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THE LAWS OF THE UNSPOKEN: SILENCE AND SECRECY

“Each atom of silence
is the opportunity of a ripened fruit!”
Paul Valéry

Of silence, paradoxically, one can only speak. By virtue of the alliance that unites reason and language, the capacity to name and to address indeed obeys a certain desire to restrain excessive communication. Laughter, tears and silence are part of the expressive world: however, they attest to the impossible pitfall of words in the socializing function that we accord them. Of extreme sociality, of meaning that exceeds the bearable, the suitability and the commerce of ideas, the only thing that rises to the surface of the perceptible is that emotional logic whose significations shatter every criterion of certitude and of truth on the real. Confronted with three forms of experience of the unspeakable, we ordinarily allow ourselves to lend credit to the spontaneity of the first two

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(laughter and tears), while the symbolic dimension of silence seems to derive from an invisible orchestration, from a rather simple calculation or from a more elaborate strategy. This difference in nature is essential, and no one would dream of equating what “can” not be said with what “should” not be said. Silence exists as a sort of constraint, interiorized at various levels of the personality, and thereby more social than psychological. Even the involuntary silence of the unknowing person can be codified: as a disciplined avowal or the politeness of the humble who neither tolerates nor imagines any escape from his embarrassment. If speech is born in the abandon of a burst of expressivity, in hilarity or in sobs, it expires in a law, no less severe than the one which endows phrases with semantic coherence. Such a rule thus manifests a universal character socially more affirmed than the multiple syntaxes that organize each linguistic patrimony. That muteness can also be subject to a particular form of apprenticeship shows how each process of socialization determines the price of the communicable and assigns a value to the unformulated. Without pretending to offer a strict typology of this phenomenon, I will distinguish five classes that are capable of comprising its collective aspects.

1. Aphonic coherence or sounded air. This makes it possible to measure the strength of a shared feeling. Effective as a method of exclusion, it reinforces the unity of a group, even when it is a community formed by circumstances. An element of self-confirmation, it pushes to the absolute the dialectic of approval and condemnation. In a more domestic fashion it refers to an economy of speech: something understood, in which an understanding look or gesture speak, in fact, quite sufficiently.

2. The silence of resistance. Here we are in the presence of an agreed imperative of protection; the unspoken word of each individual outlines the boundaries of the network of affinities in the midst of which every word takes its value in the restricted circulation of the admissible. A dissimulated power of sociality, silence is a code, a line of demarcation that can be crossed only by the person who then takes his place in the secret language, welding all elective hierarchy in secession from external powers. Drawing on his study of the Mafia, Michel Maffesoli has given us a model of interpretation in this realm, emphasizing what the organic solidity of a milieu owes to the intransigent respect for rites of

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entrance and for the secretiveness upon which a part of its attractive power rests.¹

3. The silent fraternity of community. This is a suspension of the temporality of worldly affairs that management of the sacred requires. The latter may include a certain number of attitudes that are not necessarily a part of a religious dogma, but these attitudes always include a cultic dimension. When an intense joy or an irreparable grief lays hold of a member of a spiritual family, it seems that each person affiliated to it has a feeling, the authenticity of which is attested to by this mute reaction of the collective body. Mystery needs no words. And it is in this that confession can be compared to an ethical-rational compromise, which the mystic or the ascetic can avoid, for their knowledge is aimed at illumination, at the sacrifice of words. Alongside this solitude that aspires to full proximity with the divine, the faithful member of a church or a sect, as well as the man least attached to the doctrines of salvation, can have the fleeting experience of this break with the administered world. The sensation of discovering one's soul bears him toward another, thanks to which he accedes to a generalized relationship with his natural and human environment. The impotence of words frightens him no longer: rather it causes him to rejoice.

4. The aposiopesis of the unknowing person can be defined as an involuntary cultural misfortune. It is not so much the evident lack of knowledge of information that places him in his uncomfortable situation but rather the drama of which he is the victim: his incapacity to divine the means of access to the sources of information. Listening and remaining silent, nevertheless, remain a choice which he must resolve as soon as all theoretical artifice allows anticipating an even more disastrous conclusion to his weakness. The length of his silence will be a two-edged sword. The time gained during the eventual remarks of his partner in dialogue is experienced in anguish or unconcern for the ultimate outcome: the revelation of his ignorance. Yet the silence of one who is dependent on the instruction of others is the symptom of

¹ See Michel Maffesoli, "La mafia: notes sur la socialité de base", *Cahiers internationaux de sociologie*, vol. LXXIII, Paris, P.U.F., 1982, pp. 363 to 368.

self-reflection, of lucid knowledge of the environment and of the potential risks of pretence. Knowing that one does not know is an invitation to prudence, and the unknowing person will sometimes artfully disguise his forced silence as highly appreciated wisdom.

5. In marks of respect and dignity we find elements of the second and third categories. In the active resistance of the militant as in the resistance of passive masses, silence indicates suppressed anger or scornful indifference to imposition and constraints judged incompatible with the honor of the clan, the party and the family. By agreeing to hold his tongue, the man of honor manifests respect for the group, thereby achieving the dignity conferred by the protection he accords or receives. From the demanding self-control that sometimes leads to heroic fidelity to the principles of an organization to the common politeness of the proud person who creates distances to the unknowing one who accepts them, we can observe a stylization of behavior whose aesthetics of silence leaves as many exemplary traces as the ethics of the obligation to be silent. In this respect certain passages of religious ceremony or the silent celebration that is required by certain places (cemeteries and burial monuments, churches and temples, etc.) tend to highlight the finiteness and the vanity of words and earthly agitation when compared to the immensity of time and space. Silence materializes distance in the immediate, just as it affirms proximity, or even fusion, abolishing remoteness and separation. These extremes cannot be distinguished in their manifestations: "A fool who says nothing cannot be distinguished from a wise man who is silent" as Molière wrote humorously in *Le Dépit amoureux*. Risking no vocal expression, the unknowing person respects, in a sense, and in his manner, what escapes him.

1. THE EXERCISE OF IMPOSSIBILITY

The social function of silence manifests the two-fold impossibility inherent in words: to say nothing or to talk of nothing, an excessive presence or an intolerable absence. The complicity of silence unites those whose consciousness is turned toward this immediate evidence that cannot be conceptualized. In this regard Jean Wahl distinguishes between the silence of perceptive immediation, in

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which the mind is nourished by the real, and that of ecstatic immediation through which it achieves “its union with the highest point of itself”.² In both cases language is transcended, and meaning appears in destitution. How can we describe an experience that, eliminating any conceptual operation, bases its needs outside the classic dichotomy between subject and object and beyond discursive proof?

In Jean Wahl’s first proposition we find ourselves in the reciprocity of passion and action; silence inhabits what M. Blondel was to call “agnition”,³ and Gabriel Marcel “active receptivity”.⁴ Such silence designates inner attention, movements of the soul where we are filled with what is offered to our senses as objects, and it is under these conditions that they appear and control our meditation. In this way silence endows things with an ontic power; Lavelle suggests that “even in the very silence of things, there is a secret invitation to transcend their appearance, to penetrate them, to ascribe to them a hidden life just like our own”.⁵ External silence comes to encounter internal silence; intimacy is the result of the suspension of this violent antagonism that opposes the within and the without, and the words this intimacy bears serve merely to receive the comfort of its powerful control.

J. Wahl’s second consideration is that ecstatic immediation is also a form of silent contemplation. But it has no need of an external element; the soul reflects upon itself. For this extremity of consciousness, discourse is not only superfluous but it would indicate a defect: the irruption of reason into the absolute order of being. If one part of existence escapes being intelligible, the use of language and of the coherence of orality domesticated by the intellect means depriving oneself of attaining that part of the shadow without which one loses the essential unity, the sovereignty of the One. Indeed, every word implies the duality of subject and object; the *cogito* itself supposes this ontological division. However, in contemplation the subject who regards becomes one with

² Jean Wahl, *Traité de métaphysique*, quoted by Joseph Rassam, *Le silence comme introduction à la métaphysique*, p. 70, Publications de l’Université de Toulouse-le-Mirail, Toulouse 1980, Série A, t. 44.

³ M. Blondel, *L’Action*. I, in J. Rassam, *ibid.* p. 52.

⁴ Gabriel Marcel, *Être et Avoir*, in J. Rassam, *ibid.* p. 52.

⁵ Louis Lavelle, *La parole et l’écriture*, in J. Rassam, *ibid.*, p. 61.

the object seen; the ecstatic being raises himself to oneness. The wise man, listening to the silence of the things surrounding him, is turned towards his interiority, for in it he finds all earthly riches. Plotinus explained in this way the silence imposed on initiates of the mystery without falling into the duality of the subject and the object that the effort of initiation aims to transcend.

Silence is ascensional. Georges Bataille twice reminds us in his commentary on Nietzsche that there is a summit to which no language can accede. "Like Kafka's castle, the summit is ultimately but the inaccessible. It eludes us, at least there where we do not cease being human: in speaking".⁶ The incompleteness of existence is precisely a matter of thought, of its concern for analysis and of the written or oral language that "compensates" for the absence of fascination in work and in reason. What cannot be said in the order of words is this unlimited aspect, the transgression of all the opportunities of the intellect. "The summit cannot be affirmed; no one can speak in its name", remarks G. Bataille.⁷ Sovereignty designates what escapes the utilitarian ends of consciousness, to which language remains subordinated. Sovereignty possesses a violence, a monstrosity that cannot in fact be discussed and whose identification with a headless man, acephalic, is the superhuman evidence.

There is, then, an experience in the midst of which consciousness is abolished; it tends toward the unimaginable and prohibits in a sense the words that would correspond to mastery of it. That language exercises this impossibility because it refuses to sacrifice existence to what cannot be said only brings out even more that tragic instant in which meaning is annihilated. When time sanctions non-being, ignorance is filled with the fullness of pleasure or unbearable anguish. "Dying, I can no longer cry out, for the cry that I utter is silence without end", notes G. Bataille, in *Le Coupable*.⁸ No one can escape the inadmissible reckoning of not knowing, the negation implied by the destruction of linearity, of growth and accumulation. Ecstasy, a theopathic state, remains the only possible outcome for this destitution: total pleasure or death.

⁶ Georges Bataille, *Sur Nietzsche*, Paris, Gallimard 1967, p. 71.

⁷ Georges Bataille, *idem*, p. 124.

⁸ Georges Bataille, *Le Coupable*, Paris, Gallimard 1961, p. 88.

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Nevertheless, it is not a matter of opposing the word to silence, according to Georges Bataille. The ungraspable is a breaking off that arises from the interior of words themselves; transforming the real into an expressive world, they ultimately avow that being exists independently from what they express about it. Silence is the experience of this break between the speaking subject and the conscious subject, the seal of the reciprocal impotence that unites them in light of a violence with no rational legitimacy. “What would we be without language?”, asks G. Bataille. “It has made us what we are. It alone, ultimately, reveals the sovereign moment when it is no longer valid. But in the end he who speaks avows his powerlessness.”⁹ Being is affirmed beyond being, silence is imposed on man just as words are given to him. This fulfillment in silence signifies that not only singular reality transcends the sum of its particular contingencies, but that its essentiality resides in what is the most intimate in each of us and through which we are linked to all that is or that disappears. The immediacy of this feeling corresponds precisely to what G. Bataille calls “immediate transcendence”, a disposal to receive the being that is in us, but also to recognize the transcendent community that underlies it in its incommunicable immanence.

The method of Georges Bataille remains, however, inseparable from a problematic of communication and its social parameters. Sainthood and torture, beatitude and wounds take their place in an exuberance of forces, in an expenditure of bodies, an insane exhaustion of energies whose undefinable necessity is still cultural. The excessive aspects of collective living reduce language to its insignificance in relation to reality. When the image or the vision of that which no longer has representation is immobilized in the unimagined—the sublime, horror—the word is obliterated, its difficult effort at meaning collapsing before the cultural negation of every barbarism, just as before the barbarous affirmation of culture. There is no adequate discursive system of reference when the assigned place of the body is lost in one or the other extremes of this possibility, eroticism or the charnel house, for we are here at the very limits of humanity, beyond the means by which an individual can recognize himself as subject.

⁹ Georges Bataille, *L'Érotisme*, Paris, U.G.E., 1965, coll. 10/18 n. 221, p. 304.

The functionality of usage along with its socializing effect give language its inaugural presence and the sterile character of its normativity. Claude Lévi-Strauss affirms that “on the day when we have resolved the problem of the origin of language, we will have understood how culture can be inserted in nature and how the transition from one order to another can occur. But the problem brings out the fundamental difference between human thought and that of animals ... the appearance of a specifically human function which is the symbolic function.”¹⁰ It is interesting to recall that G.W.F. Hegel, in his *Philosophical Propaedeutics*, has inscribed the emergence of language within the most extensive work of the imagination. The word is nothing other than the sign of a thought, and the imagination then goes on to endow it with the representation of a non-present object. Hegel demonstrates that two realities are presented to our senses, one of which definitively rejects the attribution of the signified. “The representation means no more here than the essence and the significance of what is sensorially present, that is of a simple sign. The content ‘given’ is opposed to a content that is ‘produced’ by us”.¹¹ To undertake to violate silence would certainly be the first civilizational risk, and in the imperfection that flows from this originates the suffering of language: its relation to forgetfulness, to truth and to absence.

The unavoidable presence of words is built on the absence of things; and if words can say nothing of death, it is because they are born in the sacrifice of the objects they designate. They appear like the phantasms of things that silence envelops. Maurice Blanchot has described how this privation of being introduced language into the world of irreparable misunderstanding. “To name is that violence that isolates what is named in order to have it in the convenient form of a name.”¹² Should this tyranny of the word be understood as the uncertain end of the human condition? In *L’Arrêt de mort*, M. Blanchot seems to be resigned to this possibility. “The regret that I feel upon having lost silence is

¹⁰ Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Entretiens* with Georges Charbonnier, Paris, Plon Julliard, 1961.

¹¹ G.W.F. Hegel, *Propédeutique philosophique*, translated by M. de Gandillac, Paris, Denoël, 1971, coll. Médiations n. 26, introduction, § 5, p. 19.

¹² Maurice Blanchot, *Le livre à venir*, Paris, Gallimard, 1969, p. 43.

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without measure. I cannot say what sadness invades the man who has spoken once. Immobile sadness, itself doomed to muteness; through it, the unbreathable becomes the element that I breathe."¹³ For this reason it is hardly appropriate to rank language solely in the realm of communication; rather it stills the anguish and the fear of the non-knowable. It therefore acts in emptiness; in it everything that silence fulfills disappears. It is not possible to reduce the subject to the words he proclaims; intersubjectivity begins with the silent implication, *a priori*, of others—the ontological community that sociality produces; for the power of what is at stake is greater than the power of what is said.

2. UNBEKNOWN TO WORDS

A sociology of language through silence would merit a study of the social functions of mute qualities, whose delicacy produces the charm of human relations, for example, tact, restraint, discretion or modesty. Silence is at the heart of every opening because it is the waiting area for an encounter: the return to self, the arrival of the other, the presence of the sacred. Returning to a theme that is dear to me, I could say that social attraction is an incomprehensible phenomenon if we eliminate the idea of a transcendental community, which profoundly penetrates each person. As a result the most unspeakable reality that defines us owes its concreteness to this communion. In this respect the incommunicable singularity of beings is hardly a negative limitation that would make all association vain or artificial; the human person exists in the actualization of all his positions, and it is thereby that he is linked to others. What sanctions the irreducibility of consciousnesses is also what unites them. The test of silence manifests a certitude of unity, immanent to social relations and which aspires to promote self-consciousness in each consciousness. This sentiment is perceptible in the five types of silence that we indicated previously, including the aposiopsis of the unknowing person. Choosing to be silent, he implicitly opts in favor of a logic of consent that only

¹³ Maurice Blanchot, *L'Arrêt de mort*, Paris, Gallimard, 1977, coll. L'imaginaire, n. 15, p. 57.

indicates the imperative of generosity borne by the diversity of consciousnesses. His muteness does not diminish him but establishes him in his undeniable singularity. Likewise, it is not necessarily correct to see silence as the vehicle or the proof of indifference. Indifference can also exist in the act of speaking, in the tone of voice for example; thus it does not partake of the specificity of silence since quite often “language, by breaking silence, accomplishes what silence sought but could not achieve.”¹⁴

The contribution of Max Scheler to the phenomenology of interpersonal relations is highly instructive with regard to the role of silence in human situations. Establishing the existential nature of communication, he demonstrates that the relation between one person and another is one of being and not of knowing. Indeed the word is not an act that suffices to admit the presence of another. In fact the opposite should be understood; recognition of an *alter ego* is prior to dialogue. Language is not the basis for communication, but we would say instead that an inaugural communication lies at the origin of the invention of language. Max Scheler postulates the idea of immediate contact in which understanding, reason and the word add nothing to what is but are dependent on Being. “... It is the most vital, the most intensive and the most direct exchange of experience (*Erlebnisverkehr*) with the world itself, that is with things, that is at stake here, and in particular with the things that are themselves given in ... the act of experiencing (*Akt des Erlebens*) and that in this act alone are presented in all their ipseity.”¹⁵ Silence is a means of experiencing an external presence: perceiving an individual or an object becomes an act of pure understanding, a co-effectuation of experiences through which meaning is targeted identically. Nevertheless, the concept of interpersonality developed by this philosopher challenges the possibility of objective intellection of the other and of what he calls “the community of persons”. The cognitive experience of others remains an unintelligible and

¹⁴ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Le visible et l'invisible*, Paris, N.R.F. Gallimard, 1964, p. 230.

¹⁵ Max Scheler, *Phänomenologie und Erkenntnistheorie, Gesammelte Werke*, ed. M. Scheler and M.S. Frings, Bern, Francke, 1972, vol. 10, p. 380-381.

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perfectly irrational participation, a knowledge that tends to completeness but that remains limited before the sovereignty of the other. Thus perception of the environment belongs to an affective, more precisely affectual, order before which the efficacy of discursive thinking founders. The rational explanation remains in the background with respect to what tends only toward experience.

Max Scheler's phenomenological approach posits the person in his spiritual reality, unobjectifiable in that he is only received by means of a participation that is a modality for the actualization of being rather than a scientific or reasoned approximation. In this way M. Scheler arrives at characterizing the individual by his capacity for silence, which should not be interpreted as an absence of words but in the manner of a vital potency that exceeds the significance of terms. "The Understanding of self, which is the prior condition required so that one person can make another understand (by offering oneself to the other's perception, by revealing oneself to another) what he is, what he thinks, what he wants, what he likes, etc. is linked, and even very closely so, to the technique of silence."¹⁶ We can understand this remark as designating an aesthetic inclination, an orientation of consciousness that is open to the play of emotions, to the risks of intuitions, to the random chance of reciprocal attraction. In this respect expression and communication can seem antagonistic, an act that can be affirmed only in words demonstrates the imperfection of the presence that gave it birth. Language, then, seems all the more necessary in that communication is less certain; and when the latter has been established, speech disappears because it has lost its essential motivation. The social dimension of Max Scheler's comprehensive phenomenology is illustrated for us by his theory of the "Community of Persons".

We can observe daily the control of an *a priori* order of values that decides our tastes and our preferences without veritable explications. Nevertheless, unjustifiability, which either attracts us to or repels us from an object, can be shared and appreciated in the same manner by a more or less large group of individuals. The

¹⁶ Max Scheler, *Nature et formes de la sympathie*, Petite Bibliothèque Payot, 1971, p. 329, note 1.

unjustified is socially consensual only when a person discovers in each of his real experiences the accompanying background of a set of real experiences of the same nature. All that is proposed to perception thus stands out as “partial being” against the background of nature unlimited in space and time. Max Scheler presumes that the singularity of a real psychic experience is rendered to itself, and thereby communicable in its originality, through the “experiencing-of-an-experience-experienced-in-itself”; in it the individual enters with the effectuation of his various acts as a member into the midst of a broader community of persons.

According to him, a two-fold importance must be attributed to this experiencing-of-a-real-experience. On the ethical level it manifests the cultural incorporation of humans in a social sphere in which they show solidarity for one another, in a Durkheimian sense, as co-responsible for the collective and effective action of the community. On a level that can be called aesthetic, if we accept with Georg Simmel that “sociability is a playful form of association”¹⁷ of an artistic type, the experiencing-of-a-real-experience brings into play the possible existence-in-fact of society, that is the co-experiencing-of-a-real-experience, expressed in the post- and co-perceiving-affectively-with-one-another (*im Nach- und Miterleben, Nach und Miteinanderfühlen*) that are the fundamental acts of the perception-of-others from within.¹⁸

Language does not occupy a predominant position in the social unity that flows from this description. The act of understanding and the co-experiencing-of-a-real-experience in no way imply an objectalization of this order. As moral subject within this totality, each individual is given as “co-author”, man-with-others and co-responsible for the various centers of experiencing the real-experience that immediately defines him as a common-person. Thus silence only confirms how the particularity of a situation or of a phenomenon are brought to act; this particularity coincides with what is given by itself, what is there, inevitably, in the experience and in intuition.

¹⁷ Georg Simmel, “Sociologie de la sociabilité”, trans. by Isaac Joseph, in *URBI*, p. CX, n. III, Paris, March 1980.

¹⁸ Max Scheler, *Le formalisme en éthique et l'éthique matérielle des valeurs*, trans. by M. de Gandillac, Paris, Gallimard, 1955, pp. 519-526. On this last idea, a comparison with the theory of *Einfühlung* is useful; cf. Wilhelm Worringer, *Abstraction et Einfühlung*, trans. by E. Martineau, Paris, Klincksieck, 1978.

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3. THE COMMUNAL MOVEMENT

To imagine that silence is the language of the being within us leads to supposing that it is likewise the law of the being outside of us. A presentiment of the transcendence of the social, the silent withdrawal becomes a voluntary participation in the communal movement, which exceeds the specific aspect of the rites of a religion or of an instituted dogma. It hallows the fact that society is a present entity, that its presence is a victory over non-being, the inorganic, chaos. Silence is precisely what makes it possible for us to perceive society as a being. The structure of collective human emotion is nothing other than the bringing into evidence of being-together in its transcendence of all instants. Georges Bataille attempted to bring this out many times, particularly in the following passage. "... Union between men is not immediate union, ... it is brought about around a very strange reality and an incomparable obsessive force; ... if human relations cease to pass through this middle term, through this kernel of *violent silence**, they are emptied of their human character."¹⁹ We can think that it is the tendential collapse of this sacred center of all societal gravitation that has made the community less powerful than formerly, to the advantage of the individual, now protected within an impersonal legal framework, subject to the reign of equivalence and market value, and thus linked directly and almost anonymously to others. In this context, a sociology of silence and of secrecy corresponds to the inevitable social affirmation of the communal link, for which intimate networks, confraternities, sects and separate societies constitute concrete responses.

For Georg Simmel, this "Sociology of intimate relations" integrates the sometimes obscure motivations of subjects in the social fabric. Secrecy—which requires silence—belongs indeed to the process of communication in its extreme manifestations: total fidelity, absolute loyalty, the gift of self. It places man in a position of plenitude, there where external society addresses itself to him only from the angle of his civic, professional or familial

* My italics.

¹⁹ Georges Bataille, "Attraction et répulsion. II. La structure sociale" in Denis Hollier, *Le collège de sociologie*, Paris, Gallimard, 1979, coll. Idées 413, p. 210.

differentiation. It reintroduces the signification of confidence in light of the challenge that is thrown up to it by the increasing objectivation of culture, of which G. Simmel writes that, "its phenomena are more and more impersonal elements that absorb less and less the subjective totality of the individual."²⁰ Silence measures the respect for rules of discretion, respect that is due to that which goes beyond the simple effect of socialization. Better, it reintroduces the classic division of the profane and the sacred since it determines an invisible world, concealed alongside manifest society.

Silence fosters the fascination inherent in secrecy and raises the secret beyond its content. It confers on him who possesses the secret a superior identity and endows his private life with a stronger autonomy before civil society. G. Simmel indicates in this respect that "the social conditions for a strong differentiation between persons permit and require secrecy and, conversely, secrecy incarnates and intensifies this differentiation."²¹ The aristocratic separation that the secret society implies *vis-à-vis* the social body is thus the silent frontier of a differentiation in the midst of which the person regains the feeling of his identity by this belonging, which personalizes him within the closed group and depersonalizes him in the broader social world.

Secrecy and silence function through the lack of energy and vitality of the administrated social body and the discourses that this causes to circulate. They unite what is apparently separated and introduce an ornamental distinction, to which G. Simmel draws our attention, moreover, in the midst of the public sphere by creating a distance and a curiosity in the profane. Ultimately the sect, the religious order or the confraternity claim to assume the mystery of being-together that civil society tends to disfigure through the secularized mechanisms of solidarity and control. In silence and secret, the group of initiates does not vow itself essentially to its rituals of over-socialization and self-affirmation; it hopes to remind each member of the association that the

²⁰ *The Sociology of George Simmel*, p. 317. Tr. by K. Wolff, New York, Free Press of Glencoe; Robert A. Nisbet, *La tradition sociologique*, tr. by M. Azuelos, Paris, P.U.F., 1984, p. 133.

²¹ *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, *op. cit.*, p. 334ff; Robert A. Nisbet, *op. cit.*

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community itself rests on what cannot be said or avowed. The transfiguration of social totality, silence is the immaterial territory of the communal movement, the primordial act and the ultimate stage of the emotion that unifies. It is what Maurice Blanchot tried to define as follows: "There could not be community if the first and last event that in each one marks the end of the ability to be was not common (birth, death)."²² What radically dispossesses the individual, and of which silence will be the most powerful expression, is thus that which ordains man to community. Living-together is an abandon of self in which interiority recognizes an opportunity in that which transcends it by surrendering itself, beyond its finiteness, to the experience lived in common.

The secret of the elective community, beyond its specific content, resides in the form of living together that it imposes. Only the transmission of the intransmissible seems to it to be an operation worthy of solidarity. Silence sets the price for every word: ecstasy, fanaticism or piety are but the modalities of this evident fact, each day overturned and denied in the spectacle of the external world. The technical reproducibility of oral messages, recording and later playback of the voice, has brought to its paradoxical limit the relation between language and death, between the uniqueness and the bodiliness of meaning. In the film *Diva* by Jean-Jacques Bénéix, we observe two variants of the law of silence in the destinies of the singer and of the prostitute. Whereas the former guarantees the integral value of her singing by forbidding any reproducible sound recording, thereby transforming each of her concerts into an original work, the prostitute attempts to flee her state by telling her story to a tape recorder, naming the names of the members of a network of panders. That the voice of the *Diva* returns to silence after each performance combines the beauty of her talent with the tragic atmosphere of her destiny; reproduction would put an end to what the performance makes immortal. The only testimony to the survival of the prostitute is the drama of a voice, become essential, and which the death of its owner will perhaps not erase. One preserves her singularity where the other

²² Maurice Blanchot, *La communauté inavouable*, Paris, Éd. de Minuit, 1983, p. 22.

hopes to lose hers. The law of silence determines the distance that separates drama from tragedy in the universe of the technological treatment of the word. The communal movement materializes a space for temporality in which affective, emotional participation suspends duration in the place that receives it. Of this nothing can be said, for words belong to the tragic or dramatic condition of existence, of which they express, without ever exhausting it, the uncertain significance.

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