitations that are dependent upon the changing circumstances of personal experience. The words of daily language that Russell[6] calls “egocentric” and Husserl[7] “occasional,” those such as “I”, “you”, “here”, “now”,

“this”, “that”, would be discarded for they make reference to contents of variable experience with each individual and, therefore, are incapable of being understood without that experience. Moreover, all subjective meanings that depend on personal perspective would be equally omitted. In this way, a pure discursive language would solely consist of invariable and objective meanings.

Such is, without a doubt, scientific language. All variable and subjective meanings are kept from it. It would not be said in scientific language, for example, “I now see a meteor,” but instead “a meteor is visible at 8 p.m. at so many degrees latitude north and so many others longitude west.” Nor would it be said, “a happy meadow” and “that tragic night,” but “a meadow whose vision is accompanied in person X with a feeling of happiness” and “the night in which person Z was central to a tragic event.”

Finally, the word eliminates the singular character with which things appear and, by that, it brings tranquility. Everything for man, before language, was new; nothing was habitual or foreseeable. It is according to this that language develops; the frightening aspect first produced by things becomes covered by a tenuous veil of familiarity; only then does he start to feel secure in his world. Once he knows it, although he does not understand it, he begins to be reassured. Because he now knows that “that” has a name and is not, for the time being, something absolutely unusual; if it has a name, it can be recognized. Something with no name is insufferable; language would never know what to abide itself to; if it has a name, however, it can be classified, it can make it more its own, language can manage it by way of a symbol. The child wants to know what the name of everything is in order to be able to make it hospitable. For the primitives, possessing the name of a thing or of a person is already, in a certain way, appropriating it. And yet amongst ourselves, there is no better proof of trust than of discovering a friend’s proper name and being allowed to use it to his liking.

The unusual is always amazing, that is to say, that which occurs only once and which we do not know how nor when it could repeat itself; amazing is “what there is not,” the unexpected and singular. And the name allows recognition of any object. Naming something is identifying it with another phenomenon that has already appeared and, at the same time, being able to recognize its ulterior appearance. Recognition eliminates the altered absolute, the singularity of the unusual, and converts the world around us into the habitual and familiar. In addition, every name is linked with certain fixed traits to the exclusion of others. Naming is but projecting the object in a logical structure that determines the qualities that are compatible with it. This eliminates the unusual and unpredictable possibilities.

In summary, a perfect discursive language, in order to be able to configure and communicate reality with exactitude, would have to prescind the personal perspective of the observer. To do so, it would have to make an abstraction of the presence of things in their rich lived experience, including their unusual and singular character, because

discursive language does not speak of the experienced world, but of the represented world.

By means of discourse, I know that the sun that rises every day is always the same and it radiates a similar light at all hours. But in my lived world, prior to discourse, that luminous disk is new each day and at times it glares with unexpected splendor.

Discursive language conceals but does not eliminate the strangeness of the world, nor does it remove the capacity of wonder. Beneath words, things continue being singular and unexpected. All can be novel, even the most common, everyday things. Is there anything more strange than the soft jingling of an ordinary crystal cup in one's hands? Is there anything more astounding than the tongue of fire that suddenly surges, alive, in the common stove? Any thing can, at the same time, be habitual, representative of discourse, and a live and unrepresentable presence. And both characteristics are not contradictory because they depend on an attitude with which we give meaning to the world around us and the form with which we employ ourselves to express it. In the first attitude, we give meaning to the world "in itself," independent of emotions or evaluations that arise within ourselves; in the second attitude, we try to give meaning so that it is presented "for us," covered with all the notes that accompany its mere presence. Discursive language corresponds according to the first method of giving meaning to the world; to the second corresponds poetry and, in propriety, silence.

"The world is written in mathematic language," said Galileo. It is true, the total structure of the universe could be projected in a few formulas, in a brief symbolic structure that would adequately configure it. These symbols would include all that could be objectively predicted about the world. The signs that fill a small notebook provide the presence of the universe; such would be the ideal of science. Moreover, Pascal was right when he exclaimed, "The silence of the infinite spaces frightens me." Because the world is at the same time both the discursive language and the silent presence, both clear mathematical system and amazing wonder.

Let us now suppose that we want to express and communicate to others this lived presence of the world. Ordinary speech would have to look for a form of language different than discourse. It would invent various ones since it is rich in resources. From the course rock with which its buildings are erected to the subtle movement of dance, all can serve as signs for new languages. But there could be another possibility that interests us since it brings us before our central theme: silence. It could signify the lived world by means of a negation of the invariable and objective meanings of discursive language. That is to say, it would try to use discursive language in a way that justly negates its discursive character. It is signified by a detour, showing how words reduced to objective meanings are incapable of precisely signifying our lived experience of the world. A paradoxical language would then be born based on the rupture in the destruction of the habitual meanings of discourse. And just as the perfect objective language was the ideal of all discursive language, this paradoxical language would be, in the end, the limit that all true poetry would strive towards.

One example will suffice: it is the days of the heatwave. The sun is in the zenith. It is noon time. Discursive language names what it sees; if it wants to designate real things it would say, for example, “the sun is visible at the zenith of such hour of the day and at such precise place;” if it wants to designate the simple data of perception, perhaps it would say: “in the center of the turquoise hemisphere a clear yellow, luminous disk can be seen.” It would have captured all that the phenomenon objectively has and it could replace its lived presence. But a poet, referring to the same phenomenon would say:

“Crowned in itself, the day extends its feathers.
High yellow yell,
hot pump in the middle of the sky
impartial and beneficial!...”

The same phenomenon is, at the same time, a star in a determinate position above the horizon and a “high yellow yell” in a sky that is “impartial and beneficial.”

What has the poet tried to designate? In the first place, the concrete presence of the phenomenon as it is lived in this privileged instant. This is why she could not ignore it, negligent of the peculiarities of the situation and personal focus revealed in it. The poetic language has not made abstraction of the qualities that the emotion or the fantasy show in the object; on the contrary, it has taken the object in all its richness of content that it presents. Because it has not tried to signify the object “in itself,” but the object as it is shown “for man.”

This will become more clear upon observing the change of meaning that is in operation upon trying to translate poetic language into objective language. “High yellow yell,” for example, hides an objective meaning that expresses some phrase like this: “a yellow stain, situated at a great height respective to the observer, so brilliant that it can be associated with the sound of a very sharp tone.” Upon first sight, it seems that the two phrases differ in their form and euphony more than by their meaning. As with everything, comparison reveals that the discursive translation not only alters the verbal form of the poem, but also its meaning. The two phrases do not say the same thing. “High yellow yell” designates a unity of lived qualities linked to the facts of perception, details of fantasy, and emotional qualities referring to the same object; its discursive translation, in change, designates a multiplicity of objective facts (the yellow stain, the sharp sounds, the association between the two), that is not necessarily lived by anyone. The inherent meaning upon the simple enunciation is, therefore, distinct in both cases. From the full meaning there are emotional notes of the poetic phrase, thus “subjective”, that are lacking meaning in the discursive phrase.

Secondly, the poetic word demands a presence to try to immediately relive it in the imagination and emotion of another person. It serves as only a brief intermediary between two experiences. In effect, given that the poetic expression does not have the

lived qualities of the object, it can only be fully understood when those qualities are relived. Its objective translation, however, can be understood without the need for a new experience, precisely because its meaning is lacking in “subjective” features. Poetic significance, however, is endowed with a distinct use of language: it not only pretends to configure a reality to communicate it, it also tries, once again, to arouse within the listener all the qualities inherent to its presence.

But in order to do this, the poet has had to employ the words in a way so as to negate their invariable and objective meanings: “She has called the sun ‘high yellow yell’.” It says more about what it is not, than what it is. It is about a “yell” distinct from any other known yell; it designates something of which no sound could be found suitable. According to its objective meaning, a sound cannot have color nor can it be elevated to the heights. Neither does “yellow” correspond to any recognizable color; no habitual color is a quality of an elevated sound. It is a “yellow” capable of exploding in yells; a color that consists of not being like any other color; it designates a singular and unique quality. “Yellow” and “high” deny the objective meaning of “yell” and vice-versa; for this negation, the usual words of discursive language acquire a new meaning in the poetic context. The poet has equipped the words with a new meaning that is constituted by the negation of its objective meaning. And this poetic meaning is indefinable, that is to say, it is untranslatable to other provided words of objective meanings; it sprouts from the contraposition of meanings that are reciprocally rejected and remains constituted by the reciprocal negation. Because of that, the poetic meanings cannot be linked in invariable forms to determined words; they emerge in its context in an unexpected manner from the distortion of objective meanings. They are unusual meanings that, strictly speaking, could never repeat themselves in other contexts. And only in this way can the poet speak of the singular and unrepeatable.

If it is proper for the discursive word to permit the precognition of an object and to ascribe it certain fixed features, the poet has broken that normal function of discourse; his language is a negation of the invariable meanings of the word. He designs the extraordinary and at the same time says that the unusual presence of things is unspeakable for discursive language. And in truth, all metaphor tends to do the same to the extent that it breaks the precise meanings that discourse calls for; all metaphor is already a beginning of a negation of a word. But at times it fails and only the great poet can effectively signify with negative language. However, the distortion of words also has a limit. If we prolong negation of the meanings in discourse until the end, words would cease. The total negation of words is silence. And maybe, from this perspective, poetry could look like a discussion in permanent tension between words and their negation, silence. Rigorously, it can only plainly realize itself in the total negation of discourse; but then it would disappear as speech... Will it disappear effectively? Will there not be talk of silence?

With this question, we touch on a crucial point of these brief reflections. The intent to show the world in the way in which it is lived has brought us to the negation of speech and, at its limit, to silence. But, is silence capable of indicating something?

Before all, we must discard from our consideration that silence is the simple absence of all language. The mute says nothing. Speech does not belong to language's grasp and cannot interest us here.

We must also discard another aspect of silence that is full of possibilities and suggestions, but that we cannot fully address. We refer to silence as a signal of determined psychical livings: the reservation that distinguishes a serious and collected soul, the tame silence that hides an attitude of humility, or a haughty silence that announces pride and depreciation, the noble silence of someone who listens, and the Pharisaic silence of someone who judges. In these cases, silence indicates a spiritual attitude or a mood and can offer an open window into the studio of another's privacy. It belongs to a style of conduct, by way that man outwardly shows before others or before himself. This is related to gesture and physiognomy. Just like an angry frown or an impulsive gesture, it can be a sign of a psychic happening; it does not mean anything beyond this, it does not designate anything about the world around us. This does not concern us, now we are only interested in silence as a component of a language capable of referring things distinct from it itself to the interlocutor; we are interested in it as a meaningful element.

In the first place, there is a silence that accompanies language like its background, or better, like its theme. Words interrupt it and then return to it. They seem to sprout from its heart, fill it during their pronunciation and then sink back in it when they cease. Without a uniform and homogenized bottom to stand out against, words would not be able to be separated, to be conjugated, or to be able to draw a structure. This silence is the matter in which letters are laid out, the empty time in which phonemes flow. It also holds the same equivalence in other forms of expression: in painting, it is the colorless and formless bottom that allows, for example, the shade of the chiaroscuro; in architecture, the vanes and the emptiness that separate and connect the tectonic masses.

This background of words also finds its place between the material signs that employ language. Writing relies on punctuation signs to signal it, and in musical notation there are signs that justly carry the name "rests." The pauses, the rhythms, that frame, underline, or emphasize oral words are linguistic signs equal to the phonemes. But all of them only act as the theme, or boundary, of the elements of precise meaning of language. In this sense, they are signs that no one refers to, but that allow only the organization of the others elements of language. They themselves do not, yet, mean anything.

Nevertheless, in determined cases, the silences of language appear to rebel against this supporting role and want, also, to mean something. So far, their pretentiousness is modest; they only wish to designate words that succeed them in the plot of language. Before a word appears, there can be a silence that announces it. There are pauses that clearly indicate the imminence of a disconcerting or unexpected

phrase; orators and actors know how to make good use of them. Ellipsis and colons can hold similar roles in writing; in music, some tense silences can indicate the immanence of a climax or a particularly expressive melody. In these cases it is obvious that silence not only encompasses meaningful elements of language, but it also begins to lend a vague proper meaning to it. It indicates something distinct about it: it refers to another thing. To what? To a word or sentence that is to come. It does not mean any word or sentence, but a word that has a certain surprising character. In a vague and imprecise way, it seems to slur, "Attention! Something worthy of note is about to be pronounced!" It indicates, in summary, a word that could not so easily be guessed or expected from the previous context. The silence begins to announce a surprising quality of things, albeit, only for the moment, of mere words.

At this level, silence is yet a simple accessory, an appendage of the context that immediately precedes it; it prolongs the word that it antecedes and, just by that, it can announce what is to come. Like this, the meaning of the "suspension" of the ellipsis depends on the word that precedes it; the musical pause of the phrase that it just finished silencing. Moreover, it is patent that it does not show anything outside of language itself; its function is to show things that are yet prohibited.

But let us pass to other cases. Now silence takes the place of a word or sentence and takes upon itself the meaningful function that is "implicit" or "implied" in it, and the interlocutor understands with that silence the same that he would understand if a word was being expressed. These silences are many and their meanings are infinitely varying. There are accomplice silences that, without words, say what the other wanted to hear. There are silences that condemn and condone, and others that confer and submit. There are timid silences that express, without meaning to, the words that they do not wish to pronounce; that silence not only signals the mood of the person (their reprobation or disgust, their modesty or doubt), but also signifies something about the objective situation. It means the same that it would in every situation that the word would replace. For that, the meaning is variable, occasional, and always dependent on the context in which it finds itself.

But through all of its variable meanings, would there not be a common meaningful function to all the silences, regardless of the context in which it finds itself? If only there were, we could say what silence itself means. On the contrary, it would be the inferred word in silence, not formulated but capable of being understood or guessed by the listener, that would be properly signified; the silence would not add any nuance itself to the meaning of the word. In order to investigate this point, we have an easy procedure: replace silence with the corresponding word that it suggests and if we precisely obtain the same meaning, we could say that silence has not itself added any meaningful nuance to the word that it replaces. But if, on the contrary, the word does not say exactly the same as the corresponding silence, we would have discovered the meaning of this.

Let us give a few examples. First: I contemplate a work of art with a friend. He wants to show his knowledge and utters an observation that, intended to be deep, only manages to be pretentious or cheesy. He looks at me, awaiting my response; I remain silent. The silence replaces a polite word of reprobation. With everything, we feel that if we substituted silence for that word, something of the meaning would be lost. But it does not only mean that the words of my friends are impertinent, that is, that they are not adequate to the present object to which they are referring, but it also means that before the situation it is best to remain silent, that is, that my own words would not be adequate either. My silence vaguely expresses: "What you have said is not pertinent. But if I were to say that to you, I, myself, would be saying an impertinence. Because of that, it is best to remain silent." Someone would say, then, that we could justly replace silence with the words I just said. Not really, because these words that are trying to translate what silence is saying do not say the same as what it is. To say that it is better to remain quiet in the face of something is to say something, something that is, at its time, irrelevant; he who says something would not be saying the same as he who remains silent; he who says something would also formulate an inadequate judgment over he who contemplates it, given that it would not be accomplished with the requisite of remaining silent. The proof is that the phrase can sound so pretentious, so impertinent to us, just like any other similar commendation.

This is the same kind of silence that could be presented if someone told me some fact worthy of amazement and I responded with silence. Without words, my interlocutor clearly hears: "there are no words to express this." Moreover, if they pronounced this phrase they would not be saying words that express such. Therefore, the only thing capable of thoroughly signifying it is the negation of all words. Like this, silence means, besides the word it is replacing, the circumstance to which that word is not adequate enough to configure the objective situation in question, or—inversely—that the present situation cannot be projected in discursive structure.

But let us pass to a contrary example: the silence that approves or consents. Someone solicits a favor, I remain quiet and they understand my settling-in. Don't they say, he who remains quiet confers? My silence now replaces an affirmation, but it does not mean the same as this. It means, too, that this affirmation should not be said. It says that it is a reserved affirmation, a reluctant, half-affirmation. It concedes and at the same time negates this concession. "I grant you what you ask," it says; more than not pronouncing these words. It means also that the words are not suited to the genre of assent granted. Upon remaining quiet, I make clear what I confer, but I do not assume my assent. In summary, I mean that my affirmation is not adapted to the objective situation, it does not respond to my intimate will nor does it describe the real situation of our personal relations.

If we analyzed other similar examples we would always see situations that look alike: silence means something distinct in every context, but it nonetheless adds a nuance of its own: that the word is not adequate to the method by which some things, in turn, are presented; that it cannot precisely represent them. This is the proper meaning

of silence. We see that it strictly refers to the language in which context appears; it allows us to understand a word and, at the same time, it cancels it by showing its inadequacy to the reality it is pretending to denote. It means that speech is something limited and the lived situation goes beyond it. Because, upon expressing the limits of speech, it indirectly shows something about things: the fact that they go beyond the possibilities of words. Silence refers immediately to speech, but upon negating speech, it shows the hiatus that separates lived reality from the language that tries to represent it. Silence is the negative quality of meaning, as such that it says that which is not lived things; it says what is not exactly reducible to language. Moreover, this must be said from the heart of language itself.

It is not strange that at the heart of expressive determined contexts, silences appear that directly designate the singular, the marvelous, the “other” for excellence. Silence indicates, then, a presence or a lived situation that, by essence, cannot be translated into words; it is something incapable of being projected into any language. Yet in daily speech, wherever an accent of fantasy sticks out, these silences can be found. On a high tight rope, a small figure dances. The drum resonates. Suddenly, a silence. All stares are fixed on the fragile little man. The silence signals the anguish of the wait; in addition, it signifies the immanence of the wonderful act. This man is going to do something unexpected and wonderful. The silence has opened us up anew to the wonder of the world.

Everything rare and singular, the surprising and strange, exceeds discursive words; only silence can “put a name to it.” Death and suffering call for silence, and the attitude of remaining silent of those that witness it not only signals respect or sympathy, but also the unjustifiable mystery and the vanity of all words. Also love, and overflowing gratitude, require silence.

Silence, at last, has always been the speech to designate the strange par excellence, the Sacred. “Yahweh is in His sacred temple,” says the prophet Habakuk, “before Him, the world remains silent.” The entire world maintains the suspense; only upon stopping his rejoicing can he talk to his Creator. Thus, the gnostics designated God with the word “Sige,”[8] silence. And when the Hindus wished to signify the first principle, the Brahma, they could only say that it is that which no other word can signify.

In an *Upanishad* that we only know by reference, the following story is narrated: a young man asks his teacher for the nature of Brahma, the teacher remains quiet. The disciple insists, an identical response. For the third time, he begs, “Sir, by grace, teach me!” Then the teacher answers, “I am teaching you but you do not understand: Brahma is silence.” Remaining quiet here means something more than the word “silence.” Otherwise, the teacher would not have preferred remaining quiet to saying it. Silence signifies that no word, not even “silence,” is capable of designating the absolute other, the pure and simple wonder. But what this consists of is not said by silence, it only shows “something” like pure presence, incapable of being represented by words.

As paradoxical as it seems upon first glance, in all these cases we see ourselves obligated to admit a certain suitable, meaningful function of silence. We must not forget, nevertheless, that this can only function in the context of a language, and the context alone determines when a silence separated from all words would not say anything; its condition of possibility—all the signification—is the word. Because man is an “animal bestowed with language,” it can maintain a meaningful silence. To the extent that silence can signify is an element of language, in the same way as discursive words, of which we cannot do without upon trying to define it.

But it is the most rebellious element to analysis. Linguistic symbols configure reality to be able to represent it; meaningful silence, meanwhile, does not configure or represent anything. It only shows a presence that cannot be represented by symbols. On the one hand, it signals the essential limits of speech; on the other hand, it indicates the pure, inexplicable presence of things. It does not supply any kind of knowledge about how things are, it only says that things are and that being is inexpressible by words. Of God, of death, of suffering, of love, of fact itself, of the fact that something exists that cannot be accounted for by words, it can only show their incomprehensible presence.

On the other hand, silence is a possibility of speech that, upon realization, abolishes speech altogether; it is the possibility of its own impossibility. But it is a possibility that constitutes speech, which cannot be done without. Just like death is a possibility that is constituted in life and is not what is outside of it — in such a way that it does not ensue from outside but that it is intricately interwoven in the facts themselves of being born and developing — in this way, language carries in itself its own limit. Neither is the death of silence outside of speech; it is, on the contrary, an essential character of language.

Silence cannot broaden the scope of the world that man can project in an objective language. It can only show the limits of that language and the existence of something that exceeds all parts of it. Like this, silence shows that no matter how much verbal meanings are enriched, the world has something that man cannot account for in his vain discourse: the presence itself of the world around us.

However, the fact that silence is intrinsic to language clearly indicates a capacity inherent in the word itself: that of negative language. One last term would depend on it: the possibility of all non-discursive languages, of poetry, for example, that occupies an intermediary space between speech and silence.

We see how little we have progressed in giving a response to the questions with which we started this investigation. We have only accomplished, when all is said and done, to plant a new problem: would silence be the extreme case of a more general meaningful possibility? And for that we must refer back to negation. But how is it possible that negation, in general, holds meaning?

With this question we may complete our reflections. For philosophical reflection does not conclude when a response is formulated but when it is capable of planting a new question.

Notes

[1] First published in Mexico at *Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana*, 2008. Our thanks to the Estate of Luis Villoro for the permission to publish this translation, especially Juan Villoro for his faith in our project.

[2] Martin Heidegger's *Dialogue on Language* (1959) discusses the incapacities of language.

[3] Wilhelm Wundt. Born Germany, 1832. Studied sign language and "inner linguistic structures."

[4] phoneme: any of the perceptually distinct units of sound in a specified language that distinguish one word from another, for example p, b, d, and t in the English words pad, pat, bad, and bat.

[5] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 1921.

[6] Bertrand Russell, *An Inquiry into Meaning and Truth*, 1940.

[7] Edmund Husserl, *Logical Investigations*, 1900.

[8] Sige: Gnostic term; Greek for "silence"; another name for God, "the Great Silence"