

THE SILENCE OF (THE) GOD(S)

INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE

Centre for Classical Studies

School of Arts and Humanities, University of Lisbon (Portugal)

November 23-24, 2023

In 1951, John Cage entered the anechoic chamber of Harvard University in search of absolute silence. He walked out shortly afterwards with the certainty that silence does not exist: “There is no such thing as silence. Something is always happening that makes a sound,” he wrote in 1954 in *45’ for a Speaker* (1961: 191). Three years later, he will add: “there is always something to see, something to hear” (1961: 8). If we accept the validity of Cage’s experiment, what it tells us is that no complete silence can emerge as long as an ear is eager to grasp it. The underlying physical law, which could be summed up as “if there is life and matter, there will be vibration”, gives rise to resonances beyond the domain of scientific objectivity. It is precisely what Susan Sontag, expanding on Cage’s reflection, points out about visual experience: “As long as a human eye is looking there is always something to see. To look at something that’s “empty” is still to be looking, still to be seeing something — if only the ghosts of one’s own expectations” (Sontag 1969: 10).

But Cage’s experiment also reveals something else on silence and its interactions with subjectivity: it tells us that what we call “silence” is a relative perception (or lack of perception), that it is defined by way of a partial frame of reference, a given context and a subjective sensitivity. To sum up, it tells us that there is no such thing as silence and, at the same time, that there is an endless variety of silences.

Indeed, when we think of it, we quickly realize that our lives are criss-crosses of sounds, words and silences and that these silences differ considerably in nature. In that respect, life and literature are very much alike – suffice it to recall, as an extreme example, Eco’s definition of the literary text as a “lazy machine” requiring the reader to fill in the blanks (1979: 24). The silence of ineffability does not coincide with that of reticence or omission; the “*silences coupables*” and the “*silences sacrés*” that André Neher highlights in the Bible (Neher 1970: 17) stand in stark contrast; censorship and self-censorship do not operate at the same depth nor in the same way and, sometimes, they do not hush up the same topics. There are silences of quietude and panic silences,

silence of decency, shame and respect; some silences are the result of an emotional excess, other, on the contrary, of a lack of emotion. There are mute silences and eloquent ones.

A likely explanation for this apparent paradox, i.e. the utmost polyphony of what remains voiceless, can be found in Le Breton's argumentation that silence is "a sentiment, a modality of sense, and not a measurement of surrounding sounds" (1997: 22).

The notion of silence is therefore neither univocal nor stable, as it has been highlighted by some recent studies embracing different perspectives, such as Alain Corbin's history of silence in modern and contemporary times (*Histoire du silence*, 2016), or Silvia Montiglio's analysis of the role of silence in Ancient Greece, where the author straightaway warns the reader against any simplification: "No generalization can be safely applied to the notion of silence. [...] If silence is a culturally specific notion, its meanings may be expected to change not only from civilization to civilization, but also within the same civilization across time" (2020: 4).

If we wish to give these silences a voice without turning them into a cacophony, we need to circumscribe our field of research. This is why the Centre for Classical Studies of the University of Lisbon has decided to organise an international conference on one specific facet of the broad topic of silence in classical and comparative literature: **the Silence of (the) God(s)**.

There is no shortage of examples in literary history, from the Egyptian god Harpocrates – mentioned, among others, by Plutarch, Catullus, Ovid, Augustine and Politian (Gaisser 1993: 72) – to the Roman goddesses Angerona and Tacita (Dubourdieu 2003), from the God-Logos of the Gospel of John to Jesus' silence in reply to the accusations levelled against him in Mark 14,60, from the rare silences of the usually talkative gods and goddesses of the Homeric poems to the "Almighty, the eternal and terrible Master of the Universe [who] chose to be silent" – because of its inexistence, death or temporary absence – on the first night when Elie Wiesel arrived at Auschwitz (Wiesel 1958: 33).

All of those examples suggest a complex and protean relation between divinity and silence. As a matter of fact, the relation is complex in two respects. Indeed, it is not only the notion of silence that is affected by subjective and cultural variability as well as by conceptual oscillation, but also the concept of divinity. Clearly enough, the association of those two notions – which could go as far as sheer identity, as claimed by captain Gøtz, in Sartre's *Le Diable et le bon Dieu*: "Silence is God" (Sartre 1951: 267) – gives a richer and deeper resonance to Cage's and Sontag's observations initially quoted. It is precisely this richness that our conference aims at uncovering through the prism of literary, comparative and philosophical studies.

Works cited

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All proposals must be submitted no later than **July 31, 2023**, as a word document, to the email address: **osilenciodosdeuses2023@gmail.com**

They must **include**:

- Name of the author
- Institutional affiliation
- Title of the presentation
- Abstract (300 words)
- 5 keywords
- Short academic CV (150 words max)

Accepted proposals will be notified no later than August 31, 2023.

Deadline for inscription to the conference: September 30, 2023.

Time length for each presentation: 20 minutes.

Languages: English, French, Portuguese.

Inscription fees: 100€ (Students: 50€; Registration without presentation: 15€).

Calendar

July 31, 2023: submission deadline

August 31, 2023: notification of acceptance

September 30, 2023: inscription deadline

November 23-24, 2023: International Conference

Organisation

Centre for Classical Studies, School of Arts and Humanities, University of Lisbon (Portugal)

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