

The Silent Majority

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Silence is a Lifestyle

IN *The Tin Drum*, Günter Grass wrote of a boy who didn't want to grow up. Young Oskar finds the world around him too absurd, and quietly resolves to always remain a child. Whereupon some otherworldly power fulfills his wish and he becomes a midget. This story is a little on the mystical side, but very illuminating. Though it's impossible to always remain a child, it is possible to always remain silent. Many people around me have personalities much like mine – on public occasions we won't say a word, but we can hardly stop talking in private. Put another way, we will say anything to people we can trust, and nothing to those we can't. At first I thought this was because we had experienced that period of cruelty (the Cultural Revolution), but later I discovered this is common among Chinese people. The writer Long Yingtai, exasperated, once asked why Chinese people never spoke. She had lived abroad for many years, and had more or less become a foreigner, frank and plainspoken. She viewed silence as a form of cowardice, but this is incorrect; silence is a lifestyle, one chosen not only by Chinese, but also by foreigners.

Here's one example I know of: Dmitri Shostakovich, a composer from the former Soviet Union. There was a long period of time during which he only wrote music, refusing to say a word. Later, he dictated a thick book of memoirs, signed his name on each page, and then died. As I understand it, the subject of his memoirs is for the most part his experience of keeping

silent. I found great pleasure in reading the book – of course, I myself was in silence at the time. But I lent the book to a friend of mine who belonged to the world of speech, and he gained no pleasure from it whatsoever. He found it dismal and depressing. One passage in the book described the Soviet Union in the 1930s, when people were abruptly disappearing, everyone was very frightened and no one spoke to one another. When neighbours had a dispute they didn't dare quarrel, and so expressed themselves by other means, which was to spit into each others' tea kettles. I haven't a clue as to what Shostakovich looked like, but every time I imagine him doing this I burst out laughing. My friend did not laugh at all when he read this passage; he felt that spitting was ugly, low class, and unenlightened. I hardly dared debate the point with him – further debate would have fallen under the purview of speech, and speech is the line of demarcation between the worlds of *yin* and *yang*.

Most people enter the classroom by the age of seven, and are subjected to the edification of speech. I believe it was a little earlier for me, because as far back as I can remember there was a loudspeaker installed outside which kept up a racket throughout the daylight hours. From this speech I learned that one could smelt steel in an open earthen hearth. These resembled the ranges we used for cooking but with a small bellows attached, which would buzz and hum like a group of dung beetles in flight. They smelted cherry-red flakes of metal, stuck together in blobs that looked like cow manure. That was steel, an uncle holding a drill rod told me. That year I was six, and for a long time afterwards whenever I heard the word 'steel' I'd think of cow manure. From that speech I also learned that a *mu* of land can produce three hundred thousand *jin* of grain; then we nearly starved to death. In short, ever since I was young I haven't had much faith in the spoken word, and the more vehement the voice, the more fervently it is pitched, the more I doubt. This habit of doubt had its origins in my starving belly. Compared with any speech, starvation holds the greater truth.

There is a great misconception in the world, which is that people's ideas are conveyed through speech. If that were the case, then speech would be the perfect embodiment of thought. I say it's a misconception because there is always a hidden meaning to things, and speech can convey much which seems contradictory to what is said. Ever since I began to be aware of things I've heard people say: *Our generation was born in a sacred time; how blessed*

we are; to us is given the sacred mission of liberating all the world's suffering people, and so forth. People of a certain age found this talk deeply inspiring, they loved to hear it. But I was always a little doubtful: how did I manage to stumble into so many wonderful things? Furthermore, I found this way of talking too unreserved. And reservation was a part of my upbringing. One day during the three years of trouble, our family sat down to dinner and found a little piece of bacon in every bowl. When my younger brother saw this he was unable to contain his elation, he ran to our balcony and shouted for all the world to hear: our family has meat for dinner! Then he was dragged back inside by my father and beaten savagely. This sort of education has left me rather withdrawn. So, listening to others talk about how blessed we are, how sacred our mission, others are suffering but we do not suffer, I always think: supposing we really are as lucky as all that, wouldn't it be better not to talk about it? Of course, I'm not saying I won't carry out my sacred duty. But here's what I think about all the world's suffering people: instead of constantly telling them how we're going to liberate them and punish their oppressors, wouldn't it be better to keep quiet, and then one day liberate them all of a sudden, and give them an unexpected treat? In short, I'm always considering the practical aspects of things, and considering them very carefully. Childhood experience, upbringing, and native prudence have all led me to keep silent.

The Education of Speech

When I was young, speech seemed to me like a cold pool of water, it always gave me goosebumps. But no matter what, people come into this world as to the water's edge, and they've got to jump in sooner or later. I never imagined I would keep silent right up to the age of forty; if I had, I might not have had the courage to go on living. But at any rate, the speech I heard was not always that crazy – it was crazy and sane by turns. Before the age of fourteen, I hadn't yet resolved to live a life of silence.

When we were young, it was our place to listen to the speech of others. Later, when people of my age began themselves to speak, it made a terrible impression on me. A friend of mine wrote a book about her misfortunes during the Cultural Revolution, the book was titled *Blood Lineage*. As you can probably guess, her family background was bad. She wanted me to write a preface to the book, which got me thinking about the things

I had seen and heard during those years. When the Cultural Revolution began I was fourteen years old, in the first year of middle school. One day there was an abrupt and shocking change: one part of our class suddenly belonged to the 'Five Reds', while another part belonged to the 'Five Blacks'. My own situation was an exception; it wasn't clear to which group I belonged. Of course, this red and black business wasn't our own invention, and we hadn't initiated the change. In that sense we were not to blame. A few among us should be held responsible for bullying their classmates, is all.

As I see it, the red students had all at once gained a great advantage, and thus deserved congratulation. Our black classmates were all at once saddled with great misfortune, and deserved sympathy. But before I could go around expressing my congratulations or sympathy to each, some red students shaved their heads, strapped on big leather belts, and stood at the gate of the school asking everyone who entered: 'What's your background?' They questioned their own classmates particularly closely, and when they heard tell of a bad background they would hiss one word between clenched teeth: 'Whelp!' Of course I could understand their delight at suddenly belonging to the Five Reds, but that they should therefore call their classmates whelps in public was surely going too far. I thought then what I think now: speech may have a great deal to teach us, but good and evil are nevertheless self-evident. What speech is forever teaching us is that we are born unequal. That some should be high and some low is an eternal truth, though you may choose to disregard it.

When I was in sixth grade, the reading given over the summer was *A Letter from the South*. It was about the Vietnamese people's struggle to resist the United States and save their country, and it was full of executions, beatings and torture. Reading it filled me with the strangest ideas. I was entering puberty then, already more or less on the verge of sexual deviance. What I'm saying is this: suppose that education had had its full intended effect; suppose those tenders of the human garden, those engineers of the human soul, had realised their designs for me; how could I possibly have escaped with my humanity, and resisted becoming bloodthirsty and cruel? Fortunately, people do not learn only from books, they also learn from silence, and this is the chief reason for the survival of my humanity. As for speech, what it taught me was: all 'bull-demons' and 'snake-spirits' must be swept aside,

the Cultural Revolution must be carried out to the bitter end. During that time, speech stood in direct opposition to humanity. If you were to believe it entirely, you would no longer be human.

The Teachings of Silence

I'll explain how my humanity survived intact: At the very beginning of the Cultural Revolution, I was living on a university campus. One day, returning from outside the campus, I met a large crowd entering by the front gate. Walking in front was a group of college students engaged in furious debate, their voices pitched high; of course they debated in the popular argot of the day, and in addition to Chairman Mao's teachings they kept bringing up the 'Six Points'. The so-called Six Points were rules that the central government had issued regarding the progression of the Cultural Revolution, one of which was 'Conduct Verbal Struggle, Not Armed Struggle': a rule simply made to be broken. One person stood at the centre of this quarrelling group, but his lips were tightly sealed, he didn't say a word, and there appeared to be blood at the corner of his mouth. Half of the students present were pressing him with questions and urging him to speak, the other half were protecting him, telling him to keep silent. Struggle between groups of people was common during the Cultural Revolution, but this was unusual. As for the rest of the trailing crowd, they were mostly boys of about my age, their lips tightly closed, not saying a word, no blood on their mouths, following behind like damned souls. Some of the college students wanted to hold them back but couldn't – when they blocked the way forward the boys just went around them, keeping silent throughout. This was a strange sight indeed, because the boys from our compound were typically ferocious. They thought nothing of quarreling or fighting, and even college students might not have been a match for them, but today they were surprisingly docile. I immediately joined them and asked what was happening but, strangely, the boys ignored me. Their mouths tightly closed and their eyes straight ahead, they marched forward steadfastly – as if they'd all been struck by some mass hysteria.

As we understand mass hysteria, there's one type where the subjects do not speak, only flail and dance about. Another type results in unceasing chatter, without the flailing. All that the two types have in common is a complete disconnect between that which is thought and that which is expressed.

But the boys from the college campus were not hysterical. I grabbed one

I knew well and got the whole story out of him: Two students had met that morning in the washroom of the dormitory, and started arguing about their differing points of view. The argument went on and on, and eventually turned into a fight. One of them was hurt, and sent to the hospital. The other wasn't hurt and so was naturally blamed as the aggressor; this was the boy walking at the head of the group. In theory, the crowd was on its way to some organisation or other (either the Campus Revolutionary Committee or the Preparations Committee, I cannot remember which) to state their case, but in truth they were just engaged in aimless Brownian motion around the campus. There was another piece to the story: The wounded student had been beaten shapeless, and a part of his ear could not be located. Some Agatha Christie-style reasoning determined that the piece of ear could be nowhere but in the mouth of the student who'd administered the beating, providing he hadn't swallowed it. This particular gentleman not only had a violent temper, but when agitated was known to bite, and bite repeatedly. Anyway, this gentleman now had two choices: either spit the ear out in front of everyone, proving his dastardliness, or swallow it. When I heard all of this I instantly joined the following crowd, pressing my lips together, clamping my jaw shut, and even feeling I held something slightly salty in my mouth.

Now I must admit I didn't see the conclusion of this business; the day was getting on, and there would have been trouble if I'd returned home late. But I was very wrapped up in the progression of events; I hardly slept that night. Someone else told me how it ended: the biter finally spat out the ear, and was then apprehended. I don't know what you'll make of this story, but at the time I felt as if I'd been relieved of a great weight: humanity had ultimately prevailed. Humans will not eat their own kind, nor swallow a piece of another human. I bring this story up to illustrate a little of what I've learned from silence. You may say that these things are not enough, but they are good things – though my methods of study shouldn't be encouraged.

By proposing a college student who bites people as a model of humanity I will certainly anger some. But I have my reasons. A violent-tempered person given to using his teeth is yet unwilling to swallow the flesh of others: There's something particularly powerful about this lesson. Besides, during the course of the Cultural Revolution we scarcely had any better models to learn from.

For a time you would often hear older people saying our generation was

no good; the Red Guards of the Cultural Revolution were of low character. Considering that we weren't products of orphanages but brought up properly in schools, our families and teachers ought to bear a certain responsibility for our low behaviour. And really, everyone concerned themselves too much with our moral conduct – everything has not only a dark side, but also a bright side. Later, we were sent to work in the countryside, and while there we were very kind and considerate to one another. This, at least, is worth noting. My personal experience can serve as proof: once, during the harvest season, I got very sick and thought I was done for. No one came to care for me except for a classmate who was also sick, but who nevertheless half-carried, half-dragged me across the Nanwan River to the hospital. Though the river wasn't deep, it was a good five kilometres wide at that time; it had flooded so you couldn't even find the river banks. Supposing someone else had become sick, I would have done the same for him. It's things like this that make me think we weren't bad at all, and there was no need to bury ourselves in the countryside and never return, nor to take certain hints and commit mass suicide, making space for the next generation. For all that was good about our character and our behaviour, we must thank the teachings of silence.

Choices in Silence

There's one thing that the majority of people know: that we can choose between the culture of speech and the culture of silence. I've experienced many such opportunities to choose. For example, in the countryside, some of my teammates chose to say a little something, and went to the 'Activists' Congress' to 'tell their studies', expecting to derive some benefit from it. Some of our younger friends may be unfamiliar with these terms, which I'll explain briefly: An Activists' Congress was a 'Congress of Activists in the Living Study and Implementation of Chairman Mao's Works', and to tell of one's studies was to talk about one's experiences and gains in the course of living out Chairman Mao's teachings. Anyone attending the congress was an activist, and to be an activist was a good thing. A further opportunity open to students was – provided you spoke up during the congress and were active in social movements – to become a student cadre, and being a student cadre was also a good thing. I willingly passed up both of these opportunities. Now, those who have chosen the culture of speech may not believe that I

passed them up willingly. They may think I was simply not a good speaker or didn't make the grade, that I wasn't worthy of speech. Speech is power, and power is yet another good thing, and many people go to great lengths to enter the societies of speech, even struggling over the 'right to speak'. If I say I willingly gave this up, some will not believe me – fortunately, there are also many who will. My main reason was that, once you've entered these societies, then you must speak their language, you must even use their language to think, and I find this tiresome. As I see it, those societies are mired in anaemia.

Twenty years ago I was a sent-down youth in Yunnan. How the local people viewed us, besides noting that we dressed a little better and had whiter skin, is a complete mystery to me. I believe they thought of us as people standing onstage, and felt they had to speak to us in stage language – at least, that's how they thought when we first arrived. This was a mistake, of course, but it was not offensive. A more offensive mistake was that they believed we were all rich and did everything they could to hike the marketplace prices, to the point where we were paying two or three times what the locals paid for every little thing we bought. Later, we learned an unusual trick for shopping: instead of bargaining, we'd toss them a wad of *mao* bills and let them count it; meanwhile we'd walk off with whatever we wanted to buy. By the time they'd finished counting, both buyer and goods were gone. In the beginning we would give a fair price, but later, some of us gave less and less, even mixing *fen* in with the *mao*. Even if I were to proclaim myself innocent, that I'd never done this sort of thing, you'd never believe me, so I'll make no contentions. One day one of the students was finally grabbed by a villager while he was paying this way – of course, I don't mean myself. The villager had made up his mind to thrash the student, but he first stammered and stuttered and at last spat out: 'Hey! No! Mao's Thought, eh? Resist Individualism!' Later, we went home and laughed ourselves into convulsions over what he'd said. These days, as you can imagine, the villager might say something like: 'Hey! No! Four Emphases, eh? Five Beautifications!' and we would laugh ourselves to death just the same. I give this example not to take cheap shots or to be clever, but to illustrate the impoverishment of speech. Using it to actually say anything becomes difficult, not to mention using it to think.

I passed many years in silence: in the countryside, as a worker, as a college student, and later as a teacher at university. Keeping silent as a teacher sounds

impossible, but I taught technical courses and only spoke technical language at the podium, and I vanished as soon as class was out. The way I see it, you can keep silent no matter what it is you do. Of course, I also had a life-long passion for writing fiction, but I never tried to publish what I wrote, I still maintained my silence. The reasons for this silence are simple: I could not trust those who belonged to the societies of speech. The experiences of my short life had taught me that those societies were nothing but yammering madhouses. What I doubted then was not just the group that said a *mu* of land could produce three hundred thousand *jin* of grain and talked about a 'spiritual atomic bomb' – I doubted all societies of speech. If you could prove to me today that I'd mistakenly condemned the whole because of a part, my happy relief would know no bounds.

Once, There Was Such a Thing as a Speech Tax

You may not believe me when I say I kept silent for so many years; you weren't born yesterday, after all. You don't believe that I've never 'stated my position' during a meeting; that I have never written a criticism, and you'd be right to doubt: I can prove neither that I am mute nor that I am illiterate, and in truth I have done both these things. But by my standards, none of that is real speech, but instead the payment of a kind of speech tax. We've heard that, in years past, even great people sometimes 'spoke contrary to their own hearts', and thus we can see that the tax is applied very broadly indeed. Because of the speech tax we cannot be held responsible for everything that we have said: our superiors made us say it. But if all speech is only a payment of tax, then we're in trouble. What can all that speech be used for? It's talk, not money; it can't be used to build dams, nor power stations. Once paid, it can only be left there to rot, to be mocked by future generations. Of course, I shouldn't concern myself about the uses of expropriated speech; perhaps it has other uses I've not thought of. What I want to say is, the collection of the speech tax has been going on since ancient times. Those who speak have always known of the need to pay it. That need has been absorbed into their blood, and realised in their mouths.

I believe that the world of speech varies between two extremes. At one extreme is the speech of sages, which is freely given. At the other is the speech of the silent, which is coin-levied by force. All speech between these two extremes is difficult to resolve: it is both an offering, and a payment. There is

a tax official in the hearts of all those who speak. Chinese scholars have a very strong sense of their obligation to society, but this is only taxation, it is being a good taxpayer. That may be an ugly way of putting it; a better way would be to say they take the troubles of the world upon their shoulders.

I once was a silent person, meaning that I did not like to speak in meetings, nor to write articles. Recently this much has changed: I'll speak during meetings, and occasionally write a little something. I have had a strong reaction to this change, and feel as though I lost my childhood innocence. It means betraying years of long-standing practice; that I no longer belong to the silent majority. This not only causes me pain, but also a faint sense of depression. The resumption of speech does not mean the resumption of my tax-paying responsibilities – if that were the case, I would be nothing but a giant blowhard. My responsibilities lie elsewhere.

A few years ago, I participated in some sociological research and thus came into contact with some 'disadvantaged groups', the most unusual of these being homosexuals. After doing this research I suddenly realised: the so-called disadvantaged groups were simply groups whose speech went un-said. Because they had not spoken out, other people thought they didn't exist, or were very distant. People still don't believe that homosexuals exist in China. Abroad, people know homosexuals exist, but don't know who they are. Two scholars in the humanities wrote a book for homosexuals entitled *Word is Out*. Later, I had another sudden realisation: that I belonged to the greatest disadvantaged group in history, the silent majority. These people keep silent for any number of reasons, some because they lack the ability or the opportunity to speak, others because they are hiding something, and still others because they feel, for whatever reason, a certain distaste for the world of speech. I am one of these last groups and, as one of them, I have a duty to speak of what I have seen and heard.

First Write Well, Then Try to Improve Yourself or Others

Most of what I write falls under the purview of literature. In my opinion, so-called literature should go like this: just write well, and to hell with the rest of it. I can think of nowhere but literature where my odd ideas would fit in. Blame literature for giving me a foothold within this society; a foothold from which I can attack society itself, and attack the entire world of the *yang*.

A few years ago, I was studying in America. A foreign devil there once

asked me: You Chinese people talk about *yin* and *yang*; how come all good things belong to the *yang*, and nothing good is left for the *yin*? This is because the right to speak belongs to the *yang*, so, of course, it will have nothing good to say about the *yin*. Confucius himself couldn't avoid this convention, and attacked 'women and people of mean character' in a lump. This phrase of his has been repeated for thousands of years but I have never heard a single response from the subjects of the attack. Everyone takes pains not to be a person of mean character, but no one's yet resolved the question of how not to be a woman. Even in this modern age, female-to-male sex change operations are a point of contention, and widely discouraged – if there were too many false men in the world, the real men wouldn't be able to find wives. Put simply, the things that are said by the societies of speech will never meet with rebuttal. You could be charitable and call this 'saying one's piece'; it could be described less charitably with a popular phrase describing immoral behavior: 'Beating the deaf, cursing the mute, and trampling on graves'. Thinking about it, the deaf, the mute, and the dead all belong to the *yin*, so it is only natural that they should forever meet with misfortune. But I know one fact for absolute certain: anyone who speaks will do so imperfectly, even saints will speak imperfectly, and these imperfections are not trivial. Any normal person who spoke this way would be considered schizophrenic, and in real life, this is how we must view those who 'say their piece'.

By now I have also wormed my way into the societies of speech, and this can only mean one thing: the societies of speech are already crumbling. In light of this unfortunate truth there have been many calls to action: Let us rebuild China's spiritual structure, and so forth. As someone originally of a different society, I have a suggestion for my friends in this new one: Let us examine ourselves. Have we become stupid? Have we become mad? There are many mirrors that can be used for self-examination: Chinese tradition is one, foreign culture is another. Another, even larger mirror is right by our side – the silent majority. All this is simply spoken from the heart, of course. A few years ago, when I had just emerged from silence, I wrote a book and gave it to someone I respected. He didn't like the book, he thought that books weren't supposed to be like that. In his view, books should educate the people, and elevate their souls – and these words are worth their weight in gold. But among all the people of the world, the one I wish most to elevate is myself. This is contemptible; it is selfish; it is also true.