

JOHN GRAY'S "SILENCE OF THE ANIMALS"
A REVIEW

THOMAS BEY WILLIAM BAILEY

If I hadn't already released a revised edition of my *Micro Bionic* book some time ago, I would be compelled to do yet another revision simply to fold in some of the insights gained from philosopher John Gray's most recent book, *The Silence of Animals*. Gray remains one of the most lucid writers in his field, and I believe one of the most important, even if the recent work in question offers just an addendum to his thought of a decade ago rather than a noticeable 'progression' into other philosophical inquiries. This may be by design, since Gray's personal project has been exposition of faith in the certainty of continued "progress" as the ethical successor to religion, rather than as a step beyond it.

Gray is not alone in his views, though he remains something of a welcome anomaly in his communicative style, which tends more towards the speculative fiction work of his late friend J.G. Ballard than anything currently marketed as European philosophy (Gray is, after all, professor emeritus of 'European thought' at the LSE.) While some would-be theoretical allies, like the anti-anthropocentric philosophers of the 'Speculative Realist' school, may currently invite more approving nods from full-time intellectuals for realizations similar to Gray's, they suffer from the same stylistic plague that infects so much of late-20th century and 21st century thought (i.e. allusive and jargon-laden writing that is unnecessary for the communication of easily intuited concepts.) As such, it is difficult for them to achieve with their overcomplicated prose the emotional range that Gray achieved in *Straw Dogs* with a largely aphoristic style, or that he achieves in *The Silence...* with generous poetic quotations.

In much the same way that his return to favorite themes illustrates his disdain for progress-for-its-own-sake, Gray's economical prose style marks another turn that is contrarian within a highly technologizing society: the valorization of silence. *The Silence of Animals*, as its title suggests, hinges upon a nuanced discussion of that very thing - and though Gray does not touch upon the same forms of "musical" silence that I explored in *Micro Bionic*, choosing mainly to examine the literary world instead - his claims are nonetheless applicable to that culture, and shed some light on what may be a possible motivation for artists who are reticent to discuss the exact reasoning behind their excursions into near-silence. In parts, Gray seems to be highly skeptical of art forms that base themselves on silence:

Only humans seem to want to silence the clamour in their minds. Tiring of the inner chatter, they turn to silence in order to deafen the sound of their thoughts. What people are seeking when they look for silence is a different kind of noise (pp. 157-158.)

However, this is qualified by Gray soon after it is originally stated:

If silence is no longer cultivated, it is because admitting the need for it means accepting that you are inwardly restless - a condition, in other times recognized as one of misery, that is now prized as virtue [...] if you admit your need for silence, you accept that much of your life has been an exercise in distraction (pp. 160-161.)

This last statement seems to be borne out by the statements of Basque sound artist Mattin, whose notes on the *Going Fragile* collaboration with Radu Malfatti seem to imply the journey into silence as something like an act of violent liberation, itself the product of a feeling of regular agitation and 'being boxed in' by societal constraints: "you must engage in questioning your security, see it as a constriction. You are aware and scared, as if you were in a dark corridor. Now you are starting to realise that what you thought of as walls existed only in your imagination." Given Mattin's divided loyalties between so-called "noise" music and the kind of near-silence exhibited on *Going Fragile*, Gray's comments about cultivated silence as "another kind of noise" seem particularly apt.

This said, Gray proposes that the cultivation of silence is merely another symptom of the illness of human exceptionalism. In his recent book he offers up several examples of thinkers, chosen from the ranks of theologians and secular humanists alike, who view the functions of silence as being different for humans and animals, respectively: a common thread here is that the involuntary silence of the latter is a sign of their being "world-poor" (Heidegger) whereas the elective silence of humans is "proof" of their unique possession of something called consciousness.

While Gray admits that we may never be able to duplicate the experiences of any other animal species, or that we may never be able to view nature from anything but a human perspective, he never concludes that this impossibility of mutual comprehension confirms a superiority of human culture to untamed nature. Furthermore, he does not see attempts to commune with nature as fundamentally misguided, even though they may end in

failure: "through poetry, religion, and immersion in the natural world, humans try to shed the words that enshroud their lives...the struggle can never succeed, but that does not make it pointless (p. 164.)" If there is a claim that I would have liked Gray to expand upon in this book, it is precisely this. His generous quotation of Samuel Beckett does provide at least one avenue of further exploration, given that "[Beckett's] interest in Democritus's idea the 'nothing is more real than nothing'" and "the quietistic impulse within his work"ⁱⁱⁱ all point to an appreciation of silence that re-integrates humans with other manifestations of life rather than giving them some privileged place apart from them.

However, it is within the world of 'intermedia' and experimental arts that the unintended consequences of seeking out silence have shown themselves to be truly beneficial. The now legendary visit of composer John Cage to the anechoic chamber confirmed for him the fact that "there is always something to see, something to hear...try as we may to make a silence, we cannot."ⁱⁱⁱⁱ Cage's subsequent realization - that sounds would survive his own death - cleaves very close to Gray's own reminders the world will not die along with humans. Both Cage and Gray would likely agree upon the surrender of the idea of human exceptionalism as the *sine qua non* of a much more joyous sense of connectivity to all sentient life, in fact Cage does note how this "leads to the world of nature, where, gradually or suddenly, one sees that humanity and nature, not separate, are in this world together; that nothing was lost when everything was given away."^{iv}

Gray's latest opus hangs on the paradoxical contention that humans will live much more satisfying lives - if ones still imbued with an acknowledgement of tragedy - when they cease looking for "redemption from being human." A non-purposive approach to silence may help to this end, whether this means 'silence' as wordless Cage-ian contemplation, or 'silence' as the indifferent reaction that the massive and indifferent cosmos has to us: this latter type being the kind that inspired many of Iannis Xenakis's works. Both of these are tragic situations after a fashion, and yet - given the incredible swell of creativity that has arisen from confronting rather than fleeing them - seem to bear out Gray's thesis.

Gray's lesson is a valuable one that can, and should, be applied to the arts - it can make the difference between "silence as another kind of noise" and silence which, though seeming radical at first, is just another attempt at proving the exceptionalism of the human animal.



Originally posted at tbwbworks.typepad.com, 2014.

ⁱ Mattin, "Going Fragile." *Noise And Capitalism*, p. 21. Arteleku, Madrid, 2009.

ⁱⁱ James Knowlson, *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett*, p. 353. Bloomsbury Publishing, London, 1996.

ⁱⁱⁱ John Cage, *Silence: Lectures and Writings*, p. 8. Wesleyan University Press, Middlton CT., 1973.

^{iv} *Ibid.*