

Interreligious Insight

July, 2005 Edition

Speaking Silence

poetry, mysticism & meditation

Charles Burack

In meditation we contact the infinitely complex universe that surrounds, surpasses and springs out of us. At once we find ourselves at the center and circumference of life, at the starting point of creation and the furthest tip of time. The big bang still echoes in our bellies, and the newest tune of existence hums wildly in our heads. We weave the elements of eternity and are woven by them. We cognize the cosmos and are drowned out by the roar of other creatures. The world speaks through us, and our words are but froth and foam.

From the silent depths of contemplation we learn that the wondrous reality of our lives can be known but not conceived, experienced but not expressed. We can see, touch, taste, hear, smell the fabric of our lives, but can neither think nor tell it. We can feel the grit, and intuit the ground, of who we are, but they escape our articulations. No word, no image, no number, can ever reveal what flows so vitally through our awakened awareness, through our rushing and ebbing current of consciousness. No form nor formula can ever capture the ceaseless flux of things, the unending shapings and shiftings of the world. No tool of communication can ever depict the stillness in the storm of being.

Language encircles a span of time and carves out an event; it quarantines a sector of space and calls it an object. It isolates and freezes a part of life and so makes a mummy, fashions a fossil. It imposes a scaffolding of concepts on a cascading panoply of perceptions. But the endlessly expansive and dynamic process of life will never be contained, nor even modestly represented, in the limited, static structures of language and image. These products of mind are mirrors that flatten the universe, giving us the illusion of re-presentation. At best, they are allusive; at worst, they elude reality and delude us.

Words are like spume on the sea of consciousness: each bubble is born, lives a while and soon dies; each is a tiny lens, a rude spectacle refracting a sector of its surroundings. Each is a mini globe, a semantic eye, that sees the sea aslant.

If language is so misleading, so misrepresenting, what value can there be in literary creation? What virtue can there be in the ancient art of words? Is fiction the grand slanderer of truth, the artful dodger of being? Is poetry Satan's artifice, and drama deceptive play?

Surely, when poetry aspires only to mirror life – to mime reality – it necessarily falters, falls and falsifies. For the flux of forces and phenomena always defies description, never holds still long enough, never fashions shapes and masses definite and solid enough, to be captured and incarcerated in the mind-forged garrison of language. Reality is always decaying and composing like the seasons, always swooning and soaring like a dancer; its substance mostly massless; its substrate virtually empty space. What words can trace this process of infinite and infinitesimal change? What image can portray the void, the vacuum, at the heart of things?

Poets attuned to the awesome, ineffable nature of reality, and to the limits and potencies of language, know their poems are not copies of the world. Indeed, such mystic poets are not mainly fired by the passion to represent reality. Rather, they burn to share the afterglow of the glory they've been gifted. And they hope the works of art made through them will move others to spacious places like those experienced by meditators – a vast yet intimate awareness that allows a deeper, more direct experience of self and universe.

The mystic poet does not create the work of art. Rather, she cares for the vessel of divine creation. That vessel is her fullest self, her whole being, her consummate consciousness. And she cares for it through solitude, study and spiritual practice. Love and humility cleanse the crucible, and silence open the lips of illumination. Suddenly, spontaneously, the supreme light streams into the womb of awareness, and the flowing, glowing forms are conceived. These wondrous preconceptual conceptions grow into incandescent images and incantatory rhythms that are finally fleshed out in grammared and learned words. From the silent soul, transfigured bodies of words are born.

Silence is ever the poet's friend, and meditation is the chariot that takes him there. The chariot can carry him to the depths of creation or deeper still. For deeper than the image-and-word-making-mind is the empty mind where ideas and pictures cease to be. This clear consciousness is a place, a boundless space, of equanimity and inaction where the impulse to engender does not emerge. It is a realm of utter transcendence beyond the creative tumult of the world. The poet who remains there will cease to be a simmering cauldron. For creation demands not only a receptive mind but also the active will to translate mind-made images and emotions into words governed by syntax, semantics and sound.

If the mystic poet is to be a poet, he must eventually review and rework his nascent creations and bring them to final form. And all these acts of reception and formation can only be accomplished at midlevels of mind. For in the furthest depths, absolute silence rules. Indeed, the poet capable of touching the supreme depths is always tempted to abandon his craft and float free in the abyss of awareness. For he realizes any resort to words must skew the truth of existence. The very attempt to speak experience, to pen perception, risks suggesting the indescribable can be approximately described.

It is the fate of the human mind to forget its creations are faulty, fractured representations of the unrepresentable. It is the fate of the mind to overlook its own conceptual confines. Egos and cultures are spawned in these murky pools of existential amnesia and communal myopia. Whole civilizations insist their icons can decipher and master reality. But the greatest mystic poets bear witness to the primordial numinosity of naked experience – organic experience before it is congealed and jailed in law, language, belief, ritual and other codes of conduct and cogitation. These poets always stand against the idolatrous constructions of ego and culture.

In the holy act of composition, the poet's consciousness is collected and concentrated on itself, on its own field of awareness. In that field the universe emerges and expires, composes and dissolves. In that open space the creations of self – its perceptions, recollections, emotions, ideations, intimations – arise and dissipate.

For when a poet attends to a lovely flower, it is her own experience-of-a-flower that she sees, smells, knows. It is not the-flower-in-itself, but the flower planted in her field of awareness. It is the part of her conscious experience where a flower appears. She has no access to flowers outside her own garden of experience. Things do exist beyond her awareness, but she can only access them through her human consciousness, which is but one expression of the universal consciousness. Indeed, the universe is an

infinite field of awareness, a vast ocean of intelligence, in which all things reside and decline. That ocean pours into each individual's stream of consciousness, which can be deepened and widened through heightened attention and devotion.

Even when the poet writes about someone else's life or about a character she has invented, she is still writing about her own experience. Whatever appears in her consciousness – historical accounts, mythic tales, a neighbor's dream – is an element of her own experience. But not everything that appears in her awareness is her own *personal* experience. Homer, Hercules and Hamlet may be vivid elements of her total consciousness, but they did not enter her experience as living beings, but as images of beings that once lived or might have lived.

So the process of poesis is an act of intimacy with oneself and one's world. And since self and world are both sectors of the poet's experience, the creative encounter is ultimately an act of intimacy with experience itself. It is human consciousness knowing itself. It is the observer knowing the observed, the observer knowing that part of itself which is observable. The sector of experience that appears to take place within the boundaries of the poet's flesh is "the-poet's-experience-of-his-personal-self"; the sector that seems to exist outside the poet's body is "the-poet's-experience-of-the-outside-world." These two regions, which we label "inner" and "outer" – even though both occur *within* our field of awareness – constitute the poet's entire experience, which is really a unified whole. Through contemplation the poet becomes profoundly attuned to any section of the field, and to the whole field itself.

The supreme poets push language beyond meaning, beyond reference, beyond sound. Wielding words as symbols and metaphors, they catapult readers to realms felt and intuited but not seen. With their pens, they transform an ordinary image into an extraordinary symbol that turns the mind toward a part of existence while not pretending to portray it. A luminous symbol alludes, indicates, gestures, playfully suggests. It opens up fields of meaning, angles of vision. It discloses, reveals, uncovers. It never says "this is nothing but that." When the mystic poet makes the sun a monumental symbol, it no longer remains just a burning ball of gas. It can now signify knowledge, light, heat, royalty, divinity, life, nurturance, awareness, illumination, cyclicity, power and more and more.

Great poets are also master metaphormakers. A splendid metaphor, like its cousin the symbol, focuses the mind on something but does not try to say exactly what it is. Its descriptions are really analogies, not copies; resemblances, not complete transcriptions. It ferries meanings from one realm to another. It transports readers from one image to the next. It speaks in indirections and similitudes yet is not modest. It knows its limits while flaunting and flouting each one. For a moment, it seduces us into thinking that love is really a rose, not merely like one. Indeed, love has the rose's beauty, fragility, ephemerality, complexity, vitality, luster, charm.

The most flamboyant metaphors are like Shakespearean actors who periodically lift their masks to show they play a part, perform a person. They are proud of their extravagant powers of enchantment, proud of their magical ability to fuse and confuse and blur the boundary between identity and identification. They revel in hyperbole yet remain totally truthful. When serious, they wink. When tragic, they ironize. When accused of lying, they say it's all been make-believe. They are in love with the literary, not the literal. They are the altars where insight and whimsy are wed. Like magic flutes, they lure the imagination out of its lair and inspire it to stretch to full height. Like the noon sun over the sea, they draw forth vapors of passion from the body's living tides.

In the poet's hands, symbols and metaphors become banners that flag the gap between word and world. They announce the leap from silence to sound, from observation to verbalization, is as much a loss as a gain. For when words are applied to world, silence speaks: something comes into focus, is given a voice and shown to exist distinctly and in relation to something else. Yet in uttering the universe, something is also effaced and erased, for the articulate can never truly reveal the nature of the inarticulate. Even more, no thing can ever disclose what another thing is. Language cannot present the being of beings.

But the poet's figures know who they are. They are wise words. They know only silence itself can reveal what silence is; they know language is play, and noble words are gifts we create out of our gratitude and our grief. They are what we weave from the wonders and terrors of existence. And they reveal and preserve the great mysteries of life.

Yet lovers of mystic poetry may fall for the faces of the poem's vibrant figures. They may be inclined to grasp the pointing finger and miss the moon. They may even be tempted to believe spirit only appears in the particular places, times and shapes suggested by the poet's images. Indeed, the mystic poet is ever aware of this image-worshiping impulse in the human heart, this persistent desire to invest finite forms with infinite power. She will try to counter this idolatrous impulse in herself and her readers by constantly varying her metaphors and her symbols. Indeed, the lives of her figures, like the lives of all forms, are fleeting, ephemeral, short. As readers experience these rising and falling figures, they will be led to experience the waxing and waning – the eternal wheeling – of all beings. And they will realize no one form can solely represent the One. For the divine One manifests at all times, in all places, and in all things.

When the mystic poet's figures marry narrative, sacred story is born, and parables and myths are propagated. The poet uses these numinous narratives to show the esoteric arc of inner change. Boldly, parables picture the inward choices we daily face and make. Will we sow our seeds of faith or harden our hearts to higher life? Will we multiply our loaves of loving kindness or greedily keep all to ourselves? Will we consciously enter the kingdom of divinity or remain disconnected from the All?

The poet collects, fashions and refashions the myths of a people. These myths are their shared dreams, their group visions of invisible realities. In them, every person, place, object and event symbolizes a precious element or activity of communal consciousness. The mythic hero is a force in every individual's soul. So are the dragon, the damsel, the sword and the battle. And so are the meadow, the trees and the sunlight. The poet immersed in sacred stories knows that the mythic trajectory of outer change reveals the mystic curve of inner transformation: from life to death to greater life; from challenge to change; from bondage to bliss; from initiation to illumination and liberation. As without, so within. As within, so without.

The great poet, knowing the contraries and contrasts of existence, is also a master of paradox and inclusion. He knows yin interpenetrates yang. Heat slides into cold. Above blends into below. Flame flickers singular then plural. Rivers ramify then mingle at sea. Plants sink to earth and silt new seeds. Sage and fool hold hands, hug, and merge. Chaos and order spring from a single womb. All things are offsprings of nothingness.

With rhythmic lines and rhyming words and parts of words, the mystic poet uses sound to still or fire the mind and yoke or provoke the flesh. The reader's chattering intellect is slowly rocked on a sonorous sea and soon slips into a state somewhere between or beyond sleeping and waking, a simple

extraordinary state that is more wakeful still. Or his mind is charged and charged again by the building concentration and concatenation of phonic rhythms until it suddenly explodes, opening the doors of awareness to electric intimations from beyond. Or his body's energies are touched and intensified until they drown the mind's frenetic activities in the ecstatic waters of soul.

Not wanting to name the unnameable or clutter the world with words, the mystic poet propagates negations and omissions. Nos, nots and nevers appear. Uns and nons become omnipresent chaperons of nouns, verbs and adjectives...and lapses and ellipses proliferate. In so doing – and in so undoing – sound cedes its place to silence, and the poet returns us to our inexpressible, ineradicable root. For more than the power of expression, more even than the power of insight – what we most respond to in a great poem is the primordial consciousness which created it and which is sometimes created in us. The great poem is an echo of the poet's sacred silence, an energetic daughter of her mystic stillness. It reverberates in us, calling forth our own aboriginal awareness. It propels us to know our own profundity. We are astonished, shocked, overwhelmed by the wealth we find within. And we are inspired to share our riches with the world.

Charles Burack is on the faculty of Naropa University, Oakland, and Matthew Fox's University of Creation Spirituality. A widely-published writer and award-winning scholar, he is actively involved in interfaith education, arts and counseling. He can be reached at www.charlesburack.com