

SILENCE AND SYMBOLIC EXPRESSION

PETER EHRENHAUS

This essay develops a phenomenological perspective of silence and illustrates its principles through a study of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. Traditionally viewed as the absence of speech, silence is discussed as a potential human response to all forms of symbolic expression. Encounters experienced as silent present a challenge; they also provide the opportunity for authentic self-discovery, which has implications for the relationship of the individual to others and to the state. The Vietnam Veterans Memorial is discussed as an architectural instance of object-silence. The meanings individuals find at the Memorial can be distinguished in terms of various public signs of understanding that characterize their interplay with the Memorial.

THE concept of silence has received intermittent, albeit insightful, treatment. With few exceptions, Richard Johannesen's (1974) "plea for research" has gone unheeded. Bruneau (1973) has addressed forms and functions of silence broadly; Jensen (1973) has developed a functional typology of silence; Scott (1972) has discussed motives attributable to silence; and Brummett (1980) has examined politically strategic silence.

In all of these essays, silence is viewed as the absence of speech or as the refusal to speak. Further, with one exception (Scott, 1972), these studies approach silence exclusively as *object*—its appearance, its uses, the meanings attributed to its presence. In viewing silence as object, our attention is focused *outward*.

Rather less frequently, silence is viewed as *encounter*—what one can do in silence, what one can come to know through silence. Scott (1972) shifts to this perspective in discussing the silent encounter of contemplation, and Jaska and Stech (1978) take it in examining how the interplay of verbal and silent encounters with others enriches the personal significance of relationships. By considering silence as encounter, our attention takes an *inward* focus toward the personal meaningfulness of the encounter for those involved.

My purpose in this essay is to suggest an extension of the domain of silence-as-object, and to indicate how this broader view provides greater opportunity to study silence-as-encounter. Silence can be encountered in all modes of symbolic expression. While typically considered the absence of speech, we can think of silence more broadly as the absence of usable forms of symbolic expression (i.e., as *our* inability to use meaningfully those forms of symbolic expression which we encounter). Further, expanding our view of silence-as-object affords us greater opportunity to study ways in which silence-as-encounter becomes personally meaningful.

In this essay, I present a conception of silence grounded in a phenomenological perspective, and indicate how this approach allows for the possibility of silence to be encountered in all forms of symbolic expression. I then discuss how architecture poses problems of interpretation, and offer an analysis of what may be one of the most striking objects for exploring the uses of silence—the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C. This analysis examines how the Memorial (as

Peter Ehrenhaus is Assistant Professor of Speech Communication at Portland State University. The author wishes to thank the Communication Monographs reviewers and Dennis Mumby for their comments and suggestions.

object) can be viewed as silent, and ways in which it becomes meaningful (as encounter).

The Speech/Silence Paradox

Defining silence as the absence of speech reflects the widespread, if not axiomatic, position that ours is a world constituted by communication and filled with its use (see Mead, 1934, for example). Scott (1972) casts his discussion of silence within "the rhetorical environment in which I insist we all live" (p. 146). Quite reasonably, our first impulse is to view silence as the absence of speech, whether absent by design or not. Our *expectation*, in other words, is *for the presence of speech, as the pervasive mode of symbolic expression*.

This fundamental expectation is revealed in the metaphoric implications of our use of the term (see Lakoff and Johnson, 1980). Communication is fullness; silence is emptiness. Silence is "filled" by talk, as talk fills a room; embarrassing silences are viewed as "gaps," as empty spaces. This implication remains whether silence is viewed favorably or not. Silence contributes to human relationships. Talk can pose a barrier to human contact (Jensen, 1973). In silence, obstructions are removed.

However, a speech/silence dichotomy creates a distinction that is fraught with paradox. As Scott (1972) notes, "Every decision to say something is a decision not to say something else . . ." (p. 146). Consequently, "in speaking we remain silent." Scott's observation has two vital implications. First, speech is selective and incomplete. Second, it cannot help but focus our attention and interpretations in one direction rather than another. In speaking to one issue, we are mute on countless others.

Yet "in remaining silent, we speak" (Scott, 1972, p. 146). This "speech" differs fundamentally from verbal communication. The "speech" that silence "speaks" is indeterminate and potentially complete; it can "say" all things to those who encounter it. Unlike verbal communication, silence cannot direct interpretation. Although silence may be intended to threaten or show awe (Scott, 1972), or to show assent or dissent (Jensen, 1973), and despite any "relatively predictable meanings" we may attribute to it (Brummett, 1980, p. 289), silence cannot tell us what it means.

Sensitive to the paradox inherent in a speech/silence dichotomy, we can broaden our view of silence-as-object. If symbolic expression speaks by directing and focusing our interpretations (i.e., through our knowing the language game for its use), then *symbolic expression is silent in failing to direct and focus interpretations* (i.e., through our ignorance of a language game for its use).

If we now recast our conception of silence from one of object, complementary in nature to speech, to one of *encounter*, we obviate the paradox of which Scott wrote. Silence ceases to imply absence; its domain becomes obstacles to interpretation. Consequently, our investigations shift from explaining the meanings of silence by cataloguing its forms and functions, to exploring both the circumstances in which our ability to make experience eventful falters, and the ways in which we attempt to make meaningful our experience of silence. Quite reasonably, encounters experienced-as-silence can occur as we engage the multitude of forms of symbolic expression about us.

By emphasizing the *experience* of silence, our focus shifts from interactions where speech is absent—their intent, their forms, their functions—to those circumstances

where the interpretation of experience is problematic. Using the popular metaphor of narrative, in encounters experienced-as-silence, the story ceases to be told by the speaker and becomes a story to be created by each who would listen. As communication scholars, our concern becomes the ways in which meaning and understanding arise through the interplay of the individual with the object experienced-as-silent. This dialectic of subject and object is at the heart of phenomenological analysis; later in this essay, I present such an analysis of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial.

Since any symbolic expression can be experienced as silent, studying encounters of silence should begin with those contexts for which there is a history of investigation. Architecture has long been a topic for discussions of signification. Writing from a semiotics perspective, Hattenhauer (1984) discusses how architecture can "speak" by suggesting to us a host of values, feelings, and interpretations. Architectural form incorporates "instructions" to those who encounter it (Preziosi, 1979a). These means of address suggest, if not prescribe, particular readings to structures; our interpretations are culturally constrained by our familiarity with the ways in which an array of architectural elements are typically used. Preziosi (1979b) asserts that architectural structure has an analog in linguistic speech; the ability of physical structure to direct our emotional orientation is akin to the expressive capacity of speech.

Regardless of an architect's intent, the public's reactions to a design are grounded in established habits and expectations for architecture (Eco, 1980). Jencks (1972) also argues for the overwhelming power of conventional usage; we expect that a particular type of structure *ought* to take a form that is meaningfully tied to our community and its customs. Conventional meanings take precedence over more subtle ones that may be intended in the design; this is "true of all form grasped on a popular level" (p. 7). In these ways, architecture "speaks." It must conform to our expectations and our ability to use it meaningfully. A piece of architecture is mute for those who fail to create a context for its interpretation.

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL APPROACH TO SILENCE

If silence can be encountered in all forms of symbolic expression, then so too can symbolic expression in all its diversity speak to us meaningfully. Wittgenstein (1958) writes that words are meaningful when we understand their use in a language game, when they conform to our expectations for their use. More generally, all forms of symbolic expression are meaningful in meeting this criterion.

All modes of symbolic expression speak to the extent that we are acculturated into a form of life which includes the language games for appropriately using them (Wittgenstein, 1958, I, p. 23, II, p. 176; Bindeman, 1981, pp. 125-6). Wittgenstein (1967) notes this in discussions of poetry and music:

A poet's words can pierce us. And that is of course *causally* connected with the use that they have in our life. And it is also connected with the way in which, conformably to this use, we let our thoughts roam up and down in the familiar surroundings of the words. . . . Do not forget that a poem, even though it is composed in the language of information, is not used in the language-game of giving information.

If a theme, a phrase, suddenly means something to you, you don't have to be able to explain it. Just *this* gesture has been made accessible to you. . . . But you do speak of *understanding* music. You understand it, surely, *while* you hear it! . . . I may indeed say: "Now I've understood it," and perhaps talk about it, play it, compare it with others etc. *Signs* of understanding may accompany hearing.

(Wittgenstein, 1967, pp. 155, 158-160, 162)

The personal experience of understanding arises *within* a form of life; symbolic expressions speak when we know how to use them. For many, the paintings of Henri Matisse speak because Impressionism is accessible. For such an audience, the works of Jackson Pollock are often mute; Pollock's style violates their expectations for how painting should speak. However, Pollock's work need not remain beyond reach.

Overcoming Silence

Each of us has the capacity to find the voice of symbolic expressions which we initially encounter as silent. In *The Prose of the World*, Merleau-Ponty (1973) examines the creation and interpretation of painting. One example concerns the slow-motion filming of Matisse working at his easel. To the unaided eye, Matisse's brush stroke appears quick and certain. But with the help of the camera, the brush is seen to hover over the canvas and dart among ten potential sites before "coming down like lightning in the only stroke necessary" (p. 44). Nothing mystical guided Matisse's hand. He had no need to weigh an infinite number of solutions to the problem of where to place the brush. Rather, Matisse's choice was designed only to satisfy those handful of conditions, "scattered on the painting, unformulated and unformulable for anyone other than Matisse, since they were defined and imposed only by the intention to make *this particular painting which did not yet exist*" (p. 45).

How does this help us to understand a painting (or a piece of architecture) that seems inaccessible? The painting's meaning is not within us, nor is it a feature of the object itself. Rather, meaning arises in our interplay with the painting. As it becomes the focus of our intention, as our consciousness becomes filled with the painting, we evoke those brush strokes considered, yet not made; much as Matisse hesitated in weighing his brush placement against a series of conditions leading to outcomes only he could imagine, the value of each gesture we encounter becomes understandable only as we reflect upon the presence or absence of the other gestures that surround it.

By contrast, the Classical style of painting is far less problematic. Because in form and texture it is the world of our everyday use, it speaks to us readily, and our appreciation of artists such as Vermeer rests largely with the richness of their technique in creating these representations. Merleau-Ponty speculates that modern artists may be concerned only with "brute expression," which results in an appearance of incompleteness. This does not make their work impenetrable. Rather, it suggests to him their appreciation of that moment

when the spectator is reached by the canvas and mysteriously resumes *in his own way* the meaning of the gesture through which it was made. . . without any other guide than a certain movement discovered in the line or an almost immaterial trace of the brush, the spectator then rejoins the silent world of the painter, henceforth uttered and accessible. (p. 55, emphasis added)

Through the interplay of spectator and painting—in the dialectic of subject and object—meanings are created and what was obscure becomes understood. We overcome the problem of how to use the painting meaningfully.

Returning to the more familiar ground of language, Merleau-Ponty makes a similar observation regarding a poet's choice of an image:

we must evoke all those words that could have come in its place that have been omitted; to feel the different way they would have impinged on and rattled the chain of language, to know at what point this

particular speech was the only one possible . . . we should consider speech before it has been pronounced, against the ground of silence which precedes it, which never ceases to accompany it, and without which it would say nothing. (pp. 45-46)

In this way, painting, poetry, and any other form of a symbolic expression can be found to speak.

An appreciation of the challenge of silence is not limited to Merleau-Ponty, in particular, or to phenomenologists, generally. Much as Wittgenstein (1967) writes of letting "our thoughts roam up and down in the familiar surroundings" of the language game of poetry, Scott (1972) sees silence as an opportunity for contemplation which allows us to muse "in pulling meanings" and "in pushing meanings" in the "broad expanse of silence" (p. 155). Both observations echo the view that understanding arises through the interplay of knower and known.

All who conduct investigations from a phenomenological perspective face the practical problem of what to examine; on first glance, studying the ways in which encounters-of-silence become meaningful presents us little worth observing. Nothing of importance appears to occur as we muse over an encounter's significance. However, "signs of understanding may accompany" these encounters. They are evidence of personal meaningfulness. Here Wittgenstein's (1958) injunction is germane for studying encounters of silence: "don't think, but look!" (I, p. 66). As with language games of speech, encounters of silence have no one feature in common, no necessary and sufficient conditions that define them. Encounters of silence will have family resemblances among them, sometimes of overall structure and sometimes of particular detail (See Wittgenstein, 1958, I, pp. 66, 67).

Just as surely as "talking about Matisse's brushstroke" is a public sign of its being understood, we have access to an array of public signs that accompany understanding. At the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, for example, we find a wealth of human action that *could* be signs of understanding. However, if we wish to do more than catalogue signs and develop more typologies—if we wish to understand the significance of encounters of silence *through* these public signs—we must first consider the kinds of understanding that can arise through the interplay of human beings with symbolic expressions experienced as silence.

Opportunities of Silence

Silence provides us with the opportunity for learning about ourselves in relation to others and to the state. Heidegger (1962) explores its crucial role in his treatise, *Being and Time*. As humans, we are aware that we exist (*Dasein*, literally "being-there," is his term for human being), and that we do so in a world filled with others and filled with possibilities for our own lives. For Heidegger, the fundamental quest is to discover the meaning of our Being. To make this discovery and find our potential for living "genuinely," we must look within. Since the question of what it means "to be" can only occur to humans, the true nature of our Being can only be disclosed to us.¹ Silence provides us the opportunity to find this answer.

In Heidegger's view, our everyday lives are largely inauthentic, characterized by a concern with averageness, with the modal of "one ought." To the extent that our actions are guided by what "one" does, by what "they" dictate, we are both relieved from responsibility for our actions and cut off from authentic self-discovery. By following the crowd, we live our lives by default. We may find security in such lives, but we fall further into an existence that is not truly our own.

A sign of the inauthenticity of everyday existence is discourse that might best be labeled "chatter" (Heidegger, 1962, p. 217). Its questions reflect superficial curiosity; it is distracted by novelty and preoccupied with what "one must see," what "one must read," how "one should/should not think or act."

The Self of everyday Dasein is the they-self, which we distinguish from the authentic Self—that is, from the self which has been taken hold of in its own way. (Heidegger, 1962, p. 167)

Encounters of silence provide the opportunity for "taking hold" and gaining genuine insight. Silence issues a call of conscience, which "discourses solely and constantly in the model of keeping silent" (p. 318; see Bauman, 1978, pp. 148-171). Its call is indefinite, towards nothing in particular, but its direction is unequivocally towards self-awareness.

But how are we to determine what is said in the talk that belongs to this kind of discourse? What does the conscience call to him to whom it appeals? Taken strictly, nothing. The call asserts nothing, gives no information about world-events, has nothing to tell. Least of all does it try to set going a 'soliloquy' in the Self to which it has appealed. 'Nothing' gets called to this Self, but it has been summoned to itself—that is, to its ownmost potentiality-for-Being. (Heidegger, 1962, p. 318)

Conscience is a call that arises in encountering silence. It summons us to question the genuineness of our lives. In Heidegger's view, understanding is a *mode of being* rather than a type of knowledge; silence issues a call to that mode of being.

Moreover, silence can give rise to anxiety, and this, in turn, can pull us back from inauthenticity. We generally view anxiety as undesirable, but it benefits us precisely because it tugs us back from our immersion in the world. Unlike fear, which is based in a concern about a specific object, anxiety is indeterminate; it has no particular focus.

We have all felt anxiety, but since it presents no definable threat and has no distinct origin, we are inclined to discount its legitimacy. However, we know that we have sensed something. The comfortable familiarity of the everyday world is displaced by a passing dis-ease. After it subsides we may seek to account for its cause. Locating no source, we may comment: "It was really nothing." Anxiety is a general dis-ease about our very Being-in-the-world (see Hyde, 1980).

Consider again a Jackson Pollock painting. If the painting is experienced-as-silent, then it does not present itself to us in ways amenable to our use. Further, *nothing in particular accounts for the silence*. There is no element to which we can specifically point as if to say, "This is what makes it obscure. If only the artist had placed his brush stroke here instead of where he actually placed it, I would have understood it." Such an observation is paradoxical; it is akin to saying, "I do not have a grammar for speaking intelligibly, but if I did, here is what I would say."

Silence provides us with *opportunity*. Even though it pulls us from the superficiality of daily life, we may still mis-hear its call of conscience. Faced with anxiety brought on by the indefiniteness of silence, we may seek refuge in idle, thoughtless chatter and proclamation. (Consider the declaration: "I may not know art, but I know what I like.")

I do not wish to suggest that there is anything "eternal" about discoveries made in answer to silence's call. Encounters-of-silence are bound to time and place. The context we create for any discovery is that of *this* moment, *this* place (Dauenhauer, 1980, see p. 128). Consequently, discoveries about ourselves are fragmentary and

time-bound. Understanding is a mode of being to which we are called throughout our lives; pursuing the meaning of our Being is life-long.

Finally, and of greatest significance, authentic self-discovery inevitably speaks to our relationship to others and to human institutions. We may find the possibilities of our own lives in encounters-of-silence, but we can only act upon them in the world we share with others. "Being-in-the-world is, from the outset, being-with and existing-with" (Bauman, 1978, p. 154).²

Again, Scott's (1972) observations on the relationship between silence and rhetoric takes a similar turn, linking the discovered truths of contemplation to the broader world. Much as "being-in-the-world" is fundamentally "being-with," encounters of silence "lead squarely up against one of the core issues of an individual's life among others . . . what shall be the balance between the person and the group, between the individual and the state" (p. 153).

SILENCE AND THE VIETNAM VETERANS MEMORIAL

Since its dedication in November, 1982, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial has been widely acknowledged as a place of extraordinary power. Columnist James Kilpatrick (1982) wrote: "Nothing I had heard or written had prepared me for the moment. I could not speak. I wept . . . This memorial has a pile driver's impact" (p. A19). A Vietnam Veteran described his first encounter as "about ten, fifteen minutes of total shock, because I didn't know what to really expect out of it."³ A commonplace of first-time encounters is simply, "I wasn't prepared for my reaction." These observations reveal assumptions of conventional usage—that people *should* be prepared for their reactions, that they *ought* to know what to expect. They reveal that the symbolic expression we call "memorial" is designed to be used in particular ways, but in this case, it is not. In order to appreciate the Memorial's silence-as-object, we must first consider how memorials are designed to "speak."

The "Voice" of Memorials

Through memorials, a community commemorates the actions and sacrifices of individuals, and celebrates the values of the community reflected in those actions. A memorial "should make concrete some shared idea about the thing it commemorates . . . [it] should speak" (Hubbard, 1984, pp. 20-21). This obligation generally takes a conventional form that attempts to "combine the expressive function of the memorial with certain esthetic features" (Nimmo, 1974, p. 86). Inscriptions are often added to memorials to "increase their communication" (Jencks, 1972, p. 7). In these ways, a memorial is designed to "speak" in a manner amenable to use by the community.

These characteristics are all reflected in the Lincoln Memorial and indicate how Lincoln should be remembered. The memorial is massive; it not only calls attention to itself, it proclaims itself. It is elevated; the visitor must ascend to Lincoln. Its stone is white; its columns, classical. The seated figure of Lincoln, to which one must gaze upward, is far larger than in life. These architectural elements "speak" to some undefined greatness.

Inscriptions speak discursively. Those at the Lincoln Memorial focus and direct our appreciation of that greatness, and instruct us in the manner in which we *ought* to interpret our encounter with the memorial. Crowning the memorial are the names of the states, defining the scope of the community paying homage to Lincoln. More important, however, are the inscriptions within the memorial. Facing the seated

figure of Lincoln, with its head downcast, we find the Gettysburg Address inscribed on the wall to the left and Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address on the wall to the right. Lest there be any uncertainty about the ideals embodied by the man and expressed in these two speeches, inscribed directly over the statue are the words:

IN THIS TEMPLE
AS IN THE HEARTS OF THE PEOPLE
FOR WHOM HE SAVED THE UNION
THE MEMORY OF ABRAHAM LINCOLN
IS ENSHRINED FOREVER

This is no mere memorial. This is a sacred place, a temple, built to commemorate our salvation as a community through him. The memorial speaks: Lincoln is a secular deity.

Similarly, a memorial to warriors is expected to speak with the voice of the community. "The essential purpose of a war memorial . . . is to express the attitudes and values of a community toward those persons and deeds that are memorialized." Making contact with one's community through the memorial "confirms the legitimacy of the sentiments expressed" (Barber, 1949, p. 65).

Memorials explain the meaning of past events. They bring legitimacy to sacrifice on behalf of the community and to calls for sacrifice. They reinforce our relationship to the community. Traditional forms of memorializing provide security. They present to us an undisputable and reassuring version of the past. But as Heidegger warns,

tradition keeps [Dasein] from providing its own guidance, whether in inquiring or choosing. This holds true . . . for that understanding which is rooted in Dasein's ownmost Being, and for the possibility of developing it. . . . Tradition takes what has come down to us and delivers it over to self-evidence. (pp. 42-43)

By their "speaking" to us through conventional means, memorials block alternative interpretations of the past, of our community and our place in it. Our relationship to the community is explained and reconfirmed; we need not question or doubt our obligation to others or to the group. As a cultural ritual, memorializing "involves its participants symbolically in a common enterprise, calling their attention to their relatedness and joint interests in a compelling way" (Edelman, 1964, p. 16).

Silence-as-Object

Significantly, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial elected *not* to define our relatedness. Our relationships to the living, to the community, and to those who were killed, remains uncertain. Insofar as we expect to be "spoken to" in ways amenable to our participating in established ritual, the Memorial is mute.

The Memorial's relinquishment is both architectural and textual. In physical form, it deviates from the conventional. Rather than elevated, the Memorial is built into a gentle slope, as if the earth were "cut open, with stone exposed in the wound" (Swerdlow, 1985, p. 566). "It is uniquely horizontal, entering the earth rather than piercing the sky" (Ayres, 1981, II, p. 5) and cannot be seen from Constitution Avenue, the major thoroughfare along The Mall. Rather than white, it is black. Rather than classical and iconic, it is modern and indexical. Its design is "pure form" that announces itself: This is a human construction, a wall; here are the names of the dead (See Jencks, 1972).

The chevron-shaped Memorial has two walls, each extending from the vertex for nearly 250 feet. The West wall points to the Lincoln Memorial; the East wall, to the Washington Monument. A walkway parallels the face of the Memorial, so "entrance" begins at the extreme of either wall. Each wall has 70 panels. The shortest, at the extremity, is measured in inches; the tallest, at the vertex, rises over ten feet. Since the Memorial is built into a slope, the visitor descends along the walkway from one extreme of the Memorial towards the vertex, and ascends towards the end of the other wall. The names are in chronological order, beginning in 1959 at the vertex, extending along the East wall, and returning from the extremity of the West wall to the vertex, where the list of names ends with the year 1975.

The Memorial's two inscriptions are declarative. One simply states that the wall lists the names of those killed or missing-in-action, in the order they were taken from us. The other announces that the Memorial was funded by private contributions of the American people. And then there are the names. Unlike the Lincoln Memorial, no formal discourse is inscribed; we are not handed an explanation of the meaning of the war, of these sacrifices, or of our place in the community. Rather, *if we choose*, we must discover how the memorial "speaks."

In its deviation from convention, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial embodies an object-silence that is politically strategic. Brummett (1980) characterizes silence as politically strategic when a public figure or collectivity refuses to speak, and thus breaches an audience's expectation for speech. When this silence appears planned, the public may attribute relatively predictable meanings to that silence and its source.

Clearly, the Memorial was planned, and those plans called for object-silence. In its national design contest, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund (VVMF) required a design that "would be serene rather than inspiring," in "a quiet garden setting" (Halloran, 1980a, p. A28). If silence calls forth contemplation (Scott, 1972), then the Memorial is silent; the judges called Maya Lin's winning design "contemplative and reflective" ("Student wins," 1981, p. 20).

The VVMF chose *not* to make a political statement about the war or the warriors. The memorial "would be a monument without a political message" (Halloran, 1980b, p. A15). According to Jan Scruggs, founder of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund, "We do not seek to make any statement about the correctness of the war. Rather, by honoring those who sacrificed, we hope to provide a symbol of national unity and reconciliation" (Weinraub, 1980, p. A14). The astuteness of this position is noted in a *New York Times* editorial:

The Vietnam war is not easy to memorialize . . . the controversy [over the design competition] reflects more than bitterness left over from the war. It used to be much simpler to build a monument. The roll of honor on bronze tablets, or the statue of the fallen warrior holding a flag appeared predictably on the village green . . . the uniforms change, the heroes sit or stand or occasionally ride a horse, but the message remains the same: a noble cause well served. . . . Nowadays, though . . . ideas about heroism . . . are no longer what they were before Vietnam. And there is certainly no consensus yet about what cause might have been served by the Vietnam War. ("Remembering Vietnam," 1981, p. 18)

In deviating from tradition, the Memorial does not express expected attitudes and values. Consequently, community members who expect a recognizable expression of commemoration for those who fought and sacrificed view the Memorial with disappointment, at best, or with outrage, at worst. Expecting "speech," they find

silence, and mis-hear silence's call. As Bindeman (1978) notes, "The call of conscience . . . may also be heard inauthentically . . . and [it] becomes a soliloquy *in which causes get pleaded*" (p. 98, emphasis added; also see Heidegger, 1962, p. 318, cited earlier).

For James Watt, former Secretary of the Interior, and a delegation of 27 Republican Congressmen, the design "makes a political statement of shame and dishonor, rather than an expression of our national pride" ("Watt raises obstacles," 1982, p. A12). In the absence of an explicit interpretation imposed by the Memorial, they attribute relinquishment (see Brummett, 1980).

Similarly, Tom Carhart, a West Point graduate and Vietnam Veteran, is a vocal opponent of the Memorial's design because it violates traditional form. He refers to it as a "black trench" that is "anti-heroic." Its black walls are "the universal color of sorrow and dishonor," and he asks, "Why can't we have something white and traditional and above ground?" (Carhart, 1981, p. 23).

More often, the call of conscience is heard. Most people accept its challenge and through their interplay with the wall, search for meaning in their own ways. "Signs of understanding" accompany these encounters.

But prior to any search for meaning at the Memorial is the challenge of approach to it as object. As with any physical structure, approach to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial poses a series of challenges to interpretation; these arise from our ability to experience only a limited number of its physical properties at any one time (Ballard, 1983). Interpretation is a "movement towards discovering *what* the presented may be; it is a movement towards meaning" (p. 6). At the Memorial, movement towards meaning arises through our physical approach.

Prior experiences with memorials underlie our expectations for how approach to any memorial could—or should—proceed. If we approach the Memorial from Constitution Avenue, from "behind," we encounter the puzzling image of people descending into the earth and ascending from it. Little in our past experiences can prepare us for this unusual and sometimes quite eerie view. The paucity of human sounds add to the other-worldliness of this approach.

When approached "face on," the Memorial appears as a narrow (i.e., small? distant?) black band that nearly fills the width of our field of vision. In moving closer, we can clearly see that the wall bears inscriptions; at this point, the breadth of our field of vision is filled with the wall, although lawn, people, and sky also occupy our visual field. Closer still, we take in only a few panels; the names are now legible, but behind the names we find our own reflected image and that of the sky.

Within only a limited range of distance from the wall is any name truly distinct. By moving in even closer, the names lose focus and we are filled with a reflected image of ourselves. We experience a figure-ground reversal; where our reflected image was the background against which we encountered the names of the dead, the dead now become the ground against which we encounter ourselves. It is a liminal experience; in confronting the death of others, we face our own mortality.⁴

Confronting our own death is the ultimate individualizing act; it pulls us from our preoccupation with superficial existence (Heidegger, 1962). If we can face our own death without becoming morose, we take hold of the opportunity to discover, sort out, and clarify the true possibilities of our own lives for whatever time we have.

To face the inevitability of my death, to pass beyond anxiety, makes me open once again to experience the wonder of Being. (Waterhouse, 1983, p. 125)

By seeking refuge in the inauthenticity of everyday life, we flee from death. True, we know that we will someday die, but this goes no further than proclaiming, "One dies." At the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, we are confronted by the indefiniteness of the "when" of death and the anxiety it arouses.

Modes of Encounter

The compelling feature of the Memorial is the list of 58,132 names engraved on its polished, black granite walls. As Maya Lin notes, "The names . . . become the memorial" ("America remembers," 1985, p. 557). However, they do not become the same memorial for all. Some mis-hear silence's call; others answer it. Those who respond do so in different ways.

Rolph (1976) observes that while "the meanings of places may be rooted in the physical setting and objects and activities, they are . . . a property of human intentions and experiences" (p. 47). The diversity of intention and experience at the Memorial is to be found in what people say, what they do, what objects they bring to the wall, what pasts they carry with them. While there are no necessary and sufficient conditions to define all modes of encounter, there are family resemblances among them. Consequently, any clustering of modes of encounter can be neither exhaustive nor precise. Group labels reflect predominant characteristics of group members as discerned through more than two years of observation and more than 200 interviews at and near the Vietnam Veterans Memorial (see note 3).

Some people mis-hear the call of conscience and fill their encounters with idle chatter; these I call *tourists* (though not all are tourists in the conventional sense). Others have encounters with the Memorial that are authentic,

a direct and genuine experience . . . not distorted through a series of quite arbitrary social and intellectual fashions and about how that experience should be, nor following stereotyped conventions." (Rolph, 1976, p. 64)

Signs of understanding accompany these encounters. Because of resemblances among these signs, I differentiate among *volunteers*, *mourners*, and *searchers*. One commonality crosses all four modes; as people begin their descent along the Memorial's walls, they either cease speaking entirely, or speak in hushed tones.

The soft but idle chatter of *tourists* is readily apparent. Tour guides, with parasols or banners aloft, herd their busloads along the walkway, reciting a litany of facts about the Memorial. They have little time to linger. The Vietnam Veterans Memorial is but one stop on their itinerary of "what one must see" in Washington, D.C. They photograph it as they would any attraction on a sight-seeing tour. Families on vacation pose at the Memorial, waving as home movie cameras pan the length of the structure. Their speech is trivial: "Why aren't the names in alphabetical order?" "Now who exactly is buried here?" "Quite a sight, isn't it?" "Does this have anything to do with M*A*S*H?"

James Watt and Tom Carhart are also *tourists*, for they, too, are closed to the possibilities of Being and mishear silence's call. While their chatter is neither soft nor idle, the influence of tradition and of "ought" upon their assessment of the Memorial is unmistakable; for them, a memorial to warriors must be white, above ground, and heroic. Rather than heeding the opportunity of silence, they opt for vocal proclamation.

If *tourists* reflect the inauthenticity of "what one must do," then *volunteers* most

vividly demonstrate its opposite, "what I must do." They have made a commitment to service at the Memorial as a place of genuine experience. Volunteers give of their own time to assure the opportunity for authentic self-discovery. Their reasons for volunteering are varied. Some served in Vietnam, some lost friends or family, and others were never touched by the war. One volunteer explains her decision:

I never thought much about the war when it was going on. I didn't even know anyone who went over. But when I came here to the wall it hit me, "My God, this was *my* war." And so I decided to do something about it. And that's why I'm here.

Regardless of their link to the war, the Memorial's "call to conscience" impels them to act. Volunteers help people locate names on the wall. They make rubbings of names, wash the wall, and pick up trash dropped by tourists. They combat media exploitation of grief, placing themselves and their directories of the names (which are the size of major urban phone books) between the television camera lens and scenes of Vietnam Veterans huddled in grief. Perhaps most important, they watch over Vets overwhelmed by the Memorial. Suicide is a genuine concern; there is a history of attempts and of one not prevented.

Mourners suffered personal loss; they come to the Memorial in secular pilgrimage specifically to find the names of comrades, friends, or family members who were killed. Mourners often bring artifacts of commemoration, including wreaths, flowers, medals, photographs, parts of uniforms, flags, obituary notices, poems, and letters. Vietnam Veterans, in particular, come not only to pay homage to those who were killed, but frequently (and with considerable trepidation and guilt) to discover whether those they left behind at the end of their tours of duty made it back to "the world."

For the Veterans, the Memorial is sacred ground. It is not only a site of commemoration, but a place of reunion. Memorial Day and Veterans Day weekends brings tens of thousands of Vets to the wall. Most wear their "cammies," or some portion of their uniform "to show respect for our brothers on the wall," and "to be identifiable to each other." Finding the living is as crucial as honoring the dead. During all but the early days of the Vietnam War, soldiers were rotated in and out of service as individuals. When their tours of duty expired, they left, and left behind were those upon whom their mutual survival depended.

A story circulates among volunteers and Veterans which, if not apocryphal, deserves to be: A Vet came to the wall to search for his buddy's name, not knowing whether he had survived. While slowly scanning the names on the likely panels with his hand, he accidentally bumped into another searching hand. It was his friend, looking for his name.

Most people suffered no personal loss from Vietnam, but their lives were shaped within the context of war that fragmented American society. The Vietnam War still pulls at them, and they come to the Memorial because they are of the war. I call these people *searchers*. These are veterans of the War's "home front."

Searchers are faced with a peculiar dilemma. While the war was highly personal, its cost to them was less immediate and less personal. Mourners have specific names to focus upon as they answer their call to conscience; searchers do not. Their call truly has no focus; they are left to make sense of it all—the litany of names, the scenes of grieving, the notes of remembrance. Because no one name on the Memorial is of personal significance, they cannot be as intimate with the Memorial as can

mourners. For them, the Memorial's silence is rich in opportunities to find meaning, but there is also a sense of being cut off—of meanings withheld and of the inability to participate in those meanings. Consequently, they, more than others, search for ways of participating as broadly as possible in discovering the Memorial's meanings. Searchers use mourners and their artifacts as focusing lenses for their own discoveries.

All those who participate genuinely in their experience of the Memorial contemplate the names. As Scott (1972) suggests, contemplation requires a kind of phenomenal dislocation, "to be isolated, to be in the world but out of the world. . . ." Contemplation is "the getting out of it" (p. 150). Signs of this dislocation accompany understanding. Where the personal experience of searchers allows them to draw the link, the comment recurs that the names of the dead are reminiscent of Yad Vashem, the Israeli memorial to the Holocaust. For these people, the Memorial's fundamental truth is its lesson: never again.

Others remark that the names take them back to their thoughts and feelings during the war. One woman stated that "as the panels got higher, the sheer weight of all the names was overpowering," and she felt as if she were "reliving our growing involvement in the war." For her, the names were a metaphor for her experience of the war, and the names transported her back to the war once again.

A similar "getting out of it" is reported by Hubbard (1984):

Walking the length of the wall carried us through months and years. . . . It was only as the wall slipped below eye level, as we ascended, that we [realized] we were . . . slowly coming out from that reverie of loss. . . . In that ascent, through and out from time, we remembered the feeling of the war at home; the slow, almost imperceptible descent into the conflict, the equally slow—agonizingly slow—diminuendo by which we left. (p. 20)

All those who answer silence's call walk slowly. They mill about and stare at length at the wall. They linger, as if disoriented. In all cases, this phenomenal dislocation turns on the names.

Language Games of Silence

Wittgenstein (1958) argues that the meaning of a name "is sometimes explained by pointing to its bearer" (I, p. 43). At the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, the converse is true. There, *the meaning of a person is sometimes explained by pointing to the name*. Pointing is a major part of discovery at the Memorial. Through pointing we "exclaim," we "call for," we "make contact with." These take forms other than extending an index finger; they also include reading names, writing letters and poems, and reading those texts. But almost "always at this memorial there is the compulsion to touch, to feel" (Fein, 1985, p. A24). As one Vietnam Veteran observes, "I don't know what it is . . . You have to touch it. There's something about touching it" (Clines, 1982, p. B15).

Most people touch the names, though some adamantly refuse to do so. Tourists can often be distinguished by the way in which they touch the wall. They generally reach out quickly, touch it and retreat, as if they have violated the admonition, "Look, but don't touch." Adolescent tourists may mindlessly drag their fingers over the depressions that form the letters as they walk along the panels. (I do not wish to suggest that all children, or that future generations, must be tourists. As Relph

(1976) notes, the meaning of place results from human intention and experience. What children and future generations bring with them to the Memorial may enable them to be searcher- or volunteer-like. The key issue is temporality. Particularly if no mourners remain to serve as focal points for their encounters, the Memorial at another *time* will become another *place*.)

Unlike tourists, mourners linger over particular names, tracing the letters with their fingers, pressing their faces and the flesh of their palms into the names. They often make rubbings to take with them. "There is no more sacred part of a person than his or her name" (Swerdlow, 1985, p. 562).

Different yet are the searchers. They have no relationship with any name, but seek to develop a personal bond. Searchers touch names often as a result of reading. As part of their effort to participate as fully as they can in the Memorial's meanings, searchers immerse themselves by reading as many names as they can. Reading is particularly apparent on those panels that tower over their heads. The naive question of "Excuse me, what are you doing?" has brought responses ranging from the incredulous ("Reading. What does it look like I'm doing?!") to shock, anger, and threats. Intruding takes readers from their immersion in contemplation and places them firmly in the world. Searchers have a particular interest in surnames, not that they know anyone who was killed in Southeast Asia, but they simply seek to locate the familiar. In finding the familiar, they intensify their relationship with the Memorial; it is these names they touch. As numerous searchers have commented, "I used to know someone named. . . ."

The names mean something different again for the volunteers. Their relationship with the wall is one of "existential insideness" (Relph, 1976, p. 55). *This* place is where they belong. Consequently, *all* of the names are of particular significance. True, some volunteers first came to the Memorial because of specific names (and thus, as mourners), but in redefining their relationship to the Memorial, all of the names are elevated in significance. During their shifts at the Memorial, volunteers may stop not only at the names of those whom they knew and lost, but at the names of those whom they have come to know through other mourners.

Another way of "pointing" is through the texts that mourners write and leave at the Memorial. In the absence of formally inscribed discourse for visitors to read (and which they have come to expect at a memorial), these personal texts become the discursive means by which visitors can discover their own truths. Particularly for searchers, the texts that they happen to encounter play a crucial role in their interplay with the wall. More than just allowing searchers to glimpse the intimacy that mourners have with the dead and with the Memorial, these texts act as focusing lenses through which searchers may discover their own truths about self, other, and obligation to the community.

In part, the texts that mourners leave for others to read serve as focal points for authentic self-discovery because they, themselves, are genuine. Beyond their sincerity of emotion, their questions and affirmations about sacrifice, obligation to community, the nobility of personal courage and the ignominy of political cowardice, these texts are filled with misspellings, grammatical errors, and are written in a labored hand.

Shortly after the Memorial was erected, one mourner began to write letters to her dead son. Whenever she was overcome by the pain of missing him, she would write a letter, cover it with plastic wrap, take it from her home in suburban Baltimore, and

place it on a stand at the base of the panel bearing his name. She writes an average of six letters per year. More than any other, she is the voice of lamentation at the Memorial, both grieving and celebrating the mother-child bond, a bond that endures beyond death. Eleanor Wimbish is an unsophisticated and innocent voice. Her letters remind those who read them of the impact of one individual life upon others, a lesson easily lost amid the Memorial's litany of names. Her perplexity at the reasons for her son's death provides those who read her letters the opportunity to give shape to their own answers, answers that are genuine for them (see Ehrenhaus, 1987).

CONCLUSION

The Vietnam Veterans Memorial willfully relinquishes the traditional role to speak as the official voice of the community, explaining the meaning of past events, reassuring us that these deaths had meaning, celebrating the virtue of sacrifice, and reaffirming the legitimacy of hierarchy. Rather than electing "speech" through a traditional form of symbolic expression, it opts for silence. It presents itself in ways not immediately amenable to our use.

In its object-silence, the Memorial places both the burden and the freedom upon us to discover what these past events mean, whether these deaths do have meaning, what virtue is to be found in sacrifice, and what our own relationship should be to our political institutions. We become responsible for attuning ourselves to the call of conscience that accompanies encounters of silence. In answering that call, we have the opportunity to find our own truths as we walk along the wall, read the names, touch them, ponder scenes of grief, and read the letters of remembrance that we happen upon.

Implicit in the Memorial's invitation to authenticity is its reluctance to embrace and preach collective Truths. Scott (1972) warns of the dangers of submitting to ultimate verities, particular definitions of hierarchy—either heavenly or earth-bound—and our place in it. Blindly accepting Truth is to exist inauthentically.

Moreover, in a political community guided by Truth, action becomes a matter of "good faith," and nowhere are the consequences of acting "in good faith" more apparent than when actions call for self-sacrifice. A call to arms requires that those called upon for sacrifices are "caught up in the great convictions" (p. 157). Trusting in Truth, reasoned thought and argument is dispensable. This is its tyranny; Truth circumvents reflection, it obviates argument, it denies the need to discover what is true and right for each human being and to act on these discoveries, redefining responsibilities to self, to others and to the community. Assured by Truth, a political community may, with the noblest of intentions, call for sacrifice. But the legacy of those intentions is all too apparent: "Much of the world's evil has sprung from the fertile soil richly manured with the rotten certainty of truth" (p. 152).

The power of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial results from our encountering silence where we expect "speech"; it arises in the dialectic of subject and object. The Memorial offers us the opportunity for authentic self-discovery by learning to play a language game of silence. The names call us to reflect on them as individuals who lived and died, and to reflect through them to the fundamental question of hierarchy—our relationship with others, our relationship with the state. Political symbolic expression, whether discursive or architectural, attempts to shape our

world and reassure us of our place and purpose within a community. In so doing, it cannot help but tell us that one Truth is truer than another. And that is one reason why more than 58,000 names are etched in granite.

NOTES

¹Heidegger's terminology in *Being and Time* is awkward to many. He elected to avoid conventional terminology (e.g., consciousness, self-reflexivity) as a deliberate part of his break with the intellectual heritage of Western thought which he believed had become corrupt. I have decided that greater accessibility of the argument requires sacrificing some of Heidegger's terminology. See Hyde (1980, esp. pp. 142-149) for a presentation of Heidegger's views that is more loyal to his terminology. Also see Langan (1959) and Waterhouse (1981).

²Heidegger's ontology is criticized generally for placing authentic self-discovery above sociopolitical consciousness and action, and specifically because his ontology underscored his initial support of the Nazi movement (see Wander, 1983). Hyde (1984) argues that Heidegger's failures (e.g., to develop clear and moral practical ramifications of his ontology) should not preclude an appreciation of genuine contributions, such as the therapeutic implications of "authenticity" (Hyde, 1980). My position is that authenticity is but one route to sociopolitical awarenesses that can be both personally liberating and politically consequential.

³Personal interview conducted at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, May 24, 1984. Quotations are taken from personal interviews conducted at the Memorial between May, 1984 and August, 1986. Naturalistic inquiry followed procedures detailed in Agar (1980), Lofland & Lofland (1984), and McCall & Simmons (1969). Inquiry began from the perspective of observer and only later was participant observation used.

⁴Ballard (1983) distinguishes between physical and perceptual closeness/distance. He notes that the ambiguity of "visual properties is a regularly occurring characteristic of perception and is correlated with distance" (p. 30). An object may be perceptually "close at hand" while still physically distant; as we move physically even closer, perceptual clarity may give way to new ambiguities. Consider that if we move too close to any wall, it becomes impossible to determine whether that surface is vertical. "The area of the unambiguous, of the close, is a limited but variable area" (p. 33).

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