

F E A T U R E

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S I L L E N C E
O F T H E
P O E T S

DANA GIOIA AND THE
TRANSCENDENCE OF VERSE

J O S H U A H R E N



IMAGE: Pierre van Schuppen after Peter Paul Rubens, *Saint Teresa of Avila's Vision of the Dove*, c. 1650, The Met.

And what are poets for in a destitute time?
—Hölderlin, “Bread and Wine”

I. MYSTICS AND POETS

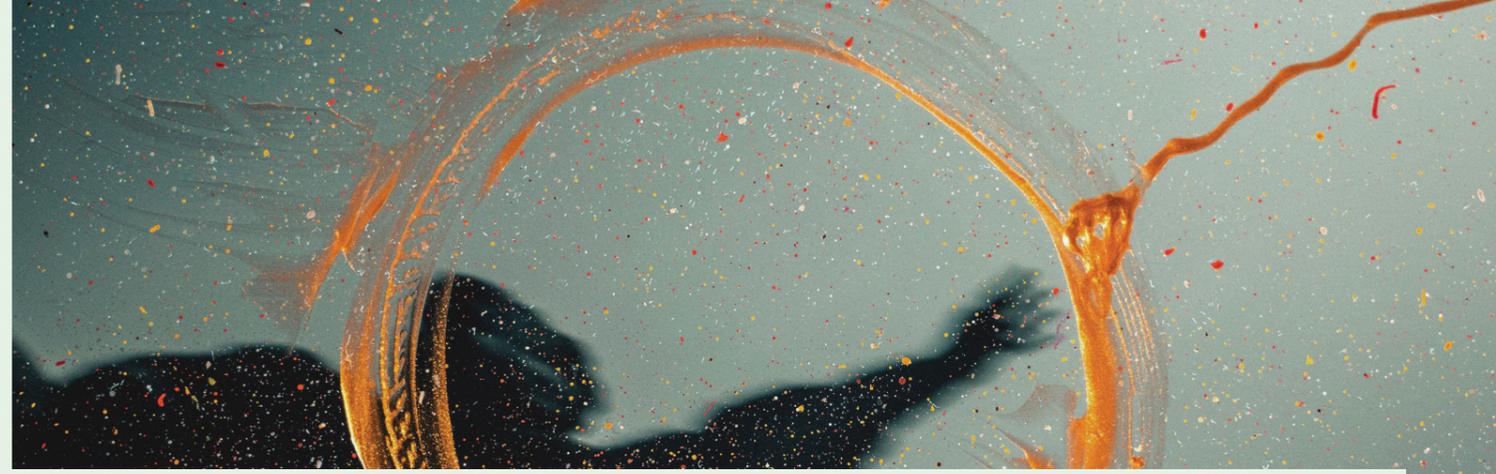
While the poet might be prayerful and the mystic might wax poetic, there is a “fundamental difference which separates the poetic experience from the mystical experience: *while the poet progresses toward the Word, the mystic tends toward Silence.*”¹ As Raïssa Maritain expounds, mystics may be moved to describe their heightened experiences, but for them this “expression is not a means of completing the experience.”² For the furnishing of her interior castle, a mystic like St. Teresa of Avila needs no speech; her talk, the record she left us of the “prayer of quiet,” is “only a result of superabundance, a generous attempt at communication.”

The poet, on the contrary, cannot do without words. They are the vital stuff of his service to the world. Albert Beguin corroborates Maritain’s conclusion, contending that “the realm of poetry, of art, never coincides perfectly with that of mysticism. . . . Whatever value one attributes to the poetic act, it remains an act submitted to the necessity of form. It ends at the word.” Let’s say the poet is convinced that his rather pathetic words can only allude to the Night he has glimpsed; even still, he “cannot, without ceasing to be a poet, go beyond the word,” whereas “the mystic tends toward silence, and all that is truly important in his eyes surpasses the articulated word.”³

Another consequential difference casts further relief. Whereas the mystic seeks union with God, the poet seeks a means of “giving harmony to our entire being, and of creating with the same stroke harmony between our being and all that is not our being.” We call this harmony beauty and form, both of which are the highest articulation of “what we call interior life.”⁴

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Still, the poet cannot reach the mystic’s mute contentment—at least not *as* poet. And if—as poet—he grows ambitious and “demands of Poetry that plenitude of spiritual knowledge which is found at the end of the ascetic and mystic ways,” he is, Raïssa writes, “preparing bitter disappointments for himself.”⁵ For if poetry and mysticism share the same Source, they are possessed of “different dispositions and according to essentially distinct types of relation to that Source.”⁶ Beguin again distills the distinction: “The final silence of the poet is a silence of the vanquished one who is resigned; that of the mystics is the peace of one who has achieved the goal of his adventure.”⁷

II. VARIETIES OF SILENCE

There are different kinds of silence, though, and some are deceptively loud. *In God without Being*, Catholic philosopher Jean-Luc Marion names a few varieties. The distinction is crucial because two of the most influential thinkers whose works tower over our considerations have consigned all talk of God to silence. “Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent.”⁸ So said the relentless Wittgenstein in the final pages of his *Tractatus*. And Martin Heidegger, though haunted by “I am who am,” comes to the same conclusion: “Someone who has experienced theology in his own roots, both the theology of the Christian faith and that of philosophy, would today rather remain silent about God.”⁹

Parallel to these profoundly influential twentieth century philosophers, numerous Christian fathers have espoused a holy quiet. Ignatius of Antioch insists that “it is better to keep silence and to be, than to speak without

being.”¹⁰ Pseudo-Dionysius, mystic of the “Super-Essential Beautiful,” incites us to “honor the ineffable [things] with a wise silence.”¹¹ What, Marion wonders, do these distinct silences mean? To what sort of silence are we summoned? “The greatest difficulty doubtless consists more essentially in deciding what silence says: contempt, renunciation, the avowal of impotence, or else the highest honor rendered, the only one neither unworthy nor ‘dangerous.’”¹² There is a crucial contrast “between silencing and keeping silent.”¹³ This dilemma leads us to see that “nothing demands more of interpretation than the nothingness of speech.”¹⁴

III. SAYING THE UNSAID

Dana Gioia is one of our greatest living poets. The former Chairman of the National Endowment of the Arts and Poet Laureate of California is a major public intellectual. He is also a Catholic obsessed with sights of the unseen in our secular age. As if taking a cue from the Nicene Creed, his verses frequently mine the mysterious, giving verbal presence to all things *visibilium et invisibilium*. As not a few of his verses proclaim, he is a prayerful poet mindful of the limits and the Babel of language, and it is through suffering these limits that his words can point us toward the Word.

Gioia begins to tease out his grasp of the aforementioned species of silence: “As a poet I have also come to believe that what one leaves unsaid is often as powerful as what one says. The hard part is, of course, making the reader actually feel what is being left unsaid.”¹⁵ His poem “Unsaid” embodies this the tension enunciated by Marion:

*So much of what we live goes on inside—
The diaries of grief, the tongue-tied aches
Of unacknowledged love are no less real
For having passed unsaid. What we conceal
Is always more than what we dare confide.
Think of the letters that we write our dead.*¹⁶

The very title bespeaks a negative muteness, announcing things that are *loud* inside of us but unheard by others because they are not, finally, said. To Marion's "contempt" and "avowal of impotence," Gioia adds alternate reasons for speechlessness: "grief," "ache," loves either illicit or too risky but "no less real" because we censor our impassioned tongues. A state of unsaying occupies more of our hours than all the uttered confidences we dare. And so, when our dead pass and so much remains "unsaid," we compose dead letters—too late, but somehow inescapably, for the communication we kept quiet demands completion, the quest for communion: yes, some of our silences were what we call prudence, but others produced a deficit.

Our keeping silent about ultimate concerns can also result in profane verbosity. As Marion cautions, "By not keeping silent, by covering it with our busy chattering, we silence that which silence alone, possibly, could have honored—by attempting precisely not to say it, or even to aim at it."¹⁷ Whereas Wittgenstein could be taken to advise silence *before* God, such silence can spill over into the silencing of God. "Either to silence silence, by dint of words busied in declaring all the idols and the thousand and one goals, or else to silence *oneself* in order to let that very thing which silence honors be told."¹⁸ Remember that the mystic's silence is a *means* of union, an occasion for passive listening and surrender rather than an end in itself.

IV. LISTENING OUT LOUD

Gioia does not induce us toward an apophatic silence so much as he inculcates the art of listening *in* silence. He epitomizes this movement in his poem "Words":

*The world does not need words. It articulates itself
in sunlight, leaves, and shadows. The stones on the path
are no less real for lying uncatalogued and uncounted.
The fluent leaves speak only the dialect of pure being.
The kiss is still fully itself though no words are spoken.*¹⁹

See the modesty of Gioia's initial lines. There are no adjectives at all; by restraining himself into minimalist prosody, he makes clear the thinness of these choreographed letters relative to the things that they name. From the inhuman vantage point of impersonal reality, words are not necessary, but it is hard for us to conceive of a landscape without language. We use analogies of verbiage immediately: sunlight and shadow are "articulations." Leaves are "fluent." Their "dialect of pure being" may be beyond words, but the poem presents it as a newly-discovered language. However, Heidegger's famous insistence that language is "the house of Being" is here refuted line by line.²⁰ The kiss is doing just fine. In fact, it may be better if you don't morph it with words:

*Even calling it a kiss betrays the fluster of hands
Glancing the skin or gripping a shoulder, the slow
Arching of neck or knee, the silent touching of tongues.*²¹

The world does
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PHOTO: Jr Korpa, Unsplash.

Notice, nonetheless, how effectively *this very verse* makes present the fullness of what is happening here; for without this extended complication we might reduce a kiss to something shushed—something inarticulate and therefore incomplete. As the scholastics argued, words are not the same as things, but they contain what they name *in alio esse*—in another mode of existence. This additional mode can chatter, but it can also dip into the depths. Gioia gets at this in the next stanza:

*Yet the stones remain less real to those who cannot
name them, or read the mute syllables graven in silica.
To see a red stone is less than seeing it as jasper—
metamorphic quartz, cousin to the flint the Kiowa
carved as arrowheads. To name is to know and remember.*²²

Poetry is a servant, not an instrument of power. Layers of reality do not leap into being simply because they are bespoken. Poets, however, can become intoxicated by the potencies of their own poesy. Maritain is attuned to this error. Habituated into profundity, "they would like to force the gates of the mystery which penetrates us and envelopes us on all sides and to create beings, or act upon created beings, by efficacious signs, as if by sorcery," as if their arrangements of words were "in accordance with the teachings of the Cabala."²³

The pinnacles of poetic utterance do not *alter* being or create *ex nihilo*. No, though they do draw out affinities and subtleties and varieties—not just red stone but jasper—making reality not merely fuller but more beautiful by naming the wholeness and clarity in things we typically see only partially, as in a finger-smudged and badly-lit mirror. “The world does not need words,” Gioia assures us, using more of them to make the case—and then doing an about face.²⁴

The mystic “finds repose” in “negative theology” because it is only after “every affirmative mode of expression” that he can sit “before the Silence which is, itself, the best praise of God in the shadows of the Faith: *Silentium tibi laus*.”²⁵ Sometimes poetry can lead us to the threshold of this great quiet. Consider the end of “Words,” which concludes with a vision of creatures at the brink of being—and alludes to the all-sufficient beyond-Being:

*The sunlight needs no praise piercing the rainclouds
painting the rocks and leaves with light, then dissolving
each lucent droplet back into the clouds that engendered it.
The daylight needs no praise, and so we praise it always—
greater than ourselves and all the airy words we summon.*²⁶

The world, which does not need words, nonetheless solicits them from us. Like smitten lovers, we sing when we behold beautiful things.

It is only after every affirmative mode of expression that he can sit before the Silence which is, itself, the best praise of God in the shadows of the Faith.



V. THE SILENCE OF THE POETS

There is, finally, another silence that shadows verse. Gioia sings of it in “The Silence of the Poets”:

*The Silence of the Poets
is something to be grateful for.
Once there were so many books, so many poets.
All the masterpieces one could never read,
indistinguishable even then
among the endless shelves of the unreadable.*

*Some claim the best stopped writing first.
For the others, no one noted when or why.
A few observers voiced their mild regret
about another picturesque, unprofitable craft
that progress had irrevocably doomed.*

*And what was lost? No one now can judge.
But we still have music, art, and film,
Diversions enough for a busy people.
And even poetry for those who want it.
The old books, those the young have not defaced,
Are still kept somewhere,
Stacked in their dusty rows.*

*And a few old men may visit from time to time
to run their hands across the spines
and reminisce,
but no one ever comes to read
or would know how.*²⁷

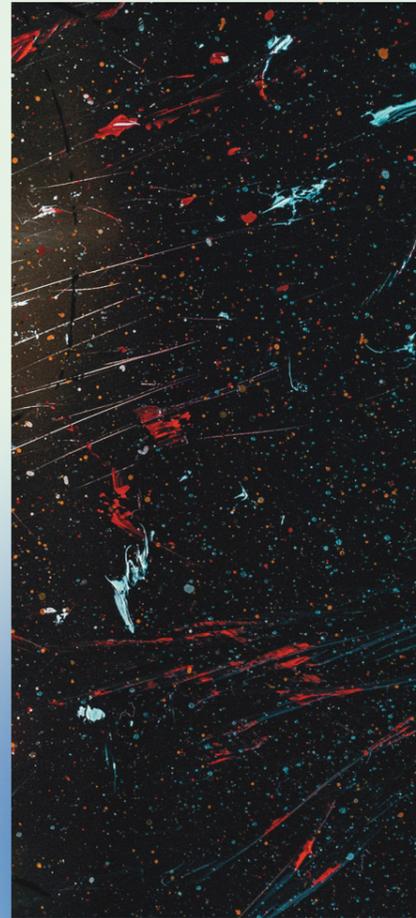


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“The Silence of the Poets” is not, here, a kind of apophatic reverence. It is ominous. This sort of silence is a shortfall. Initially, sure, the tone is celebratory. The paucity of verse is a purifying corrective. The dross is forgotten—library dust. We’ll save time and soak up genius at once. Then the voice turns conciliatory. Like any other useless pursuit, this quaint and “unprofitable” art is consigned to history’s ample dustbin. Nothing is lost, right? So much is gained with the variety of choices: music and movies proliferate. Our days are full. We’ve “diversions enough for a busy people.”

IMAGE: Annemarie Heinrich,
Jorge Luis Borges, 1967, Wikimedia Commons.



The staircase takes us into a library's rare books room, and then spirals into something out of Jorge Luis Borges or Franz Kafka. In Gioia's poem, as in Borges' fable "The Library of Babel," the library is not just a library: "The library will endure; it is the universe. As for us, everything has not been written; we are not turning into phantoms. We walk the corridors, searching the shelves and rearranging them, looking for lines of meaning amid leagues of cacophony and incoherence."²⁸

And so we can take no comfort when the librarian tells us not to worry because these poems are preserved in stacks—rationally ordered and fully funded. We can take no comfort when a patron assures us "don't look back," for these verses that once gave us second sight are now therapy in the country of old men. The final stanza confirms our worst fears. The final "but," a most modest conjunction, contains the gunpowder of Molotov cocktail: "But no one ever comes to read / or would know how."

As with all literarily-imagined futures, the horror is in the recognition of our own world, a world that may not need words but is doing quite badly for lack of them. In his breakthrough Atlantic essay "Can Poetry Matter?" Gioia contended that "poets have been alienated from their original cultural function. . . . In poetry's case, the socioeconomic changes have led to a divided literary culture: the superabundance of poetry within a small class and the impoverishment outside of it."²⁹ That word "impoverishment" distinguishes his stance from being that of a mere neutral observer; here is no angel of history, indifferent to what has been lost. The poets' compartmentalization and mutation lead to a deafening muteness—a city bereft of prophecy and witness.

That whereof we cannot speak we must consign to silence.
What whereof we cannot quiet we must assign to poets.

William Carlos Williams, poet and doctor both,
diagnosed the silence of the poets like so:

*It is difficult
to get the news from poems
yet men die miserably every day
for lack
of what is found there.*³⁰

The
horror
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Every day, men waste verbosely for lack of the silencing words of the poets. They rival each other in a parliament of noise, not heeding those verses that could lead them to the threshold of God's great and silent presence. Their souls are starved and their reverence impaired for lack of what is found there. Who knows what would happen if we listened to the poets, once banished from Plato's *Republic* and now self-exiled and enclosed in a "subculture." Those raiders of the inarticulate—are they even in their right minds?

Maybe, like the mystics, theirs can be a kind of madness. But maybe this is precisely what makes their significance or insignificance more-than-human after all. If Josef Pieper is correct, then "genuine poesy"—that which tells mortals things we could not conceive from within our limitedness—"originates with divine inspiration; it flows from a condition of the soul closer to a state of being-beside-oneself than possessing-oneself."³¹ Maybe at its highest, conceived amidst what Pieper and Plato could only call "divine madness," poetry can leave its rich if unconsecrated wine at the altar of God, coaxing not just its authors but also its hearers toward the Lord of language. Now I can't think for you, now I can't speak for you, now I can't hear for you—you'll have to decide.

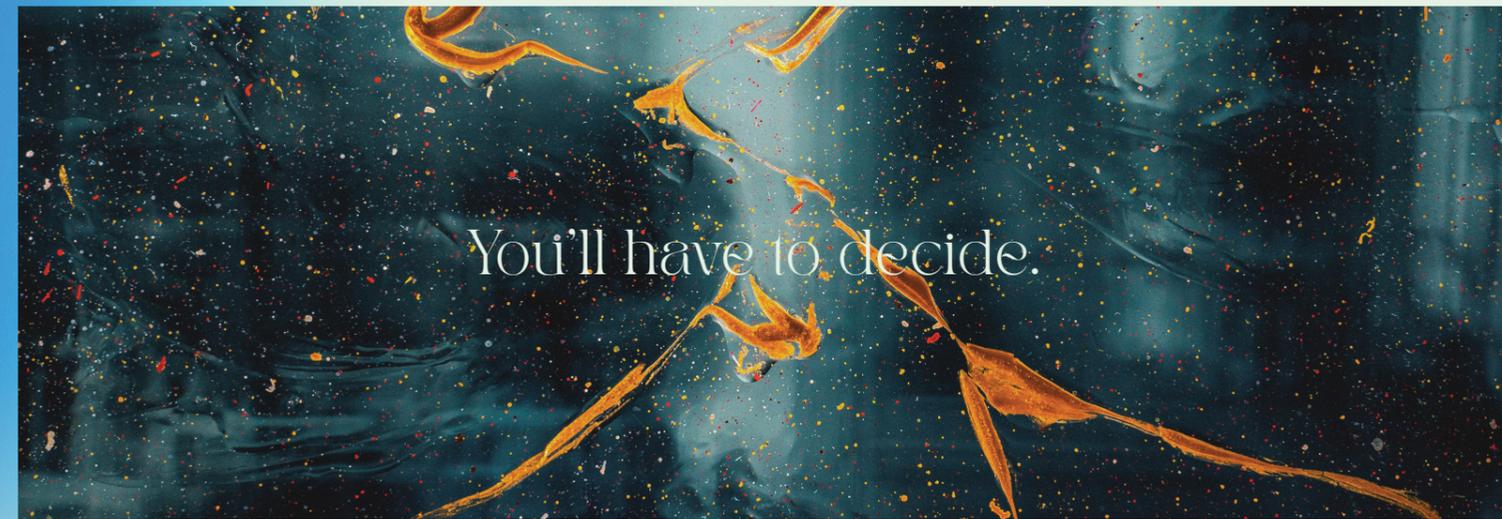


PHOTO: Jr Korpa, Unsplash.

Endnotes

¹Raïssa Maritain, "Magic, Poetry, and Mysticism," *The Situation of Poetry*, trans. Marshall Suther, New York: Philosophical Library, 1955, 34.

²Maritain, 34.

³This and the previous two quotations taken from Maritain, 34.

⁴Maritain, 35.

⁵Maritain, 32.

⁶Maritain, 33.

⁷Maritain, 33.

⁸Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 7 (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1922), 189.

⁹Jean-Luc Marion, *God Without Being*, trans. Thomas A. Carlson (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1991), 53.

¹⁰Marion, 53.

¹¹Marion, 54.

¹²Marion, 54.

¹³Marion, 55.

¹⁴Marion, 54.

¹⁵Erika Koss, "A Conversation with Dana Gioia," Image: *Art, Faith, Mystery* 73 <https://imagejournal.org/article/conversation-dana-gioia/>.

¹⁶Dana Gioia, "Unsaid," in *99 Poems: New and Selected* (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2016)..

¹⁷Marion, *God Without Being*, 60.

¹⁸Marion, 60.

¹⁹Dana Gioia, "Words," in *99 Poems*, 12.

²⁰Martin Heidegger, *On the Way to Language*, trans. Peter D. Hertz (New York: HarperCollins, [1959] 1982), 5.

²¹Gioia, "Words," 12.

²²Gioia, 12.

²³Maritain, "Magic, Poetry, and Mysticism," 24.

²⁴Gioia, "Words," 12.

²⁵Marion, *God Without Being*, 35.

²⁶Gioia, "Words," 12.

²⁷Gioia, "The Silence of the Poets," in *99 Words*, 88.

²⁸Jorge Luis Borges, "The Library of Babel," in *Collected Fiction* (New York: Penguin Books, 1999), 112–118.

²⁹Gioia, "Can Poetry Matter?" *The Atlantic*, May 1991, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1991/05/can-poetry-matter/305062/>.

³⁰William Carlos Williams, "Asphodel, that Greeny Flower," in *Asphodel, that Greeny Flower & Other Love Poems* (New York: New Directions, 1994), 19.

³¹Josef Pieper, *Divine Madness: Plato's Case Against Secular Humanism*, trans. Lothar Krauth (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989), 30.

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Joshua Hren is founder of Wisblood Books and co-founder of the new MFA in Creative Writing program at the University of St. Thomas. He has published essays and poems in such journals as *First Things*, *America*, and *LOGOS*. His books include the short story collections *This Our Exile* (2018) and *In the Wine Press* (2020); a forthcoming novel, *Infinite Regress* (2022); and two nonfiction works, *Middle-earth and the Return of the Common Good: Tolkien and Political Philosophy* (2018) and *How to Read (and Write) Like a Catholic* (2021). His book *Fugitive Faith: Dana Gioia and Poetry that Matters* is under consideration.