

NICHOLAS JOSE

ON RETICENCE

When I was in Oxford writing my doctorate, I had little formal contact with the university. I saw my supervisor once a term, for an hour or two. He was a brilliant Shakespeare scholar, a Welshman who had grown up in Cockney London, a man of few words. The notes he gave me, chapter by chapter, never filled more than half a page. He would tear off the bottom half of the sheet of paper and keep it for later. I always enjoyed climbing the stairs to his high-ceilinged room. The elegant eighteenth-century building backed on to a deer park. The snuffling animals were eloquent in their decorative superfluity; a few of their number would be ritually fed to the college fellows at an annual feast. The last time we met my supervisor asked what I would do with my life. We had never discussed personal matters. Professionally he was not one to rush into print, nor was he particularly sociable. He had grown disillusioned with the careerism, laziness

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and dullness of the university. His parting advice was put almost as a question. Blinking behind his glasses, he raised his eyebrows and said: “Love and be silent.” He was quoting Cordelia’s stubborn, calamitous option in *King Lear*.

Startled, I took his words away with me. Took them to heart as a kind of mantra that I quote to myself as a radical yardstick, if not of silence, then of speech withheld. I am drawn to the relationship between speech and the spectrum of responses covered by all those words starting with “re-”: repressed, retentive, recalcitrant, reluctant, retiring, reserved and, especially, reticent, where the prefix “re-” suggests an ingrained resistance to prevailing currents. A quality of stone, not water.

The avoidance of words that are tainted (perhaps like money) by their currency in a tainted world is a deep tradition

in many cultural and religious discourses. Silence is golden. Look before your leap. Think before you speak. Loose lips sink ships—and not other people’s ships, but your own.

I had a beautiful, spirited university friend who was brought up a fundamentalist Christian. She loved literature and wrote great poetry, some of which she published back in the days of *New Poetry*. But she could not value words that were cut off from a moral or existential core. Once I passed on some inconsequential gossip about her and she wrote out a Biblical reprimand that I still tremble to remember: *He that keepeth his mouth keepeth his life: but he that openeth wide his lips shall have destruction* (Proverbs, 13.3). It was as if I had violated a tribal law that preserved the inner (the private, the membership of the group) against the outer (the promiscuous, the enemy). Ultimately she put away her literary gifts, staying within the fold of her upbringing. She said in a letter that my own writings would be just so much “confetti on the grave”. The phrase stuck—and stung—as a reminder that, under eternity, words are as transient as the breath that animates our clay. Words, that is, which fail to reckon with a countervailing pressure to say nothing. Words that merely float on the air, tossed from an open palm, released from friction and gravity.

Would you knowingly invite a reticent person to dinner, someone like my Oxford supervisor, or my friend who believed in sealing her lips? If you had no choice, how would you deal with such people? Sit them next to Chatty Carl or Commandeering Cathy in hope that their quiet attentiveness would mop up the attention-seeking of the other. The voluble need vessels, after all, into which to pour their words. You might hope that the reticent guest would say just enough to keep the ball rolling, while letting you rest secure that no verbal flatulence will be released into the amiable air. My guess is that you will find yourself hankering, despite yourself, to bring the reticent one out, as if in the comfortable warmth of your table—select company, a few drinks—this usually reserved person will be encouraged to unbutton. Somewhere in the

evening, as dishes are removed and the group moves to another room, you will find yourself turning to ask: What do *you* think? Have *you* had that experience? Are you *all right*?

Then there will be a feint—a blush, a shake, a laugh. “Why do you ask?” the guest will say, using a practised formula of deflection. With a quiet gasp of panic, reticence will be maintained, but appearing now as a flicker of non-cooperation within the civilised pale, the violation of another law that requires us to declare who we are within our own tribe. That’s what ex-Prime Minister Paul Keating meant when he called Malaysia’s (continuing) Prime Minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad a “recalcitrant”. It was an accusation of barbarism. Where we are speaking creatures, a refusal to join speech within the common circle shadows an intractable other order. It suggests the ghostly guest at the feast, the inaccessible speech codes of the stranger, the silences of eternity that we imagine but can never quite hear.

Am I exaggerating? In trying to speak about reticence a contradiction appears—a trap. I discover hostility lurking in the dictionary versions of a word that should derive simply, even nobly, from a Latin root meaning “to maintain silence”: not to spill the beans. But indications of a less acceptable concealment lurk, as if dictionary compilers, like torturers and spies, find reticence a nuisance. The opprobrium begins in etiquette, where a “*habitual* disinclination to speak” is bad form, and extends to pathology. Pride and prejudice, in the manner of Jane Austen’s Mr Darcy, but more likely a danger zone of secrecy that is just a shade away from being a vice: the opposite of brave, open and free. “Disinclined to speak *freely*” (OED): in the English moral tradition, as elsewhere, freedom is inseparable from honest and unfettered expression of heart and mind, the challenge epitomised in the concluding words of *King Lear*: “Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say.”

Reticence ought to be a sign of how difficult that is.

Too easy speech, falling back on convention, can be a liability. Dragging things into the light of naming and labelling can betray their subtlety, their truer nature. The good leader

knows when to be “retiring”, to make a tactical retreat. To speak too much can block out listening. To be the cynosure of all eyes can make you stop noticing things, as if the attention that speech demands blinds the speaker to shadows behind the glare. Or is that merely the self-justification of a reticent person? After all, speech is how we make shared sense of our lives. At its extreme, as dumbness or autism, reticence looks like incapacity, provoking attempts at therapy. What are you trying to hide? Come clean. Come out. Fess up. Voice. Name.

I love gossip. I skim the newspapers for those fleeting references to names I recognise. I love the *agon* carried forward by the latest piece of half-information, the casual speculation that provides the next twist in the soap-opera of public and social life. I play my part in pulling together these stories. But does that mean I believe them? I take it for granted that the people whose words and deeds fill our media don’t stand by what they are reported to be saying or doing. As I reel from the latest twists and turns in the lives of friends and acquaintances, I assume a gulf between the story I’m told and what will turn out actually to have happened, what—to speak more precisely—it will come to *be* or *mean*. I assume what I’ve heard is never the whole story.

A rough kind of truth is put out which choosy customers can take or leave. Its force lies in its crudeness, its cocking of its head at a striking angle, immediate, unmediated, using terms already at large to meet the market and satisfy appetite. Reticence is a nagging reminder that beyond the stories people already know (and want) there are other stories they don’t yet know and may not want, stories that are harder on both teller and listener. A reminder that lives are *not* stories after all, much as we might want them to be.

For psychoanalysis, speech provides a path to self-knowledge and health. The discipline required to give meaning to our existence is a quest for the words to describe our situation and articulate our needs. To resist that task or get it wrong is to be a mess; to

get it right is to become whole. Yet flying in face of the conviction that speech is good for you, our century has rendered language ineffectual, even obscene, through systematic atrocities that make silence the only conceivable (while still culpable) recourse. “No poetry after Auschwitz”, noted Adorno, who might have corrected Cordelia: “Witness and be silent.”

In the half-century that has passed since the Holocaust, language has made a comeback through the strobelight and mirrorball of postmodernism and popular culture. There is more speech going in the public domain, including on the Web, than ever before in human history. Rather than be silent, we are encouraged to become more insistent, appetitive, exhibitionistic and gross with our words. Therapist’s couch meets revival meeting as dominant discourse.

The books that sell are those that trade in authenticities, from humble cookbooks and gardening books, where fantasy can become reality by practical steps, to the Do-It-Yourself improvements of liver-cleansing and the higher techniques for attaining immortal life. In literary publishing, faction is the mode of the moment—as if a puritan distrust of the imagination has resurfaced in a new way. (Another puritanism wants to ban *images* of sex and violence, as if to do so will banish more than the images.) Imagination is re-admitted through the backdoor as persiflage, the mask, meant to be invisible, over the self that is offered. Life utterance, therapeutic for both speaker and listener, becomes a powerful ritual—like the gig of the glamorous shaman who spins in her trance in a Seoul disco.

It is difficult to talk of certain things without feeling tricked into uttering commodified speech, like a dummy mouthing words from the ventriloquist’s voicebox. It’s the Zeitgeist speaking—and that, at least, should make anyone reticent. Critical comment merely flags the destructive energies that must be absorbed into the system’s forward motion. Dissent serves to grace a larger conformity. Not merely the media in which language lives and moves, but the concepts, structures, stories and myths that make up speech are part of a corporatised warp

and weft. As John Ralston Saul writes in *Voltaire's Bastards*, "the undoubted sign of a society well under control or in decline is that language has ceased to be a means of communication and has become instead a shield for those who master it", the servants of established power. Our dinner table conversations take place within that weave. It's global, with the same moves being made in discussions in Darwin and Dublin, Toronto and Taipei. If there are people who manage to stay outside this process, by definition we'll never know. It's a creepy, sticky feeling of being enmeshed: "global" without really being global.

The only way out may be not to speak at all. But this is *my* life and I must speak it. Am I imagining these difficulties? Am I grandly rationalising a desire not to speak? Call me anal. Language has always been compromised and corroded. To communicate has always been hard work. It might not matter so much with politics and movies and other topics already in the public domain: what about the inner life? Greedy corporatism has moved well beyond the division of public and private to commodify the treasures of selfhood that were once protected by silence. Our emotional lives are carried on in terms from television sit-coms and self-help manuals. The seven veils of the self have been dropped in a language stomp that insists on voicing the unvoiceable. Disgusting things must be spoken loudly to overcome fear. Unformed things must be identified. The spotlight must resolve shadows into bright new formulations. In place of the struggle towards a personal language for what you are, you can choose generic boxes of identity, ethnicity, sexuality, spirituality and more, with menus under each heading. You can chart yourself in the language of computer software. Asked "Who am I?", you can respond by clicking on icons.

Reticence makes its own dimension, creating its own space, hypothetical, still unstated. Perhaps that's why it suits me as a novelist. I hate having characters in my work identified with real-life people. The space between the incompleteness with which I know actual persons and the completeness that words

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give a character on the page who has no other form of existence lets fictional creativity happen. Being aware of my uncontrollable fictionalising, I become scrupulous about not aligning my words with other actualities.

Some people think of reticence as the province of particular social classes, associated with presumptions of power. The literary English, for example; private schoolboys; Japanese policy advisers; Buddhist monks; Adelaideans. Not Latins, not Jews, not movie stars. Such generalisations fail not only because there are exceptions, but because *manners* are too easily mistaken for the more individual matter that is genuine reticence. Once you learn the code of a social group, you know what is being said, even if the language is not demonstrative. Reticence is different. An aesthetic quality that we can observe and admire in art, it is also a matter of personal style in other environments. Giorgio Morandi is reticent, as is Paul Celan, as is Juliette Binoche. Martin Amis is not. In authoritarian regimes—in China and Japan—the true eloquence of reticence, that would be drowned out by noise in freer-speaking societies, is nevertheless a quality achieved by individual artists, writers and speakers working within long, supple traditions. It needs to be listened for, not dismissed as unresponsiveness.

The closest thing to reticence is shyness, a bodily phenomenon when not only the mind but the whole being seems unable to speak, uncomfortable even in being present in front of others. Blushing, sweating, panting, awkward, with eyes averted, a shy person (often someone young) reacts physically to being confronted, making shyness a quality that is as pure and true as it is helpless and uncontrollable. It's about being there and not there, in feeling incapable of joining the rumbustious, devouring social fray. In an almost erotic way, it's about going naked before the heartlessness and calculation that accompanies social interaction. The protective mechanism is to be quiet, to become an unanswering body.

Shyness is sometimes accompanied by intense powers of observation and silent engagement. In the right context, a shy

person may well speak more than anyone else. But it needs to be a safe situation where the other person experiences the same risk and rawness in the exchange. Alone with the beloved, given an answering sign, the tongue-tied admirer pours forth, the words of one joining with the words of the other to create a new communion. Shyness is always saving itself for a desired change, for being enabled to grow out of itself.

Reticence, however, is a condition to live with, what shyness becomes with practice, as the mind harnesses the body's seeming incapacity to speak. Reticence is essentially situational, like shyness in its concern with when and where and how and with whom to speak—*freely*—of everything, from the most intimate questions of self to the most revealing declarations of belief. Reticence requires a partner, sometimes a flamboyant and talkative one, to work with. Sometimes that partner can be the part of oneself that is a social performer adept at blocking access to the spaces behind doors. Reticence prefers the intimacy of dialogue to roundtable chat. Reticence waits for the moment, quickly turning away if the opening to dialogue is not wide enough, resorting to blurting or bumbling if the pressure to speak is too great. Reticent talk is free to move with each give and take, fine-tuned to contour and dynamic, pauses to register vibrations, rushes when the impulse is there, reverberates with its partner's utterance. Reticence offers double readings of an encounter—whether an interview, a negotiation, a therapy session or an erotic inquiry—registering both the situation and the possibility for the situation to become something different. Reticence seeks formulations in which the first words that come to mind are already being reconsidered. Some people's language effortlessly expresses their passion, their conviction, their way of being. Reticence manages the different sort of truthfulness that comes with speech that is thoughtful in the sense of being *filled with thought*; that activates the gaps around the words; that contains questions already asked and answered; that implies the logic and interchange preceding it; that sets up further openings. The provisional, resistant placing of words creates conversation that unfolds from speech

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with roots deep in the speaker's mind—a mind offered conditionally.

In the concentration of good poetry we experience silence as the ground against which language finds its most intense meaning, as we hear silence in the rests without which music is impossible, or see the empty space of a Chinese painting that makes the world of mountains and rivers co-terminous with the void in the mind of the master. Such art finds equivalents for what is beyond formulation and figuration: whether sensations, intimations or sheer unreason. The communicating self, stilled into nonexistence, seeks another way.

Reticence, with its linguistic care, steps sideways, from stone to stone across the water, finding and leaving equivalences, making each positioning a metaphor for something else in an act of hoped-for communication. The evasions that reticence brings are images that advance and recede; a potential persona who becomes present then fades into absence; a possible relationship between persons, eroticised, ungendered; so to speak, an ontological androgyny. Reticence enables imaginative alternatives through “the intricate evasions of as” that the “more severe/ More harassing master” extemporises, in Wallace Stevens's words from “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven”. Reticence is not hiding anything. On the contrary, it reveals things that are themselves in being unexposed. It is the opposite of a credo, and makes any credo look stylised and symbolic.

The model of reticence is found in the natural world. Nature is there, engaged in one continuous act of self-expression and self-revelation, whether thundering or becalmed. Should I desire to read Nature like a book, perhaps it can be done, but not easily, only over time, and not by myself alone. An endless gleaning has gone on as long as human perception and will continue as long. Birds come and go according to natural cycles, and in response to other changes of which I am not aware. I can observe far better than I can predict. Trees speak of solitude and growth, yet are indistinguishably part of a crowded set of environmental

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relationships. I can see both the trees and the wood better than I can see myself. Flowers I can never experience as a bee or a honeyeater does, but only as *I* experience flowers, aestheticised, which already contains metaphors. The perfect banksia or ginger flower becomes an equivalence even in being itself: one of the endless “evasions of as” that Nature unfolds. The questions we put, if we join, are Nature’s own reticent responses translated into our language.

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