

7 Art of silence

‘Stay, illusion
If thou hast any sound or use of voice,
Speak to me.’

– HORATIO TO THE GHOST (WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, *HAMLET*)

A WOMAN DESCENDS THE STAIRS

In the Wallace Collection’s gallery of seventeenth-century Dutch painting, a woman descends the stairs. Her knee is bent under a voluminous red dress and white apron, one foot poised, as if she knows that to lower her weight onto the stair would risk a creaking of the wood. The composition of the picture is built around a familiar device in Dutch painting — the *doorsien*, a ‘looking through’, a hole, opening or threshold that leads through to a secondary scene. Behind her is an open doorway through which we can see an airy, high-ceilinged room in which two well-dressed people are sitting at the table, drinking wine. Their expressions, from what we can see of them, are almost comical. The conversation seems to have hit an awkward silence; their faces are positively dyspeptic. To the left of the woman, in the centre of the painting, are familiar objects that add symbolic depth to Dutch art of this period: a mirror, a globe, a map, all three showing reflections or representations of spaces that lie outside the frame of the work. Thrown with insouciant haste over a chair, a scarlet cloak invites the painter to demonstrate his skill in rendering the folding and falling of fabric, his love of blazing colour within the sober, shadowed hues of a bourgeois Dutch interior. A sword propped up next to the cloak tells us that a soldier has entered the house.

To her right of the woman and downstairs we can see into another room, lit by a roaring fire. The contrast between the light of this cellar space and the surrounding darkness is extreme. To modern eyes, this makes the square of light look like a television or computer screen. What can be seen in this isolated square is the man who owns the cloak and sword, and he is seated next to the maid of the house, clearly in the process of seducing her. He is leaning in close to her face, whispering; his hand is on her breast. Head angled away from him, her hand is on his hand, either in affection or pushing it away. By her feet, a cat is eating food, and this is another familiar motif, of a pet taking advantage when somebody neglects their duty.

The woman in the centre of the picture carries a wine jug in one hand, so from this we can deduce the situation: the wine has run dry, the maid has disappeared, and so the woman of the house has gone to fetch it herself; in the course of doing this she has heard some part of the seduction scene below stairs. She is smiling, collusive, claiming silence, but her gaze seems myopic. There is a clue to this.

On the side of her head, behind the left eye, is a black dot, and this shows she is undergoing a cure for an ophthalmic problem. She seems to be leaning on the banister rail with her right elbow to steady herself in mid-step and her finger is raised to her lips, as if to whisper 'shhh.'

The painting is called *The Listening Housewife*, or *The Eavesdropper*. The name of the artist and the date of the work are both very clear because they are inscribed on the stair just below the eavesdropper's foot: N. Maes, 1656. Nicolaes Maes was a pupil of Rembrandt. Born in Dordrecht in January 1634, he entered Rembrandt's studio in Amsterdam as a teenager in about 1648, returned to Dordrecht to marry in 1654 and then settled again in Amsterdam in 1678 until his death in 1693. From the age of 26 he restricted himself largely to fashionable portraits influenced by the work of Rubens and Van Dyck, though there is one exception, an interesting picture — psychological or supernatural in its implications — of a woman suffering from a grave illness. No doubt his prolific output as a portraitist was a reward for his facility in capturing the placid, self-satisfied vanity of his wealthy Dutch and English sitters and their unfailingly grotesque children. The paintings of children are noteworthy for being surreal to the point of nightmare, fat young cherubs with painted faces dressed in ostentatious headgear and adult clothes, naked in drapery, or even winged. Infant Ganymedes ascending Mt Olympus, they ride eagles through lowering clouds. Others cuddle deer or dogs, or sit like pink pygmy despots in miniature chariots pulled by goats. Maes's humour was sharp, even cruel — we know that from his genre paintings. Is it possible that in the course of making a decent living churning out portraits of burghers and aristocrats he made sly fun of them through his pictures of their children?

Many of the genre scenes of his early twenties, however, embraced the spatial, social and psychological implications of sound and silence, largely within domestic interiors. He is almost unique in meditating so explicitly on the contradiction of using a visual medium to represent the ineffability of one moment of hearing, though his fascination with sound as an implicit means of articulating complex spaces is a trope familiar from other works of the early modern period painted in the Netherlands.

Maes was so captivated with the theme of the eavesdropper, or so responsive to its popularity with clients, that between 1655 and 1657 he painted six versions. Four hang in London, one in Boston, and one in his hometown of Dordrecht. All of them are different in quite subtle aspects but all depict this errant, suspect, uncontrollable, betraying, dislocating and uncanny quality of sound. Moreover, they assume a listener, listening to nothing.

He shows a captured moment of listening to what is, or should be, secret. The sound in the silent painting is sustained over centuries, but the silence in the sounding room, the gallery in which the painting is experienced, is transient. There are many paintings of noise and silence from this early modern period of Dutch art, many representations of music both drunken and refined, of people reading, sleeping, peeling apples, scraping parsnips, pouring milk. With scientific detachment, they experiment with the possibility and impossibility of bringing sound into life through a mute medium; with humanistic engagement they locate the significance of sound and silence within human events, specific places and the world of objects. But they also locate us in a haunting, participating in events from more than 350 years ago, placing us in liminal space, colluding with the woman with her finger to her lips, her foot poised over the wooden stair, the stair that threatens to creak and so reveal the guilty pleasures of her intensive listening.

We have stumbled onto a scene as it unfolds. Perhaps the stumble is actual, a transition of movement and time, as well as metaphorical, since we have disturbed a person interrupted, engaged, absorbed, in an act that could be construed as shameful. Through being enjoined to silence by the

eavesdropper, we become a second eavesdropper. The space in which we stand is shared, yet the assumption is that the viewer of the work is hidden from all but one of the characters inhabiting the painting. If we were visible, as we are in actuality in relation to the extended space of the picture, then we would be visible simultaneously to all parties in the house, so exposed as a voyeur. That finger on the lips would be too late. Silence would be irrelevant. Yet the hearing of this stilled moment is, in reality, non-existent, and the viewer's point in this extended space is also non-existent. The viewer oscillates between being and not-being: a noisy silence.

LOVERS, OVERHEARD

Apsley House, London: 5 July 2007. Another Maes *Eavesdropper* of 1656, this one subtitled *Lovers with a woman listening*. Again, the listening woman is poised above the lowest step. A forefinger to her lips gives her a quizzical, simpering look; simultaneously it enjoins silence and points to her left, where an open door into another room reveals two lovers, framed against an open window with a windmill visible in the distance. One of the lovers is a maid; her abandoned broom is propped against the door frame. The man is leaning in to her, pawing her breasts. She slumps into him, heavy and tired, somewhat reluctant. A baby basket is by her feet on the floor, and the maid holds a string in her left hand, presumably to rock the cradle.

As for the woman who listens, she has left her work at a book that lies open, probably the household accounts, to eavesdrop. Duties have been neglected by all parties; the invitation to stop work and become a voyeur implicates the viewer in this scheme, part moralistic, part prurient. Keys hang from the listener's dress; perhaps they clink faintly. In the decipherment of these paintings, which is one way to approach them, as a riddle to be decoded and understood, keys play a significant role. Here, they are virtue and responsibility, and elsewhere in Maes, they stand for the forsaking of these qualities, but in this context, attached to the clothing of this woman who is trying to keep still, they are percussion that must be kept quiet. The stairs will creak once her foot descends. Through the open door we hear the rocking of the cradle, though if the sound stopped in the preceding moments, then its silence will have alerted the listener to mischief.

The painting hangs in the Piccadilly Drawing Room of Apsley House, and in this ornate room, gold and white, I hear the constant roar of traffic behind me as it circles Marble Arch, and the strange quavering of a window frame vibrated by the unseasonable high winds that blow outside.

Why so many versions of the eavesdropper? They are like performances of the same play, a short season during which slight variations of a theatrical scene are presented to an audience that becomes curious, this curiosity growing into a compulsion to return over and over again. They are also operatic mysteries, even the seeds of tragicomedies, the weight of blame hefted with each new viewing. Who is the victim? Who's cheating who? The dynamic shifts from player to player, drawing the beholder of the painting into this web of seduction, reproach, dereliction, snooping and collusion.

Speech is marginalized and repressed; action is stilled. After all, each eavesdropper has the choice of interrupting the tryst, berating the maid, ejecting the suitor, but spying is too delicious. The denouement can wait. The story of the space is neither visual nor aural, nor even a flickering fusion of the two, since the eavesdropper cannot see, only look out into an unknown future, and the viewer who she shushes cannot respond by speaking back into the image. How is it possible to bridge this gulf? Speaking of England rather than Holland, Bruce R. Smith makes this suggestion in *The Acoustic World of Early Modern England*: 'The multiple cultures of early modern England may have shared with us the biological materiality of hearing, but their protocols of listening could be remarkably

different from ours. We need a cultural poetics of listening.'

The fulcrum of these paintings (the punctum, Barthes might have said) is the silent 'shhh'. Sounded or implicit, this point, sibilant and cautionary as the serpent, falls into the category of stop, sneeze, aerosol spray, all close relations to sudden pain, orgasm, heart attack, broken stick underfoot, camera click, the sudden closing of a book, a slammed door, a thrown glass, a car crash, an explosion. There is a punctuation, a pointing (though the finger points upwards to the heavens as it bars the way to speech) a crossing out. The purpose of its whisper is to still sound, to cut through unwanted noise like a blade, but in so doing it must evade silence. Hence, a finger on the lips, the silent 'shhh', the hush. Making noise to stop rogue noise, the 'shhh' identifies itself with errant sound yet signs for nothingness: my sound is the sound that obliterates, and because there is no such thing as a sound, only sounds mixing together in the course of becoming and fading, the 'shhh' is a stoppage of flow. We hear the contraflow in Björk's song from her 1995 album *Post*, 'It's Oh So Quiet': 'Ssh, ssh, it's nice and quiet, ssh, ssh, but soon again, ssh, ssh, starts another big RIOT.'

Extending from this stoppage of sound is a blockage of secrets. The finger to the lips can also be a sign cautioning the wisdom of silence on subjects that should not be broached, secrets that should not be divulged, things better left unsaid. A Henry James story, 'The Ghostly Rental', uses the 'shhh' in this sense. During his country rambles, the narrator comes across an isolated house that strikes him as 'spiritually blighted'. Passing a young woman at her gate nearby, he enquires about the house; her response is evasive, provoking his curiosity:

But I laid a hand on her arm, respectfully. 'You mean,' I said, 'that the house is haunted?'

She drew herself away, coloured, raised her finger to her lips, and hurried into the house, where, in a moment, the curtains were dropped over the windows.

Any verbal exchange on the subject of this uncanny place is stoppered, sent back as if by a spell, shut out by a blinding of the canny house's eyes. Returning to Freud and *The Uncanny*, the unhomey feeling emanating from the haunted house (not haunted at all, as it turns out) is warded off, plugged, banished by a retreat into the security of the home. That is the intention, but as with any form of censorship, the desire to know becomes stronger.

Most art historians prefer not to speak of sound in Maes's paintings, or indeed any others, though Richard Leppert's writing on the representation of music in paintings is a notable exception. Sound is not their speciality, so this is understandable, but there is another factor. The hearing of sound in a painting can only be speculative and uncanny. Take, for example, the anonymous Flemish painting, *Boy at a Window*, c. 1550–60, which is in the Royal Collection at Buckingham Palace: a boy looking through a window pane. The frame of the window is also the frame of the painting, so the intended illusion of the work is that this sinister smiling boy who looks out at me is tapping at the leaded glass with his fingertip to attract my attention. In reality, the soft tap-tap-tap is silent, though its imaginary, uncanny presence resonates very effectively. Despite the visual evidence of its effects, there is no material evidence of sound, no proof, no trace, no clear historical context within which a theory can be constructed, no documented history of the significance of sound and silence, no scholarly tradition of discourse, and what little is known of Maes gives nothing further with which to work. In an otherwise stimulating paper that considers Maes's eavesdropper series, Georgina Cole downplays the importance of hearing in these paintings. She writes of the eavesdropper's power to 'see' the structure of the painting (though the woman at the centre of the painting 'sees' only the imaginary viewer in front of her — the structure of the painting is hidden from her eyes so she must use her ears to understand the entirety of the scene), and even interprets the raised finger in visual terms, as a pointer

rather than a silencer. ‘Capturing our attention with both look and gesture, the housewife makes contact with the viewer,’ she writes, in “‘Wavering Between Two Worlds’: The Doorway in Seventeenth-Century Dutch Genre Painting’. ‘With raised finger, she demonstrates how we should “look” at the painting, gesturing to the maidservant’s seduction, and guiding the viewer to perceive its clandestine quality in relation to the civil group upstairs.’

Similarly, in *The Self-Aware Image: An Insight into Early Modern Meta-Painting*, Victor I. Stoichita concerns himself with seeing, rather than hearing. ‘A powerful dialogue is established between painting and spectator,’ he writes, ‘because it is actually interrupted. From her gestures, attitude, and expression, the person in the foreground — “the eavesdropper” — intimates, beckons.’ In her detailed study of Maes’s eavesdropper paintings, Martha Hollander concedes some significance to sound: ‘[The raised finger] recalls the emblematic figure of Silentium, shown with her finger to her lips, who encourages silence to avoid jealousy and strife.’

Yet sound is indisputable within these spaces, palpable absence, uncanny in its visibility. It is true, adding to my difficulties here, that the gesture varies from painting to painting, angled or slightly curved, never unequivocal, never a clear indication of anything other than a stoppage. The gesture itself, finger on lips, has no secure place in the history of signs, since it arose from a misunderstanding. In ancient Egypt, a naked young Horus, god of the sky, was sometimes depicted sitting on a lotus blossom, with one finger to his lips, signifying the hieroglyph for ‘child.’ After the conquest of Egypt by Alexander the Great, the young Horus was transformed into a Hellenistic god named Harpocrates, personification of the new sun. Later Greek and Roman poets interpreted this finger to the lips as a gesture for silence and secrecy, even though silence in Egypt was signified by the whole hand placed over the mouth. In *Metamorphoses*, Ovid wrote of Isis and her attendants:

The barking bug Anubis and the saint of Bubast and
The pied-coat Apis and the god that gives to understand
By finger holden to his lips that men should silence keep

More grounded in immediate realities of sexual deceit, Catullus wrote:

If any secret’s whispered by a friend,
To one who’s known for silent loyalty,
Cornelius, I’m steadfast to this end:
You’ll find a mute Harpocrates in me.

Despite the error, the gesture was accepted and has persisted as a commonly understood visual symbol denoting or demanding silence. Examples include Michelangelo’s statue of Lorenzo de’ Medici, Gerrit van Honthorst’s *Samson and Delilah* from around 1619, in which a maid looks out and gestures for silence at soldiers only she can see, as Delilah cuts Samson’s hair, Werner van Valckert’s etching of 1612, *Sleeping Venus Surprised by Satyrs*, which shows a satyr with a finger to his lips, ogling the naked Venus, and Quentin Massys’s *Allegory of Folly*, painted around 1519, which shows a stupid looking man wearing the bells, ass ears and cock’s head costume of a fool. His finger is on his lips and an inscription on the painting reads ‘*Mondeken toe*’: ‘Keep your mouth shut.’ We are back again in Sebastian Brant’s *Ship of Fools* and its moralising — the noisy woodpecker drawing predators to its own nest, and the chattering fool who is equally a hazard to human society. More whimsical as time passed, it could be found on garden ornaments of cherubs and drawings of satyrs, yet centuries later, the sign was still powerful enough to be used in propaganda posters issued by the American Office of War in World War II — Uncle Sam with a finger on his lips, with a message that

read: 'I'm counting on you! Don't discuss: troop movements, ship sailings, war equipment.' More recently, the patriotic hush was subverted for political satires aimed at American media compliance with the Bush administration. Uncle Sam was now saying 'Don't discuss: election fraud, corruption, civil rights, impeachment.'

INDISCRETION, OVERHEARD

The Harold Samuel Collection at Mansion House, London: 23 January 2008. *An Eavesdropper with a Woman Scolding* (1655) shows a variation on the drama inherent in what can be heard but not seen. In this case, silence is not the issue. No foot is poised above a stair. The maid has neglected work, leaving crockery in disarray, in order to enjoy the sound of her mistress giving a tongue lashing to some hapless victim. Her finger is not quite raised to her lips, so the scene seems frozen at an earlier moment than other versions of this theme. A painted green curtain hung from a trompe-l'œil pole obscures the right-hand view of the interior and conceals the victim. The detail is tantalising: was the curtain drawn open at the beginning of the ruckus, but only partially drawn because it threatened to ruin the pleasure of witnessing this loss of control? Was it open already, so we have the misfortune of missing half the scene through an accident of placement? Or is Maes thinking that a total visual scoping of an incident such as this is unnecessary, because hearing tells us most of what we wish to know?

The inherent theatricality of the eavesdropper series is further heightened by this curtain. Nine years earlier, *The Holy Family with Painted Frame and Curtain* by Rembrandt provided Maes with a template, though the curtain device relates back to Greek myth: in a contest to decide the best artist, Zeuxis painted grapes that were so realistic that birds tried to eat them; he then asked Parrhasius of Ephesus to pull back the curtain to reveal his work but the curtain itself was Parrhasius's painting.

Rembrandt's humanisation of the Christian theme of the holy family shows a woman and child huddled by an open fire, while in the background gloom, a carpenter is working. In every sense — frame, lighting, depth and atmosphere — their room is portrayed as a miniature stage set, an illusion completed by a painted curtain drawn aside to reveal two-thirds of the scene. Another reality, belonging neither to the subjects of the painting nor to the beholder, is introduced. As in theatre and opera, many genre scenes of Dutch painting in this period suggest a fourth wall, with painters like Maes and his celebrated contemporary, Gerrit Dou, delighting in 'breaking' the wall by using experimental pictorial devices to address or approach an audience directly.

Dou, another member of Rembrandt's studio, specialized in meticulously rendered illusions. His *Violin Player* of 1653, for example, shows the musician leaning out from an open window, the music book from which he plays propped casually on the ledge as if in danger of falling off with a thud into the viewing space. A birdcage is attached to the edge of the window frame, its food container protruding into the non-space between observer and observed. In the darkness behind the musician we can see a painting on an easel and two figures — a young man grinding pigment and a man smoking a pipe — but the musician's eyes are fixed on the bird cage, rather than on these men or the pages of his music. Music is represented as an inspirational force within the artist's studio, but perhaps birdsong is even more inspirational to the musician. Dou plays not only with these ideas but also with the illusion of paintings within paintings: the bird song, the violinist and his music projecting into our world and leaving behind the paintings at his back. The presence of a caged songbird adds a reminder that sound can escape confinements in which solid bodies are trapped. Ultimately, the violin player will never escape from the painting of which he is the subject, no matter how far he leans into our