ON SILENCE IN FICTION

By Alix Ohlin

A couple of years ago, at a gallery in New York, I came across a piece by Janet Cardiff that got me thinking about silence. Cardiff is a Canadian artist whose installations (notably a series of “walks,” in which you put headphones on and listen to her voice telling you a story about a place as you wander through it) make fascinating use of sound. This piece, Cabinet of Curiousness, was located in a small back room without windows. Each drawer of an old-fashioned card catalogue was rigged to emit a sound when you pulled it open, and stop when you shut it. A woman’s voice spoke; a saxophone played. You could create a cacophony by opening all the drawers, or listen to a single sound at a time; you could play the cabinet like an instrument.

After opening and shutting the drawers for a while, I stepped aside and watched others do it. The piece drew people in and made them laugh. As its title implies, the cabinet rewarded curiosity, each drawer providing a little burst of excitement as it offered up its sonic surprise. But the longer I watched, the more I noticed that people were just as thrilled, maybe more so, to be able to close a drawer mid-noise. That was the exciting part. In a city like New York, I thought, as perhaps in almost any location in our bustling universe, it wasn’t that big of a deal to find or create noise. But to create silence—to be in charge of it; to make it into an activity, and an event—felt miraculous. It felt like playing God.

Silence appeals to us not just because it’s a rare commodity in the modern world, but because it is profoundly intertwined with our consciousness and our sense of self. Silence can indicate oppression and taboo; it can also be spiritual, offering respite and calm. As Anne LeClaire notes in her book Listening Below the Noise: A Meditation on the Practice of Silence, silence is a way of paying attention to the world; it is, she points out, “our anchor to the present, to the here and now.”

People who meditate, who attempt to drown out the noise of the world, understand how difficult it is to maintain that feeling of attention. You can shut yourself up in a quiet room, but it is much harder to silence the stream of thoughts inside your own mind. And it is this interplay between internal and external silence—between the words inside our heads and the stimulus outside—that fiction, with its capacity to venture into the mind, is particularly well-situated to explore.

Cabinet of Curiousness made me ask how fiction writers engage with silence and play with its possibilities. Music uses the caesura and poetry uses breaks in lines and stanzas to create pockets of silence on the page. For prose writers, I think, creating silence involves sculpting the story around it. Silence in fiction relies heavily on context. A gap in the prose—whether that gap arises from omission in the narrative, withholding on the part of a character, or some other formal invention—makes its presence felt most artfully when the writer has prepared the reader for it. Often, the gap feels ambiguous, mysterious; and that mystery, deftly handled, is also the source of its power. An open drawer offers us sound; a closed one keeps us thinking about what’s inside.
Some writers use ellision and white space to indicate things referenced but not confronted head-on. Take, for example, Jean Rhys’s spare, tortured novel *Good Morning, Midnight*, in which the narrator, a woman adrift in Paris, speaks only indirectly of the past that haunts her. We understand from her behavior and her isolation that she is troubled, but the source of those troubles remains almost bafflingly opaque. She stumbles around the city, finding and losing work, finding and losing men. Sixty pages into the novel, she approaches what is clearly her most painful memory.

When she finally addresses it, the tale is told partially, and enigmatically. (It is also told in present tense, as though she continues to experience the trauma, and has never left it in the past.) She has a relationship with a man and bears a child. In the hospital with her newborn, she recalls, “I can’t feed this unfortunate baby. He is taken out and given Nestle’s milk. So, I can sleep…” After the ellipsis is a paragraph break in which, one supposes, she goes to sleep, relieved of the burden of her child. In the following paragraph, a reassuring nurse enters: “The next day she comes in and says; ‘Now I am going to arrange that you will be just like what you were before. There will be no trace, no mark, nothing.’” This kindly nurse, offering to erase the marks of pregnancy, swaddles the narrator just as her baby is swaddled; like a little mummy, she notes, “And never crying.”

Later, when the nurse removes the bandages, her promise has been kept: “there is not one line, not one wrinkle, not one crease.” There follows another paragraph break, another gap in the action. Then:

And five weeks afterwards there
I am, with not one line, not one
wrinkle, not one crease.
And there he is, lying with a

In the gap between the nurse’s care and the narrator’s recovery, the baby has died. There is no death scene; instead there is only the tortured numbness of a narrator who can’t stand to relive the experience.

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The silence of the baby’s death is given meaning and shape by the language that surrounds it. In “The Aesthetics of Silence,” Susan Sontag writes that “the artist who creates silence or emptiness must produce something dialectical: a full voice, an enriching emptiness, a resonating or eloquent silence. Silence remains, inescapably, a form of speech.”

In *Good Morning, Midnight*, the narrator’s inability to speak of her loss resonates with palpable grief. After we understand that the baby has died, we can put together the clues that hinted at problems: he was not breastfeeding, and his lack of crying signified not a contented baby but a sickly one. The ellipses and paragraph breaks show the narrator’s voice trailing off, abandoning a difficult subject, then circling back to it.

Rhys also uses repetition to poignant effect. The phrase “without one line, without wrinkle, without crease” recurs, its meaning changing and deepening as the passage goes on. At first, this phrase represents a promise from the nurse that the woman’s body will recover from the strain of pregnancy; it offers recuperation and beauty. But later, when the promise is kept, its reality is a terrible one. It suggests instead the horror of erasure: the baby is gone, no traces of him left, and the absence of marks to confirm her pregnancy represents yet another agonizing loss. It is as if she’d never been pregnant at all. Silence, created through ellipsis, white space, and repetition, is another form of erasure; it tells the reader of a pain that is too great to bear, yet must be borne.

At the other end of the stylistic spectrum from Rhys’s haunted, taciturn narrator lies the hyper-articulate world of David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest*. Wallace’s dense syntax may not, at first glance, seem a place to locate a resonating silence. But Wallace’s characters are often isolated from other people, within the cage of their own minds. This isolation occurs despite or even because of their highly self-conscious abilities with language, as though along with linguistic facility comes a place to locate a resonating silence. As a result, Wallace’s work capitalizes on the disjunction between internal and external silence; in conversation, the dialogue between people is often partial, stuttering, and incomplete, while their inner monologues surge forth in a torrent. His writing is full of expressive gaps—the missing
questions in “Brief Interviews with Hideous Men,” for example, or his use of “...” in dialogue to indicate a silence laden with enigmatic but tangible emotion.

For Wallace, silence is struggle. It can be a power play, an existential crisis, and an event around which a scene revolves—even, as in the opening pages of *Infinite Jest*, all three at the same time. As the book begins, Hal Incandenza sits in a university conference room as a committee of interviewers invites him to speak. We know, because Hal narrates the scene to us that he is highly intelligent and verbally dexterous:

> This is a cold room in University Administration, wood-walled, Remington-hung, double-windowed against the November heat, insulated from Administrative sounds by the reception area outside, at which Uncle Charles, Mr. de Lint and I were lately received. I am in here.

Hal’s diction is complex, almost Victorian (“lately received”), pitched at a right angle to what we might expect from a teenage athlete being courted for a higher-education sports team. In contrast to the sentence that describes the setting, which is lengthy and detailed, the declaration “I am in here,” stands simply as its own paragraph. At first the sentence appears to refer to Hal’s physical presence in the room. As the scene unfolds, though, it becomes clear that the situation is a good deal more complicated than that.

The committee members talk—at great, officious length—about Hal’s athletic future at the school, while our narrator refuses to speak. Every once in a while, when he ought to speak, he doesn’t. Wallace reminds us of his refusal at intervals: “There is a silence.” A paragraph later: “There is
a new silence." Two paragraphs later, the refusal now doubled, and absurd: "My silent response to the expectant silence begins to affect the air of the room, the bits of dust and sport-coat lint stirred around by the AC's vents dancing jaggedly in the slanted plan of windowlight, the air over the table like the sparkling space just above a fresh-poured seltzer." This generous description of the room is elaborate to the point of absurdity. The specificity is fine-grained, right down to the seltzer; the reader is being supplied with almost more information than we can handle or need. (Meanwhile, Wallace, a writer with the broadest of vocabularies, has used the word silence over and over again.) At the same time, Hal, the source of this fizzy sensory overload, withholds speech from the other characters in the room. The gap between internal monologue and external silence grows ever wider, with Wallace's repetition of the word serving as a healthy reminder. In case we missed it, silence is the event here.

The result is both funny and suspenseful, as we, along with the committee, wonder just how long the silence can last. Indeed, as the scene goes on the silence grows so replete as to become its own character, with shifting expressions and moods: "The room's carbonated silence is now hostile," Wallace writes. Then, later: "A neutral and affectless silence." Wallace is playing with silence, using it to make us laugh. But at the same time, Hal's mute presence in the room generates real mystery and suspense. Why won't he speak? And how long can he hold out? These questions animate the scene and draw a current of unease into the room. We don't know how to interpret Hal's silence, because for all the other information he's feeding us, he doesn't say why he won't talk. And into this gap we may infer many things: fear, anger, and a need for power.

In his personal copy of Thomas Harris's Silence of the Lambs, Wallace commented on a scene in which Hannibal Lecter refuses to speak to his inquisitors. He underlined the silent noncompliance of the criminal in the face of a police interrogation, pointing out how powerless the officers are to penetrate Lecter's psychological defenses. "Here insanity has its advantages," Wallace wrote in the margins. "Lecter has complete control over his concentration. When what's around him is unacceptable, he can 'simply go away.'"

Like Lecter, Hal too, has gone away, existing at some great remove from the other people in the room. His behavior, though, is not due to psychopathic violence; rather, we discover, his silence is a desperate gesture that comes from recognizing in advance the futility of speech. Silence is a course of action taken by the damaged.

When at last Hal does speak, his words are rendered as articulate dialogue on the page, but they
apparently come across to the other characters as gibberish sounds. They react with hysterical alarm, going so far as to wrestle him to the floor. “What in God’s name are those...” one Dean cries shrilly, “...those sounds?” Meanwhile, Hal repeats the phrase “I’m in here,” but to no avail. The repetition of the sentence has moved from physical reality to a statement of isolation and pathos. For Hal, the distance between internal and external speech is unbridgeable.

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Silence is the form of speech he chooses when all else fails.15 “I am not what you see and hear,” he tells the committee, but alas, they cannot understand him.

One of the most discussed chapters in Jennifer Egan’s A Visit from the Goon Squad is written in the form of a PowerPoint journal kept by a teenage girl. Though the format is unusual, Egan uses techniques similar to those of Wallace and Rhys to structure a narrative in which the space between characters registers as an active presence. The result is a chapter that uses silence as a literal and thematic guide to the story of a family.

In her book, Anne LeClaire describes a team of scientists from Stanford and McGill universities who researched silence. They watched images of the brains of people who listened to a series of movements within symphonies, punctuated by pauses. Silence, the researchers found, triggered a flurry of mental activity in the brain. When the music resumed, the action shifted to a different part of the brain. “The pause itself becomes the event,” LeClaire quotes neuroscientist Vinod Menon as saying. “A pause is not a time when nothing happens.”16

In Egan’s work, too, the pause is the event. Her chapter is told in the voice of a teenage girl who observes the fissures in her immediate family: her artistic mother, her autistic brother, and her doctor father. Because of the slide journal format, many of her sentences are physically separated from one another on the page—inside boxes or as the components of a triangle. At times the layout encourages the reader’s eye to move in a standard sequence (left to right, top to bottom) but at other times, the sentences can be read in a number of different orders.

The format doesn’t feel like a gimmick because it is rooted in character; the visual layout adds eerie levels of connection and disconnection to the prose. Everyone in the family exists at a slight remove from everybody else, as on a page in which dialogue belonging to the mother and father is placed on two separate branches of a flowchart that do not intersect. Another page uses flow chart boxes to indicate the discrepancy between what the narrator’s brother wants to say and what he ends up saying—like Hal Incandenza, he can’t make himself understood.

But silence is not just a cosmetic property here; it’s also the subject of the chapter itself. Lincoln, the autistic brother, is obsessed with...
pauses in songs, which he catalogs with scientific precision. Of the song "Bernadette," by the Four Tops, he says, "This is an excellent early pause. The voice tapers off, and then you've still got 1.5 silence of total silence, from 2:38 to 2:395, before the chorus kicks back in. You think, Hey, the song didn't end after all—but then, 26.5 seconds later, it does." 17

Lincoln's attention to the pauses in songs seems to anchor him to the world, and the specificity with which he dissects them—down to the nanosecond!—seems to reflect not just an aficionado's enthusiasm but also the attempt to codify a world whose emotional intricacies may be beyond his grasp. Alison, his sister and our narrator, shares his love of silence; it's a common language between them. She informs us that he "loops the pause in each song so it lasts for minutes." 18 The pauses, she admits, are her favorite; she represents them in her journal as a blank white box at the end of a sequence of boxes, as if it is the destination or the point. The pause becomes an event.

Concerned with the links between technology, music, and memory, A Visit from the Goon Squad locates silence at the intersection of all three. In using the PowerPoint format, Egan fills the page with gaps and white space, a more intensely graphical version of the ellipses and paragraph breaks found in Good Morning, Midnight. The characters in this chapter are islanded in the gaps, but as the flow charts and intersecting triangles show, they try to communicate across them, too. Thus they aren't just discrete individuals; they are also a family unit, however fractured, working to bridge the distance between them.

Left unsaid—but hinted at by Alison's attraction to the pauses—is the fact that in her complicated family, with a workaholic father and autistic brother, Alison has retreated. Her silence in regards to herself is an observer's quietness, the self-effacing narration of a girl who believes that other people need or deserve more of the attention. It's not the silence of grief, or of a person who can't communicate; it's the chosen silence of a narrator focused beyond herself, at the family that, in all their flawed, loving complexity, makes up her world.

Alison's use of silence—and Egan's—is slyer than the slide journal format may suggest at first. Egan understands how the white box, like the closed drawer, focuses the reader's attention. Most of all, in Goon Squad, as in the work of Wallace and Rhys, silence testifies to the mystery of human connection—at times tenuous, at other times resilient. Each of these narrators tells us a story in which silence plays a crucial role in illuminating the predicaments of its characters. Like the people I observed in the art gallery, playing with Cabinet of Curiousness, these narrators realize there is power in silence, whether playful or painful. To control the silence is to concentrate the story. Without silence, they couldn't tell us everything they have to say.

Alix Ohlin is the author most recently of Inside, a novel, and Signs and Wonders, a collection of stories. Her work has appeared in Best American Short Stories, Best New American Voices, and on public radio's "Selected Shorts." She teaches at Lafayette College and in the Warren Wilson MFA Program for Writers.

Notes
3. Ibid., p. 60
4. Ibid., p. 60.
5. Ibid., p. 61.
8. Ibid., p. 5.
9. Ibid., p. 5.
10. Ibid., pp. 5-6.
11. Ibid., p. 8.
12. Ibid., p. 9.
15. Ibid., p. 13.
16. LeClair, Listening Below the Noise, p. 151.
18. Ibid., p. 188.