Listening to Silence Speak

BERNARD P. DAUENHAUER

When the philosopher confronts silence, how is it possible to remain true to the phenomenon? Does not the very speaking of it betray that about which the philosopher speaks? Such giants of contemporary thought as Heidegger and Wittgenstein caution us to remain silent before that which lies beyond the province of philosophical discourse. How dare a philosopher speak of silence? With considerable boldness and care, Dauenhauer answers such reservations: only if silence is allowed to come to presence not as a lack, denial, or negation of its opposite, and is allowed to present itself as a positive phenomenon, as a distinctive way of being. Thus speaking of silence shares the same legitimacy as any discourse:

Given the limited scope and power of the domain of discourse, no formulation of the sense of silence can be regarded as exhaustive. But the same limitation infects all discourse. . . . The conundrum posed by this fact does not of itself proscribe discourse. . . . One is entitled to engage in discourse, even discourse about silence, so long as he does so with this conundrum in mind. [78-79]

Considering the thorough treatment Dauenhauer gives to the topic, one might be tempted to say he provides the definitive, though not exhaustive, discussion of silence. With a disciplined imagination, Dauenhauer nicely describes the types and unity of silence and then exposes the
temporality of the phenomenon. Finally, not hesitating before the task, he speaks lucidly of silence as even more fundamental than speech itself; astonishingly he speaks of the ontological power which surrounds, envelops, and gives him, or anyone, his own discourse, namely silence itself.

Any review or attempt at a synopsis will inevitably belittle Dauenhauer's careful argument and his mounting of evidence for the thesis of his book. Perhaps it is best here to indicate the direction, and suggest the details, of Dauenhauer's insights. The work begins with acute observations about the role of silence in discourse. Silence can be sighted as an active performance in the performing arts which employ gestures, or when "silence speaks" in John Cage's "Silent Symphony." Moreover, silence punctuates all discourse: it intervenes in the flow of utterances as fore-and-after silence, as interrupting. Moreover, a deep silence pervades all utterances of any sort; for example, there is the silence of intimates who share unspoken meanings during spoken discourse, the liturgical silence which worshippers hold open for God's coming, and the mystical silence which awaits the to-be-said. These initial approximations are enriched by relating them to types of discourse; for example, the discourse of a tradition, together with fore-and-after silence, provides the background against which all particular present and future utterances are made, and with deep silence of the to-be-said tradition, authorizes and forms the criterion of utterances in discourse.

With the diversity of types thus displayed, Dauenhauer begins to expose their unity by an intentional analysis of the phenomenon in which he specifies both noetic and noematic correlates as well as the genesis of silence. Because silence is intimately bound with discourse, an obvious hypothesis for the intentional meaning of silence would be that it is the positive abstaining from determinate expressions. But such an hypothesis falls before such counter-examples as liturgical silence and deep silence. (Dauenhauer exhibits a special skill at the use of counter-example in doing his eidetic variations on the phenomena: in this book we see a phenomenologist at work.)

Whatever it is that the abstaining here intends, no particular utterance as such is necessary to fulfill it. The worshipper abstains from uttering expressions for the sake of what is, in intention, not necessarily utterable.[57]

Now, if it were the case, as the suggested hypothesis holds, that liturgical silence is merely abstaining from pre-given determinate expressions, then whatever expression does follow the silence which ruptures the flow