

Silence, Please

Some claim community is founded in conversation. And it is true that the slightest exchange establishes a common ground, and these fellowships, however transient, may originate even as we ask directions in a strange part of town or share an opinion on the weather. But I have also followed long stretches of silence on the back roads of France and Italy and felt refreshed by the lack of gab. As the kilometers turned on the odometer, I have gone a whole day without speaking and have often played with the fancy that the facility for speech had left me. When I stopped for a night's lodging, I might have to employ sign language. With or without bath? I would stand dumbly before the question.

To travel in a foreign land where one is not all that easy with the language spoken imposes a solitude that some find unacceptable, even frightening. The isolation oppresses them, and they are stung by the sense that they draw breath in a surrounding that gets along without their

input. The more philosophical may hear the ominous soundings of the ultimate alienation that awaits us all. But I embrace this recess from language and enjoy its curious freedom.

Speaking-up is an attribute we supposedly admire; we claim to esteem the outspoken personality. "He says what he thinks," is an assessment given as praise though the value of the thought is sometimes questionable. These days our common airwaves are saturated with the gabble of so-called authorities, talking all at once, and this rude furor is meant to simulate intellectual discussion. The racket makes no sense nor is it meant to do so for our time has become impatient with content.

I can give no inventory of the thoughts that ran silently and probably not all that deeply through my mind as I followed Route D1 south on a beautiful day in the Meuse Valley. If I refer to my journal kept during that tour, I will find only fragmentary accounts: details of landscape and food eaten, the aspect of a village, a historical site noted. But the thoughts that kept me company during that solitary junket have disappeared like the breezes that wafted through the car's windows. I hope they may have lodged in the walls of my imagination, my soul as the Ancients used that word.

The verbal exchanges in the family life I saw on the screen of the Chief Theatre in Kansas City were a beguiling enigma, foreign to my experience. How could people talk so much at the dinner table, so pleasantly trade comments? Where did all those words come from and where did they get that material? My grandparents' dinner table was a silent business, each of them covertly waiting for the other to say something that could be contradicted or ridiculed. So, it was a standoff, and we ate in silence. Later, my grandfather's eloquence would enfold me in his bedroom, away from my grandmother's ironic asides, as he told me stories of his early years. Her speech, melodious as it was profoundly idiomatic, was preserved for teatime confabs with cousins or sisters, or in those moments when she would rise to address a convention as the innocent spokesperson for the squalid Pendergast political machine.

But when my mother appeared in this still life, the noise of her upset us. She smashed our mute decorum with rowdy narratives of her life in New York City that turned the dinner table into a sounding board for opinions and pronouncements that none of us could process. She stunned us. I know now that much of what she said was a boisterous quilt she pieced together to cover the solitude of her life with and then without my father.

Visiting my parents in New York, I would stand entranced before the representation of Neanderthal family life in the Museum of Natural History. As adult males sharpened stone spearheads, females tended supper cooking over an open fire while children played with beads and small stones. All silent behind the glass. The staged harmony of these manikins was familiar to me; I recognized their wordless cohabitation.

Families this side of the glass pursue their daily routines similarly. I know of one that went about its address with a purposeful restraint. Disagreeable matters were swept under the rug and crises, if acknowledged, were appeased rather than met. "I don't want to hear about it," was the cry in response to a difficulty. The children acquired an aptitude for the tacit, stepping tight-lipped through rooms of small talk. In their own maturity, they turned this honed reserve upon their elders as if to punish them for the expertise they had learned from them.

Thoreau, our national icon of aloneness, claimed "the truest society approaches always nearer to solitude" but Henry was also known to leave his lakeside retreat and go home to his mother's for supper. So asking for the gravy

to be passed had not completely lost importance and even he would have to admit that in the absence of civil exchange, anarchy masquerades as freedom. Yet, our genius has enabled us to magnify our words into the realms of prattle, and the resulting clamor imprisons us. Language is no longer a component of order as academic jargon competes with political euphemisms to make a solecismic din that deafens the essential dialogues. Have we been brought all this way, Stephen Crane might ask, to drown in our own gibberish?

