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Pleiades: Literature in Context, Volume 36, Issue 1, Winter 2016, pp. 31-40  
(Article)

Published by Department of English and Philosophy, University of Central  
Missouri

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/plc.2016.0034>



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## Geoffrey Babbitt

### A Faint Cloud Kindled at the Rising Sun

*The rest is silence.*  
—Hamlet's last words

My daughter is almost asleep as I rock her, waiting for the dark out her window to transform silently into dawn. I smell the top of her heavy head.

~

Exhaustion is shorting-out my thoughts, making them flicker.

*I think the children smell unopened, / like unlit candles.*

The silence has heft.  
I want to keep the sun at bay.

*No easy thing, violence. / One of its names? Change.*

~

Phaëthon wants confirmation that Phoebus is his real father, so Clymene sends her son to Phoebus' high, glittering palace, with its huge columns and polished ivory pediments. The silver double doors shimmer with Vulcan's carved scenes of the sky, land, and seas.

Phaëthon asks his father for proof of their relation. When Phoebus says he will give him any gift the boy requests, Phaëthon asks to drive the Chariot of the Sun.

Phoebus reluctantly grants his wish.

~

Phaëthon cannot control the chariot. He scorches the constellations, destroys towns and entire regions, enflames mountain peaks, turns Libya into a desert, dries out rivers and lakes.

Jupiter strikes Phaëthon down with a thunderbolt.

*... Phoebus, in despair  
hid his own face; the world, for one full day—  
...was left without a single ray of sun.*

~



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But before Phoebus steals sunlight from the world, Phaëthon's sisters turn into poplar trees.  
Clymene tries to pull her daughters from the very trees they're turning into. "When you rip this tree,"  
each cries, "it is my body that you tear."  
Bark closing over their mouths chokes them silent. Their tears harden into amber glowing in the sun.

~

When my daughter was born six months ago, my partner Kathryn and I struggled over her name.  
I had been alternately favoring "Alette" and "Calder." Kathryn, however, was holding to "Remi Grace."  
In a peak of urgency—when the representative for the Office of Vital Statistics was forcing pen to paper,  
nurses ushering us into the hallway with discharge papers in hand—Kathryn proposed "Blake" as Remi's  
middle name.

That name changed "Remi" for me; Kathryn had been right.  
"Blake" told me so.

~

Change isn't necessarily violent. Blake wouldn't think so.

*He who binds to himself a joy  
Does the winged life destroy  
But he who kisses the joy as it flies  
Lives in eternity's sun rise*

~

Into her sleep, Remi sinks down, down, down.  
And further down.

~

Niobe is an archetype of the mourning parent.  
She refuses to honor the Titaness Latona and cuts short the rites of those who do. Then she causes  
her own misery by foolishly boasting of her fortune. In doing so, she defies the wisdom that Sophocles  
offers at the end of *Oedipus*: "let none / Presume on his good fortune until he find / Life, at his death, a  
memory without pain."

After Apollo shoots her seven sons dead with his arrows, she continues her defiance: "What triumph?  
Even in my misery, / I've more than you have in felicity: / despite these deaths, I still claim victory."  
And so Diana lets her arrows fly.

*The last was left. With all her body, all  
her robes, her mother shielded her and cried:  
"Do leave me one, my youngest, her alone! I*

---

*beg you, spare, of all my children, one!"*  
*She prayed, and as she did, the one for whom*  
*she prayed met death.*

~

Niobe's grief transforms her into stone. "Even her tongue / is frozen in her mouth; her palate now / is hard."

She cannot moan or cry. Her rock silently weeps.

~

"She stood in silence, listening to the voices of the ground."

This line initiates the turn in *Thel*.

Thel is so afraid of death that she is terrified of everything that living entails (sexuality, etc.). Those around her—the Lilly of the valley, the Cloud, the Clod of Clay, and the Worm—have a Blakean faith in the eternal life that awaits them, so they share none of Thel's anxieties.

As the Cloud says, "O maid I tell thee, when I pass away, / It is to tenfold life, to love, to peace, and raptures holy." The Cloud even tells Thel: "if thou art the food of worms... How great thy use, how great thy blessing."

~

After Thel's dialogue with her fellow characters, she comes to the land of the dead and stands before her own grave. She silently contemplates the dewy plot of open earth, and a "voice of sorrow breathe[s] from the hollow pit." The voice does not issue from any of the poem's characters. It seems to come from the grave itself, but it is born from Thel's own mind.

The voice reinforces her fear of death. Thel shrieks and retreats to the edenic, innocent Vales of Har.

~

The sun now rises, and a beam lights up Remi's hair.

The morning is stiff with frost.

~

In 1962, a five-part documentary produced for Swedish television followed the making of Bergman's *Winter Light*, the second in his "Trilogy of Faith," which is initiated by *Through a Glass Darkly* and completed by *Silence*.

The documentary is fittingly titled *Ingmar Bergman Makes a Movie*.

Regarding a scene right before Jonas the fisherman kills himself with a rifle, the interviewer asks Bergman: "Jonas the fisherman pays a visit to the priest, who is feeling sick and miserable and shaken by fever.... Will you use a series of different shots or one continuous shot of the priest?"



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Bergman's answer does not focus on the camera work.

"Well, you see, I will partly use the sound... when working in close conjunction with the audio track, it's like an accompanying chord, although unnoticeable.

"The most important thing is... as he recovers from his attack, there is a complete silence. I would minimize the usual noise in the studio, or in the church... the normal background noise, I will minimize even that. Each movement will be accompanied by almost no sound at all, thus creating a frightening silence around it. And as he looks up in this silence, it will have a powerful impact on the audience, as silences always do.

"A silence will hit—I'm working much more with silence than with sound."

Even if audiences weren't reflectively aware of the silence, they felt it.

I could feel it in my bones.

~

In the Iliad, when Priam steals himself into the Greeks' camp to ask for Hektor's body, he begins kissing Achilles' hands.

*I have gone through what no other mortal on earth has gone through;  
I put my lips to the hands of the man who has killed my children*

Theirs is a chiasmus of grief. Priam stands in for the absent father Achilles mourns. And through Achilles, Priam grieves the loss of his favorite son Hektor.

~

After their brief connection, Achilles urges Priam to break his fast by recalling Niobe's story to Priam. "Now you and I must remember our supper. / For even Niobe, she of the lovely tresses, remembered / to eat, whose twelve children were destroyed in her palace...".

If Niobe could eat, so can they, Achilles suggests—although Priam had fifty sons, and they are now all dead.

Achilles slaughters a fattened sheep.

~

In *Ezekiel* 24:16-17, after the prophet's wife has died, God tells him: "Son of man, behold, I take away from thee the desire of thine eyes with a stroke: yet neither shalt thou mourn nor weep, neither shall thy tears run down. Forbear to cry, make no mourning for the dead, bind the tire of thine head upon thee, and put on thy shoes upon thy feet, and cover not *thy* lips, and eat not the bread of men."

In one of his illustrations of *Ezekiel*, Blake depicts Ezekiel after his wife has died.

Ezekiel kneels in the foreground, looking upward, as if to God. In the background immediately behind him, four young people surround his wife's deathbed, hunched over, crying into their hands. Ezekiel's back is to his wife's peaceful body; he kneels, crossing his arms, staring straight up. His beard is shaggy and broad.

---

His big glistening eyes are full of muted feeling and unshakeable obedience as he looks toward God.

~

Blake one-ups Ezekiel.

When Blake's beloved brother Robert died of tuberculosis at twenty-four, Blake's first biographer tells us the poet saw Robert's "released spirit ascend heavenward through the matter-of-fact ceiling, 'clapping its hands for joy. '"

~

Shortly after delivering the famous line "Frailty, thy name is woman," Hamlet complains about how quickly Gertrude went from grieving widow to new bride.

At first she was "Like Niobe, all tears," but "within a month": "Ere yet the salt of most unrighteous tears / Had left the flushing in her galled eyes, / She married."

Here Niobe is less a figure for the grieving parent than a symbol for the general mourner.

~

If, however, we accept Stephen Dedalus's proposition in *Ulysses*, then Gertrude would be mourning as both wife and mother.

In the Scylla and Charybdis episode, Stephen Dedalus explains that when the ghost of Hamlet's father—a role which Shakespeare himself played onstage—says, "Hamlet, I am thy father's spirit," then:

*Shakespeare, a ghost by absence, and in the vesture of buried Denmark, a ghost by death, speaking his own words to his own son's name (had Hamnet Shakespeare lived he would have been prince Hamlet's twin) [suggests] you [Hamnet] are the dispossessed son: I am the murdered father: your mother is the guilty queen. Ann Shakespeare, born Hathaway.*

Gertrude, then, as Ann Shakespeare, was very much like Niobe in having lost every son she ever had. For Hamnet was Ann's only.

~

John Cage entered Harvard's anechoic chamber in pursuit of silence and instead heard two sounds—one low, one high.

The chamber's engineer told Cage that the low pulse was his circulatory system, and the high buzz was his nervous system. Absolute silence, Cage concluded, could never be experienced.

"Until I die there will be sounds.... One need not fear about the future of music."

~

I once experienced the sensation of complete silence, and it was while dreaming.



---

~

*King Lear* begins with speech and silence.

Before dividing his kingdom, Lear instructs his three daughters: “Tell me... Which of you shall we say doth love us most”—*not* “which of you doth love us most.” The inclusion of “we say” does far more than just round out the pentameter; it announces the scheme of the game.

Goneril and Regan—although worse daughters than Cordelia—are shrewd test-takers. They recognize that the test is not of love but expressing love. So naturally, they dramatize love’s ineffability.

Goneril: “A love that makes breath poor, and speech unable.”

Regan: “I find [Goneril’s speech] names my very deed of love; / Only she comes too short.”

~

Then there’s Cordelia, who refuses to play the game. “What shall Cordelia speak?” she asks in an aside. She resolves, “Love, and be silent.”

~

I watched a video on Al Jazeera English’s website the day it was posted: November 20, 2012.

Israel had bombed a Palestinian home in the Gaza strip. Two neighbors of the Al-Dallu family and ten of its members—who spanned three generations—were killed.

~

The reporter noted: “Israel says it targeted the house because a senior Hamas commander was staying there.”

~

In the video, a father in the Al-Dallu family carries the body of his three-year-old daughter past weeping family and neighbors, through the sunny streets leading to the cemetery.

He holds her parallel with the ground and lowers his head toward her chest.

He might be praying.

Her mouth is small, and her eyes are big but lifeless under their thin lids. Her hair is short, and her forehead bloodied.

Her father places her gently, headfirst, into a burial hole.

~

She cannot feel the dirt shoveled onto her. Never again will she feel sunlight or dirt or anything on her skin.

*Never, never, never, never, never.*

~

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In a *New York Review of Books* essay, Stephen Greenblatt argues that the deep effect upon Shakespeare of his son Hamnet's death significantly influenced the writing of *Hamlet*.

Greenblatt begins with the name: "Hamnet and Hamlet are in fact the same name, entirely interchangeable in Stratford records in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Shakespeare evidently named his son after his recusant neighbor and friend Hamnet Sadler, who was still alive in March 1616 when Shakespeare drew up his will and left 26 shillings, 8 pence to 'Hamlett Sadler...to buy him a ringe.'"

~

In "On My First Sonne," Ben Jonson elegizes his eldest son who died of the plague. The twelve-line poem ends:

*Rest in soft peace, and, ask'd, say, "Here doth lie  
Ben Jonson his best piece of poetry."  
For whose sake henceforth all his vows be such,  
As what he loves may never like too much.*

Ben Jonson's son shared his name.

Although lines nine and ten clearly claim that the son was the poet's finest piece of art, upon a first reading, for however brief a flash, it's possible for "Ben Jonson" to seem to refer to the poet: "Here doth lie / Ben Jonson." In which case, the speaker makes a point similar to Stephen Dedalus's: the death of the son makes a ghost of the father.

His grief changes him into a corpse.

~

In Bergman's *Winter Light*, the hunchbacked sexton says to despairing Pastor Ericsson:

The passion of Christ, his suffering—wouldn't you say the focus on his suffering is all wrong—this emphasis on physical pain? ...And his torments were rather brief. Lasting some four hours, I gather? I feel he was tormented far worse on another level. ...Just think of Gethsemane, Pastor. Christ's disciples fell asleep. They hadn't understood the meaning of the last supper or anything. And when the servants of the law appeared, they ran away, and Peter denied him.

Christ had known his disciples for three years. They'd lived together day in and day out, but they never grasped what he meant.

They abandoned him, down to the last man. He was left all alone. That must have been painful. To realize that no one understands. To be abandoned when you need someone to rely on. That must be excruciatingly painful.

But the worst was yet to come. When Jesus was nailed to the cross, and hung there in torment, he cried out, "God, my God. Why hast thou forsaken me?" He cried out as loud as he could. He thought that his heavenly father had abandoned him. He believed everything he'd ever preached





---

was a lie. In the moments before he died, Christ was seized by doubt.  
Surely that must have been his greatest hardship? God's silence.

~

I am with Remi in the local grocery store.

Even though I'm pretty sure they don't have a basement, we go down into a basement where there are two rows of flat metal tables, each row about six or seven tables deep, a clay tile floor, and oversized dish-washing basins. One end of the basement is curtained off for showers and baths. Although our shopping trip hasn't even begun and we are clearly in employee quarters, I decide to take a bath with Remi. Bath time at home is fun, so it seems fun to reenact it elsewhere. I hop in the bath with her, run the shower over us. Splash, splash, splash.

I drain the bath but leave her there, sliding the plastic door shut as an ad hoc babysitter. I head upstairs to stroll through the aisles, but Kathryn is seated under an umbrella at a patio table near the pharmacy. We eat lunch. We talk. We talk and talk and talk. When the table empties, it refills with the same pizza we ate in Greece while watching Australia play Italy in the 2006 World Cup.

Time streams by too quietly to notice it passing.

~

A commotion. People scramble downstairs into the basement. I think some are firemen and paramedics. As I drift past the cashiers, toward the stairs, I turn back to look at Kathryn. Several of our best friends have come out of nowhere, and they are now huddled around Kathryn, comforting her.

She isn't crying, but they are stroking her back speaking to her in dove tones as if they expect her to start soon.

I realize that I left Remi alone in a porcelain bathtub in the basement of a grocery store.

Then the sound goes out—total silence. A sonic blackout.

~

As I'm rushing downstairs, I have a vision. Latex-gloved hands pull Remi's small body from the bath I left her in. Her eyes are closed in a way I've never seen them closed before.

~

I'm rooted to the stairs. The rescuers and Remi are not in sight. Bodies swirl in slow-hurried motion around me. Silence. I can never face Kathryn again.

~

After checking on Remi in her crib, I can't sleep.

The part of me that lets me sleep has just been subliminally accused of being negligent. Every time I begin to nod off, I open my eyes to the curtains drawn against dawn.

---

~

I spend the rest of the night staring at the curtains, listening to her white noise machine on the baby monitor. Every peep she makes is a relief.

~

I like to think Blake's life ended with a metamorphosis into something only Blake himself could have seen. Or something only Blake himself could have seen had he not been dying.

Blake's last vision—one he may never have in fact had—is where I feel called to meet him every time I read him. If I am to know anything about him at all.

Blake's last vision is where he crosses over into silence. It is not enough to read only his words or to study his designs.

To pierce that silence.

~

I put Remi down into her crib. She is a vision that changes every day.

~

Blake's last vision is the silence of salt on the tongue instead of the honey you were expecting, it is a bird breaking into light, deep-red wine poured over a cold stone, a woman turning into a nightingale, a silent sun rising above dark rocks.

~

I wish I were Blake or Ezekiel or Cage or even Bergman's hunchback sexton.  
But I admit I'm more like Thel.

~

In his essay on *Hamlet*, Greenblatt quotes these lines from *King John*:

*Grief fills the room up of my absent child,  
Lies in his bed, walks up and down with me,  
Puts on his pretty looks, repeats his words,  
Remembers me of all his gracious parts,  
Stuffs out his vacant garments with his form.*

How did Shakespeare survive living these lines?

~



---

I'd become a ghost—a faint cloud kindled at the rising sun.  
The rest would be silence.

~

Silence is that which fills the sonic space created by sound's vacancy.  
So it isn't an absence. It is a fullness.

Silences, then, aren't defined by what they're missing but by what they contain.

No two are alike—not only because each harbors something unique but also because each takes a different form depending on what it holds.

Silence is a purse or a pocket or a bottle or a ship or a womb or a room or an envelope or a coffin.

In light of sound's absence, it can contain anything—even sound. It can be a cathedral filled with choral music or a hallway echoing laughter.

It can be grief's most intense pitch.