

Silence and Noise: Three Notes on Thomas Glavinic

I

In 1973, Joseph Beuys made a work called *Das Schweigen*, in which five reels of Ingmar Bergman's film *Tystnaden* were lacquered and plated in copper and zinc, effectively rendering the film's content incommunicable, and so consigning it to the very silence – metaphysical, emotional, psychosexual and theological – that its title suggests. In this work, Beuys, who famously remarked that “the silence of Marcel Duchamp is overrated”, appears to be interrogating silence in all its forms, from the mute confusion of irrational desire or unjustified revulsion, through the final willed *incommunicado* state of the rejected after every appeal to grace or compassion has failed, to Duchamp's studied withdrawal from the art world in order to devote himself, quite artfully and self-consciously, to chess, (though, because that very withdrawal is, in itself, another work of art, and so paradoxical – where did this withdrawal end? how long does such a silence *effectively* last? – Beuys felt compelled to offer a lightly damning critique, which might reasonably be taken as the necessary rejection of a merely ironic and, in the end, rather camp gesture, in which the performance that unfolds is so wholly taken up – and so carefully *qualified* – by the artist himself).

In contrast, *Das Schweigen* demands that we confront silence without such qualifications. Real silence cannot be manipulated, it is wholly and mysteriously there – and in this readiness to confront the implacable, Beuys has a more recent counterpart in Thomas Glavinic, whose *Night Work* almost perversely surrenders one of his most remarkable writerly gifts, (that is, the gift for chronicling the small talk, unfinished statements and the rationalisations that we, the mostly conventional, use to mask our deeper and more

irrational impulses: a gift he uses to supreme effect in *The Camera Killer*, where horror is ever-present in the televised news accounts of the sadistic murders of two children, and in the minds of the two couple who pass a seemingly innocent weekend in the country drinking and playing badminton, all the while glossing over the absurd and terrifying narrative into which they have been plunged with a running commentary of banal comments and received ideas). In *Night Work*, on the other hand, the narrator, Jonas, finds himself completely alone in a lifeless and silent world, after everyone he has ever known has disappeared and thus has no one to talk to but himself, (and the painful comedy of this book, contrasting with the social comedy of *The Camera Killer*, comes from the fact that speaking banalities to oneself is very different from the consoling prattle of self and others). Yet what begins with the eerie quiet a child might experience at the start of a game of hide-and-seek, when all his companions have vanished into the woods, grows into a massive and overwhelming silence, a silence that Jonas is driven to increasingly desperate lengths to break. This he does by various means – reckless car rides through Vienna, wild shouting fits in what were once public spaces, a journey across Europe which only serves to deepen his sense of isolation – but whatever respite he achieves comes only for a moment and, when the silence inevitably returns, it is deeper and more all-encompassing than ever. All the while, he interrogates his childhood past, returning to old haunts where he and his parents passed their very ordinary holidays and unearthing his father's old possessions in order to study them in forensic detail, all the while working through intimate memories of his most recent girlfriend, Marie, (his love for her steadily increasing, it seems, the more desperate he becomes, offering the reader a cruel twist on the old saying *absence makes the heart grow fonder*). Yet it is hard to say what he misses about these people other than the fact that they were once *other* than himself and at the same time his self's – as the common term has it – significant others. With them, he could talk, joke, exchange pleasantries, argue and so hold the underlying

silence at bay – yet it could be argued that these others only served as distractions from an eerie and strangely disturbing world that had been present all along, waiting for Jonas to turn and see it:

“It had never struck him before. Almost every building was adorned with stone carvings. None of them was looking at him, but all had faces. Jutting from the oriel moulding on one house was a winged dog, on another a fat boy silently playing the flute. One wall displayed a grimacing face, another a little, bearded old man preaching to an invisible congregation. He’d never noticed any of these things before.

He took aim at the old preacher, but his arm shook. With a threatening gesture, he lowered the gun.”

[Note to translator: this comes during the second section of Chapter 9]

As an existential thought experiment, *Night Work* is as bleak as anything we read in Camus, or see in Bergman: we need others, not necessarily to love, or to try to understand, but to break a perennial silence that would otherwise engulf us, sending us off into madness, pursued by phantoms. Rarely has silence been so serious, or so total – and, like *Das Schweigen*, Glavinic’s novel defies the self-congratulatory theatre set up by Duchamp. Confronted by this stark and uncompromising work we see that, even as it acknowledges the irrational, so much of the Dada / Surrealist enterprise transforms the uncanny into something of a parlour trick, partly because those artists are determined to give it such obvious anti-bourgeois form and, partly, because they are beglamoured, not so much by what they find, as by the fact that it is *they* who do the finding. In Glavinic, on the other hand, as in Beuys, the confrontation with silence is serious, terrible and unglamoured. This is the silence from which everything arises for its tenuous span, the

silence to which everyone returns and, once fully recognised, it cannot be controlled with irony, or dandyism. It is *real*.

II

“But Jonah rose up to flee unto Tarshish from the Presence of the Lord; and he went down to Joppa, and found a ship going to Tarshish; so he paid the fare thereof, and went down into it, to go with them unto Tarshish, from the Presence of the Lord.”

There are times, reading Glavinic, when I am obliged to remember, not just the Biblical darkness inside the belly of the whale that the naming of *Night Work*'s narrator actively evokes, but also the mythical creatures of my own Celtic-Pictish culture: presences that both exist in the world as objective realities and are, at the same time, baroque variants of the self, tuned into the mind's most fundamental doubts and terrors, tapping at that energy to paralyse its victims with fear. In his *Witchcraft and Second Sight in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland*, John Gregson Campbell describes one such presence thus: “Sometimes the Baucan causes fright by its mere appearance, sometimes by the noises it makes, and sometimes by its silence. In appearance it is commonly a man or a woman moving silently past, and not speaking until spoken to, if even then; but it has also been encountered as a black dog, that accompanies the traveller part of the way, as a headless body or simply a dark moving object. At other times it is terrific from having a chain clanking after it, from its whistling with unearthly loudness, by horrible and blood-freezing cries and sounds of throttling.” In *Night Work*, this presence – echo self and definite Other – manifests itself as The Sleeper, who emerges from the home movies that Jonas makes each night, movies of himself going to bed, lying down and sleeping. At first, this Sleeper is simply Jonas, and there is something both comic and pathetic about the process of filming, (he attempt to mimic the presence of another by filming oneself

asleep is so very much like the creation, by a lonely and insecure child, of an imaginary friend that the reader feels a keen, and at the same time, reluctant pity for the man). Gradually, however, that manufactured Other begins to assume an irrational and terrifying independence, disrupting, first, Jonas' psyche, then his day-to-day plans, so that, when he sets out to travel to England and find out what has become of Marie (she was staying there with friends when everyone disappeared) the Horla-like Sleeper frustrates him again and again, finally becoming an implacable enemy capable of actively threatening Jonas' life, (and because this Other is, in essence, a kind of parasite that cannot exist without a host, these attacks seem all the more absurd and frightening). Of course, what Jonas does not appreciate is that the invented Other derives its power from him: he was the one who created The Sleeper, through a kind of desperate loneliness and, if he could only embrace, and then transform, his solitude into a spiritual – that is, an elected – condition, he is the one who could end its reign of terror and make of the Other an ally, rather than a foe.

But then, it is not the Other who is the foe, and it is not the Other who inspires fear: the Other, like Goethe's Erl-König, is a fabrication, a living mirror upon which the self's fears – and darkest wishes – are projected. When Goethe's child, rapt with a kind of dark, untutored fancy, (the very opposite of the creative imagination, which reveals the world as it finally is, beyond mere factuality) asks:

Mein Vater, mein Vater, und hörst du nicht,
Was Erenkönig mir leise verspricht?

the key word is the ambiguous *verspricht* – and the child's fate is sealed, not by the mist, wind and willow trees that frighten him, but by the father's inability to make full use of

his imagination and so go beyond the merely rational explanations he offers as a counter to his son's sense of a seemingly irrational and so negligible threat:

Sei ruhig, bleibe ruhig, mein Kind,
In dürren Blättern säuselt der Wind.

We are reminded, here, of the poem 'Las Ilusiones', by Juan Ramón Jiménez:

– No era nadie. El agua. – ¿Nadie?
¿Que no es nadie el agua?]
...
– No hay nadie. Era el viento. – ¿Nadie?
¿No es el viento nadie? – No
hay nadie. Ilusión. – ¿No hay nadie?
¿Y no es nadie la ilusión?

[– It was nobody. Just the water. – Nobody?
How is the water nobody?
...
- It was nobody. It was the wind. – Nobody?
Is the wind nobody? – It was
nobody. Illusion. – Was it nobody?
And is illusion nobody?

In both the Goethe and the Jiménez we see the failure of the conventional dismissal, born of a seeming rationality that is, in fact, merely reductive. Yet in each case, if the father, or the first speaker, had spoken from a position of creative imagination, the fear engendered by fancy would be, not dismissed, but transformed into full engagement with the world: yes, illusion is *not* nobody, yes there *are* othernesses abroad in the world that we cannot comprehend, some of them of our own creation but, informed and strengthened by the power of the creative imagination, the father, Jiménez's first speaker and Glavinic's Jonas could have reached the point of saying, with the Psalmists, "Thou shalt not be afraid for the terror by night; *nor* for the arrow *that* flieth by day; *Nor* for the pestilence *that* walketh in darkness; *nor* for the destruction *that* wasteth at noonday". Had

they gone beyond convention and reduction, and used their imaginations to transform what is undoubtedly a frightening and irrational place into a home, they would have trumped the fears they projected on to that world, and come into what the biblical Jonas would have known as ‘the Presence of the Lord’.

III

Which brings us back, of course, to the fact that the central myth of *Night Work*, subtly invoked by the name Jonas, is the hero-figure’s confinement inside the belly of the great fish: a fixed period of time in which he is utterly and entirely alone. The case could be made, however, that Jonas’ solitude is simply a figurative extrapolation of the solitary, disconnected existence common to many of Glavinic’s characters, whose culture and milieu seems to be based entirely on minding one’s own business, observing the prescribed conventions and pretending that all is well in a deeply troubling world. These observances – this intricate and seemingly interminable exercise in self-deception – is wonderfully conveyed by the characters of *The Camera Killer*, for example, as they go about the business of having a fun weekend with a kind of fixed-grin desperation, even as they indulge their prurient interest in the televised murder case, and express with relish their righteous indignation at police incompetence and the cynicism of a media that, with regard to the video of the child murders, does all it can to have its cake and eat it too, condemning the killer for making such a film, all the while fishing for a justification to show it themselves on prime time, fully aware of the viewing figures this would achieve. Indeed, a general suspension of any real moral or emotional engagement with the crime or its victims runs throughout this novel, its action mediated as it is by television cameras and by the tone of what would seem to be an official account, a stark and highly

detached statement, or even a confession, of the events leading up to the narrator's arrest – an arrest he witnesses on the television screen, as his friend, Heinrich, points him out:

The police car drove into the farmyard, siren wailing, and pulled up. The sound of the siren ceased, the blue lights continued to flash. Three policemen jumped out of the vehicle. The senior officer put his hands on his hips and surveyed his men and us in turn. I saw on the screen how Heinrich too kept turning to look at the television, on which the three policemen's intervention could be observed. The senior officer took a few steps across the yard. He appeared to be examining the licence plate numbers of the cars parked there. Then he jerked his thumb at one of the vehicles and asked whom it belonged to.

Then, Heinrich told him – his guests, in other words, my partner and me. The television clearly showed him pointing us out.

The senior officer and one of his men came over to me. We've got him, he said; that's the man.

On the screen, I saw Eva, who was standing beside me with the tray, retreat several feet. Behind me, my partner started to scream. On the television, I saw handcuffs being produced and turned around. The officer in command announced that I was under arrest; I was charged with having murdered two children.

I do not deny this.

[Note to translator: this passage is at the very end of the novel]

Until this point, there has been no obvious reason to suspect the narrator of the murder – in fact, given his behaviour, Heinrich seems a much more likely suspect – but the essence of this finale is not doubt as to the narrator's guilt, but the recognition that, having been found and arrested on television, all question of guilt or innocence is

irrelevant: now that he has been seen as such, he is – he *must* be – the killer. The murders were committed for a camera, the hunt for the killer is enacted through the TV news, so it is natural and fitting that his arrest and guilt should depend on what the camera decides. Yet we should not assume that this is just another, more or less glib critique of how our lives are governed by the media: on the contrary, it is not the camera that is to blame for the present state of affairs, but our surrender of all authenticity, and all reality, to the false authority that the camera – or rather, its gaze, signifying the gaze of an entire public - confers. To say “I saw it on the TV, so it must be true”, may be spoken with the appropriate glib irony, but the truth is, when we have come reached the condition where nothing can be validated by any other means, we have nowhere else to go. Now, the complexity of actual events is too much for us to bear: we have neither the time nor the inclination for anything but received ideas and truisms. Like the Biblical Jonas, we flee ‘the Presence of the Lord’, that is, the vivid and demanding actuality of the world, to take blind, yet oddly comfortable refuge in the belly of an electronic whale. The bargain, when duly considered, is clear: if the camera does not pick us out, we need not fear the terror by night or the destruction that wasteth at noonday, because as long as these things happen to others, they are mere rumours in our whale-bound existence and, in exchange for this assurance, we surrender the actuality, the sometimes terrible beauty and, most of all, the challenge of the Other without a second thought. Like Plato’s cave-dwellers we, the mostly conventional, sit gazing at shadows flickering across a wall; the big difference between us and them, however, is that they cannot turn around and detect the illusion by which they are governed, while we are free to do so at any time. It’s just that, as curious as we are, this is the one direction in which we choose not to look.