

Stillness

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How to begin an essay on stillness. Insofar as an essay is a broaching, an interference, a disruption, a breaking in of me upon you—your mind a quiet lake, me jumping into it—we start with some discussion of quiet as disquiet. That is to say, Helen of Troy.

Aiskhylos's *Agamemnon* is a violent play from beginning to end, a world of chaotic people doing chaotic things for the worst reasons. Its action unfolds in the wake of a war that seems to most survivors to have been a colossal mistake, moving as it did from the pointless blood sacrifice of an adolescent girl to the savaging of a civilization. The chorus of the play is twelve old men who cannot sleep for thinking about all this; they have nowhere in their own minds they can go for rest or reverie. "It drips all night before my heart, the griefremembering pain," they say.¹ Into the midst of this general woundedness, this international disarray, in the third strophe of the second choral ode, the chorus places Helen, as the proximate but sufficient cause of it all, and they do so in these words:

And at that time
I would say
there came to Troy
a spirit of windless calm,
a quiet dreamy extra bit of luxury—
her feather touch,
her softly stabbing eyes—
the heartbreaking bloom of desire that she was.²

Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

1. Aiskhylos, *Agamemnon* 179–80.
2. *Ibid.* 737–43.

A spirit of windless calm. It has always astonished me, the way Aiskhylos so softly slips Helen into the violence of this ode and this play, like a bead of mercury dropped down a test tube of lava. It isn't the usual way to recommend a femme fatale, to say that she contradicts turbulence and comes on like a spell of calm weather. Later in this ode the chorus will describe Helen as swerving aside from her original peaceful course to bring ruin on Priam's family, but her first impact is this quietness.

Perhaps Helen's power can typically be traced to something unexpected in her affect, something inexplicable in her effect. When Homer introduces her in the *Iliad*, he lets her pace the parapet of Troy and talk about the armies fighting down below without any of the predictable physical description that might accompany a major heroine. We have no way to know if Helen is dark or fair, sleek or fat, richly bejeweled or coolly austere. Homer creates a moment of hush around her, where our entire observation passes through the eyes of some old men seated on the parapet who watch her go:

There they sat, the elders, upon the Skaian gate,
old men stopped from war but good at talking,
like the cicadas that sit on a branch in the forest
pouring forth their lily-like voice.
Such were the leaders of Troy as they sat upon the tower.
But when they saw Helen coming along the wall
they went quiet, saying winged words to one another:
*No blame attaches
to Trojans or Akhaians
if they suffer for a woman like that.
She seems terribly like an immortal god to look at.*³

That's all we find out about Helen's looks from the *Iliad*. The elders paralyzed by her presence find their usual eloquence faltering. To say that someone looks like a god is to call her unspeakable. Or, since the old men do speak, perhaps a better word might be exorbitant—from the Latin *ex orbita*, “outside the usual wagon track or rut.” So, I was pondering the exorbitance of Helen, and of erotic objects in general, and wondering if a poet like, say, Sappho could be seen to react to desire in the same way, that is, to feel her

3. Homer, *Iliad* 3.149–58.

narrative abilities suspended in the face of the beloved—to be stilled by desire, as it were. I began to look at Sappho’s fragment 16, which includes erotic assessment of both the mythic Helen and a real person named Anaktoria whom Sappho legendarily loved. But I got no further than the textual problems of the opening verses when I was drawn off the wagon track by another consideration and a different form of stillness.

Sappho’s fragment 16 exists for us largely due to the ministrations of two Victorian archaeologists named Bernard Pyne Grenfell and Arthur Surridge Hunt, who discovered a large cache of papyrus documents at Oxyrhynchus in Egypt circa 1895 and worked on deciphering and publishing these for the rest of their lives. They uncovered many hitherto unknown bits of classical authors, among other more pedestrian material, and published sixteen substantial volumes of Greek literary fragments between 1896 and 1920.

Grenfell published this poem of Sappho’s in 1914. Staring at that date one day, I began to be curious about Grenfell. And what it was like to spend long afternoons pouring over bits of papyri in a library while the rest of Europe was going off to war. Grenfell’s lifelong collaborator, Arthur Surridge Hunt, held a commission in the Fourth Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry and went to France. Grenfell did not enlist. He had been delicate of health and subject to psychological crisis most of his life, cared for by his mother until she died and then a mental institution until his own death in 1926. Unfit for the infantry, Grenfell spent the war years perfecting Oxyrhynchus Papyri volumes 12 to 15. He never married although Hunt did. Grenfell’s working life ended in 1920 when his mother died. In photographs he looks openhearted but wary, with wild eyebrows and a very forward gaze like a dog trying to appear undaunted.

He was Professor of Papyrology at Oxford starting in 1908. His papers are held in Oxford’s Sackler Library and include a notebook from the 1898–99 expedition to Egypt. Tucked in a back page is a small photograph captioned “Unknown Woman” (fig. 1).⁴ Unknown Woman is naked except for some over-the-knee black lace stockings. She is seated on a rumpled bed, has short dark hair in a sort of flapper style and both arms raised, presumably to better present her moderately large breasts, at an awkward backward angle over the left shoulder as if she were wielding a baseball bat. It must have been a tiring pose to hold, and she looks a bit surly with the effort or at least suspended in an afternoon she can’t wait to see the end of. She looks you right in the eye. The calculations of the photograph are pornographic—even the woman’s direct gaze is a strategy of the genre, whereby the naked subject shows a

4. Photo found by Daniela Coloma in Grenfell’s notebook, now in the archive of the *Egypt Exploration Society* at Sackler Library, Oxford.



FIGURE 1. "Unknown Woman."

sudden awareness of being watched and undercuts the fiction of a surprise visit from you.⁵ Yet the strategy seems to misfire. This woman is no platitude. She has the plain sense of things in her eyes. Roland Barthes would say she leaves the pornographic behind and becomes erotic, in so far as the erotic (he says) is a pornographic that has been disturbed or fissured or interfered with. What interferes is some detail that rises from the surface to pierce the viewer—Barthes famously calls the detail a *punctum*, from the Latin word for a sharp pointed instrument. The *punctum* both attracts and distracts your eye so that, looking at the photo, your thought is pulled past its frame “not only toward ‘the rest’ of the nakedness, not only toward the fantasy of a *praxis*, but toward the absolute excellence of a being, body and soul.”⁶ In other words you start to wonder about the woman, her afternoon, her tired arms, her mood, her salary, her future. You may wonder too about Bernard Pyne Grenfell, how he found this photo, whether he cherished or despised it, whether erotic matters were one of the things that drove him mad. And all this happens in a moment that has two sides: on one side the woman in her awkward pose years ago; on the other side you, staring at this photograph years later. Barthes says the *punctum* is “what I add to the photograph and *what is nonetheless already there*.”⁷ What I add to the photograph is my confrontation with her strategic but fathomless gaze. What is already there is the crazy tilt of her elbow at its baseball-player angle, the sexological ineptitude of this. Her gaze almost falters rising over her own elbow.

Which returns us to Sappho fragment 16, not in its particular content, but as a paleographical problem. As an ineptitude of legibility.

This poem, as it was pieced together by Grenfell from papyrus scraps in 1902, is a text interrupted by gaps and brackets, especially in its third, fourth, and final stanzas. These punctuation marks, which indicate missing material or dubious text, reveal that we don’t know where the poem ends or exactly what it says or finally what it means. Gaps and brackets interfere with easy reading of the words as an awkward elbow might spoil a pornographic pose. They direct us past the textual surface into a space of speculation, where we can play around with the mechanics of reading and maybe get a glimpse of “the rest of the nakedness” of Sappho. A fragment releases us from time and space, from rectilinear complacency, from the noise of our own

5. On the direct gaze as strategic, see Giorgio Agamben, *Idea of Prose*, trans. Michael Heller and Sam Whitsitt (Albany, N.Y., 1995), pp. 126–27.

6. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York, 1982), p. 59.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 55.

expectations, into a different dark lacuna, a stillness of study that is possibly fathomless.

Here is a translation of fragment 16, so far as it can be read:

Some men say an army of horse and some men say an army on foot
and some men say an army of ships is the most beautiful thing
on the black earth. But I say it is
what you love.

Easy to make this understood by all.
For she who overcame everyone
in beauty (Helen)
left her fine husband

behind and went sailing to Troy.
Not for her children nor her dear parents
had she a thought, no—
] led her astray

] for
] lightly
] reminded me now of Anaktoria
who is gone.

I would rather see her lovely step
and the motion of light on her face
than chariots of Lydians or ranks
of footsoldiers in arms.

] not possible to happen
] to pray for a share
]
]
]
]
]
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] toward[

]

]

]

out of the unexpected.⁸

The poem means to set up an argument—about Helen or about the nature of beauty or about the value of war and armaments—but the outlines of the argument disappear into what Japanese poets call “the silence between two thoughts” (*jikan*). Let’s entertain two thoughts about Helen: good woman, bad woman. Depending on how we restore the text of the third and fourth stanzas of fragment 16 here, Helen’s virtue stands or falls: What was she thinking to run off with Paris? What motive disappears into the missing words represented above by square brackets? Different scholarly emendations make her willing, unwilling, led astray by Aphrodite, drunk on Eros, brainless like women in general, or just unlucky. You can swim around in these options; you can choose one or leave them all in play; you can think up another. It is a free field of imagining. Helen goes in and out of focus. The experience of reading gets deep and flirtatious.

But then it’s hard to speak of the silence between two thoughts without remembering John Cage. Cage had the notion from 1948 onward to compose a piece of uninterrupted silence and sell it to the Muzak company as canned music for elevators and waiting rooms. It was the color white (which Wallace Stevens once called the “color . . . / In which the sense lies still”) that showed him the way to a method.⁹ Cage was visiting Black Mountain College in 1948 when he saw Robert Rauschenberg’s series of white paintings, which Rauschenberg called “the plastic fullness of nothing.”¹⁰ Soon after, Cage created *4’33”*, using chance methods to compose a score in which the pianist sits at the piano for this length of time, turning the pages of his music and playing nothing, although he does open and close the keyboard in between movements. When asked how he’d gone about making the score, Cage said that he *built it up gradually out of many small pieces of silence*.¹¹ The work (performed in 1951) was widely denounced by critics and audience, including Christian Wolff’s mother, who rebuked Cage in a letter for his “prank.”¹² She said she had consulted the *I Ching* on the matter and

8. Sappho, *If Not, Winter: Fragments of Sappho*, trans. Carson (New York, 2002), pp. 27–29.

9. Wallace Stevens, “Bouquet of Roses in Sunlight,” in *Selected Poems*, ed. John N. Serio (New York, 2011), p. 238.

10. Quoted in “Tabula Rasa,” www.rauschenbergfoundation.org/art/lightboxes/tabula-rasa

11. See John Cage, *I–VI* (Hanover, N.H., 1990), pp. 20–21.

12. Kyle Gann, *No Such Thing as Silence: John Cage’s 4’33”* (New Haven, Conn., 2010), p. 191.

received the hexagram for Youthful Folly. Cage wrote back an apology. He too had consulted the *I Ching* and got the hexagram for Exhaustion.¹³

So, let's return to the perpetually unexhausted Robert Rauschenberg and the inspiration Cage took from him. Rauschenberg's white paintings in their plastic nothingness coincided with Cage's Zen beliefs and practice; at this time he had begun to interpose chance operations between himself and his work in order to silence personal taste, self-expressiveness, ego. Emptying a canvas of marks or a musical score of notes makes a stillness where the rest of the world can enter. Cage called the white paintings "airports for lights, shadows, and particles."¹⁴ And Rauschenberg said, "I always thought of the white paintings as being, not passive, but . . . hypersensitive. . . . So that one could look at them and almost see how many people were in the room by the shadows cast, or what time of day it was" (quoted in *OTW*, pp. 64–65). At the first performance of *4'33"*, which took place at Woodstock in an auditorium open to a forest at the back, you could hear trees and wind during the first movement, rain beginning during the second movement, and in the third movement sounds of the audience muttering or walking out. "Silence is not acoustic. It is a change of mind, a turning around," said Cage.¹⁵ He was a patient man. He liked the gradual way space fills with sound or dull things become interesting. But also, Cage was a bit of a mischief-maker. He enjoyed errors and surprise. The story is well-known of how he arranged to visit the Acoustic Laboratory of Harvard University in order to experience the world's stillest place but found, after entering its soundproof anechoic chamber, that all he could hear or think about was the pounding of his own heart, the roaring of his own nervous system. Philosophically, his favorite thinkers were people who insisted on foiling the research, like Meister Eckhart, the mischief-making German mystic who famously said, "The eye by which I see God is the same as the eye by which God sees me."¹⁶ This kind of sentence depends on a moment when two points of view interchange and give each other, in passing, a bit of a shock. Here's another example of it—from one of Emily Dickinson's best-known poems:

13. See Cage, letter to Helen Wolff, 11 Apr. 1954, *The Selected Letters of John Cage* (Middletown, Conn., 2016), p. 177.

14. Quoted in Calvin Tomkins, *Off the Wall: A Portrait of Robert Rauschenberg* (New York, 1980), p. 65; hereafter abbreviated *OTW*.

15. Cage, "An Autobiographical Statement," johncage.org/beta/autobiographical_statement.html. This statement is variously attested; I think he made it first in Kyoto in 1989 when he gave a speech after receiving the Kyoto Prize.

16. Quoted in Gann, *No Such Thing as Silence*, p. 99.

I heard a Fly buzz—when I died—
 The Stillness in the Room
 Was like the Stillness in the Air—
 Between the Heaves of Storm—¹⁷

It is unclear where “I” am positioned in order to write a poem about a noise simultaneous with my own death. Time seems to fold over itself and to be looking at me from behind its own back. ED likes this kind of mischief. In the last stanza she uses it again to make the end of her life be the end of the poem—posthumously, as it were:

With Blue—uncertain stumbling Buzz—
 Between the light—and me—
 And then the Windows failed—and then
 I could not see to see—¹⁸

Around the time she was writing this poem she contracted a disease of the iris of the eye that made her hypersensitive to light. She spent six months in Boston consulting an ophthalmologist and feared she was losing her sight altogether. For more than a year afterwards she had to wear bandages on her eyes for long periods. The image of blocked light as well as the over-determined verb of the last line—“I could not see to see”—may be a reference to that visual distress, sensationalized here as a kind of death.

But every artist knows the crisis of artistic inspiration—the time when insight fails and motive goes blank and you cannot “see to see.” For Rauschenberg this came after the all-white paintings; he was uncertain how to follow or deepen his experiments in stillness. So, in 1953 he bought a bottle of Jack Daniel’s and went to knock on Willem de Kooning’s door to ask him if he could erase one of de Kooning’s drawings. Rauschenberg was young and uncelebrated at the time, de Kooning the reigning art master of the New York galleries, so the request had a cockfighting resonance. De Kooning was grumpy but persuadable; he looked around his studio for a drawing that would be really hard to erase—found one layered with grease pencil, ink and heavy crayon. “It took me a month and about 40 erasers but in the end it really worked. . . . The problem was solved and I didn’t have to do it again,” says Rauschenberg (quoted in *OTW*, p. 96). I like to compare Dickinson’s mischievous poem 465 with Rauschenberg’s *Erased de Kooning Drawing* (1953). Both works combine vision, blindness, and bravado, taking away one

17. Emily Dickinson, poem 465, in *The Complete Poems*, ed. Thomas H. Johnson (Boston, 1960), p. 223.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 224.

subject matter to allow the appearance of another; both manipulate stillness to give a bit of a shock.

The shock energized Rauschenberg for his next experiment. After erasing de Kooning he moved on to a new art form that he called “combines,” which gathered paint, painting, and material objects onto one surface to see what would happen. *Canyon* (1959) has the following components: painted canvas, photo of an old car parked on a city street, photo of his infant son Christopher reaching one hand up into a dark space above him, postcard of the Statue of Liberty, man’s white shirt cut open, crumpled tube of paint, fragments of printed words or newsprint, and a bed pillow tied by a rope that pinches it in half (fig. 2). From the midst of all this bursts a taxidermized American bald eagle in full flight. Rauschenberg says he made the work out of stuff he found around his studio. If so, the stuff was deeply found. He had spent the 1950s changing most of the defining features of himself; he’d left his wife and son, got a divorce, departed America for Europe to travel with Cy Twombly, come out of the closet sexually, and transformed his artistic method by the addition of objects to painted surfaces. All the quiet background of his life as an up-and-coming abstract painter—complete with wife, son, car, white shirt, undivided pillow, and conventional method of art-making—was suddenly gone. You might say Rauschenberg took flight out of the middle of Rauschenberg, launching himself as an eagle from the litter of his own former personality. It was perhaps ominous that he had to lop off the bird’s tail in order to fit it onto his canvas; the disquieting of a quiet surface can sometimes make more trouble than you expect. The stuffed eagle, which had been found in a trash bin, turned out to be from an endangered species, protected by The Migratory Bird Act of 1918 and the Bald Eagle Protection Act of 1940, and it would (like Helen of Troy) cause exorbitant problems for its owners in later years, who were forbidden to sell the artwork and had to donate it to a museum to avoid taxes.¹⁹ But in 1959 all that was the future; the eagle was a proud symbol of national and personal supremacy—as harmless as it was motionless. Motionlessness in general seems to me characteristic of the combines, despite their furiously surreal subject matter and their exorbitant metaphors of flight and rupture. Their peculiar inertia is captured by Octavio Paz in his poem “A Wind Called Bob Rauschenberg”:

the objects sleep side by side,
great flocks of things and things and things,
the objects sleep with eyes open
and slowly fall within themselves,
they fall without moving,

19. See Leah Dickerman, *Rauschenberg: Canyon* (New York, 2014).



FIGURE 2. Robert Rauschenberg, *Canyon* (1959). Combine: oil, pencil, paper, fabric, metal, cardboard box, printed paper, printed reproductions, photograph, wood, paint tube, and mirror on canvas with oil on bald eagle, string, and pillow. 81 3/4 × 70 × 24 in. Gift of the family of Ileana Sonnabend. The Museum of Modern Art. © 2021 Robert Rauschenberg Foundation / Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), N.Y.

their fall is the stillness of a plain under the moon,
their sleep is a falling with no return.²⁰

As we're talking about exorbitant objects, let's reconsider Grecian urns. "Thou still unravished bride of quietness," says Keats in the first verse of his ode on an imaginary ancient piece of pottery.²¹ Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn" is about the pathos of time. According to Andrew Motion, when the poem was first printed in 1820 a comma appeared in the first verse between "still" and "unravished," making "still" into an adjective describing the motionless urn rather than an adverb qualifying the purity of the bride.²² Anyway, she is a metaphorical bride; perhaps it doesn't matter whether we deck her with a comma or not, but consider the moment in which you speculate on that. Once you know about it, the comma rumor opens one of those lacunae where a text differs from itself and layers into options or gives you a silence in which to think two thoughts at once or opens a space in which to luxuriate in the richness of refusal. Extra minutes seem to expand inside the reading of verse 1. "Thou foster-child of silence and slow time," Keats continues in verse 2.²³ If, according to Cage, silence is what we're not noticing, can we say that silence *noticed* is stillness. You have to notice it, enter into it. Stillness takes time.

Let's now see what happens if we evolve the comma into the still slower time of the semicolon.

This sign, the semicolon, used by the ancient Greeks as a question mark, went out of use with the Romans, was revived by Aldus Manutius in 1494, was redefined by eighteenth-century grammarians, and in modern usage indicates a pause between two clauses or delineates items on a list. Postmodern usage has added an emoticon function of the semicolon as a wink. "You can think of [semicolons] as commas and as such they are purely servile or you can think of them as periods and then using them can make you feel adventurous," said Gertrude Stein,²⁴ who mainly avoided the semicolon, in contrast to Virginia Woolf, who used more than a thousand in *Mrs Dalloway*. Compare James Joyce's *Ulysses* at fifty and Emily Dickinson's entire oeuvre at roughly zero. ED was not one to pause between clauses. She left two thousand or so poetic compositions loose in a desk drawer when she died, most of them scribbled on scrap paper. The handwriting is fast, forward slanting,

20. Octavio Paz, "A Wind Called Bob Rauschenberg," trans. Eliot Weinberger, in *The Collected Poems of Octavio Paz: 1957-1987*, trans. Weinberger et al., ed. Weinberger (New York, 1991), p. 577.

21. John Keats, "Ode on a Grecian Urn," in *The Complete Poems*, ed. John Barnard (New York, 1988), p. 344.

22. See Andrew Motion, *Keats* (Chicago, 1997), p. 392.

23. Keats, "Ode on a Grecian Urn," p. 344.

24. Gertrude Stein, *Lectures in America* (London, 1988), p. 218.

and sort of saucy, with almost no punctuation except dashes. The page is her universe. Those dashes simply do not care what anyone else thinks punctuation should be. Anyone else is not going to see them.

Woolf, on the other hand, worried herself into illness over what other people would think, what reviewers would say, the “psychology of fame” in general.²⁵ “I wish I need never read about myself, or think about myself . . . but look firmly at my object & think only of expressing it,” she said in her diary.²⁶ And in a letter to Ethel Smyth, “I believe unconsciousness, and complete anonymity to be the only conditions . . . in which I can write.”²⁷

Anonymity was not an option, given the high social profile of her family and friends, not to say the headlong plunge of idiosyncrasy that was her style. The style is omnivorous. She has a modernist hunger to “put practically everything in” or “to give the moment whole; whatever it includes.”²⁸ But flooding the page with all the data available to consciousness at any moment would have made her voice more conspicuous than Joyce’s. So, she pauses to rein herself in, then frets about it: “One word of slight snub in the [TLS] today makes me determine, first, to alter the whole of *The Waves*; second, to put my back up against the public.”²⁹

She did not alter her style completely, but she did experiment throughout the 1930s with techniques of reticence, attempting to draw back a little further from the authorial surface in each novel, replacing “the damned egotistical self,” as she called it, with the plural pronoun “we,” or with phenomena like furniture or moonlight, or with humanity as a whole.³⁰ In the book she left unfinished at death, *Between the Acts*, there are voices, words, and phrases slipping in and out of different consciousnesses and behind them someone called “third voice” or “another voice” or “that was nobody.”³¹ She is like a swimmer in a strong current trying to swim backward, trying to get to some place prior to her own personality. Around this time, we find a spooky passage in a letter to Smyth where VW describes walking in a flooded field by the River Ouse:

Yesterday, thinking to explore, I fell headlong into a six foot hole, and came home dripping like a spaniel. . . . How odd to be swimming in a

25. Virginia Woolf, entry for 10 June 1919, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, ed. Anne Olivier Bell and Andrew McNeillie, 5 vols. (London, 1977–82), 1:280.

26. Woolf, entry for 18 Mar. 1935, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, 4:289.

27. Woolf, letter to Ethel Smyth, 29 Oct. 1933, *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, ed. Nigel Nicolson and Joanne Trautmann, 6 vols. (New York, 1975–80), 5:239.

28. Woolf, entry for 28 Nov. 1928, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, 3:210, 209.

29. Woolf, entry for 4 Dec. 1930, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, 3:336.

30. Woolf, entry for 26 Jan. 1920, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, 2:14.

31. See Woolf, *Between the Acts* (New York, 1941); hereafter abbreviated B.

field! . . . How I love this savage medieval water moved, all floating tree trunks and flocks of birds and a man in a punt, and myself so eliminated of human feature you might take me for a stake walking.³²

Punctuationally, a stake walking might be a semicolon—this mark both fixed and fluid, both servile and adventurous; this still point in a swimming world. The work Woolf left unfinished in 1941 when she died is a novel stuck at this still point. Written in 1940 but set in 1939, *Between the Acts* is a story of characters pausing on the edge of war, intended to be read by people who have already been carried past that punctuation point. The writer is looking back to a future that will not have happened yet, and yet it has. This gives me the same inside-out feeling as Dickinson's "I heard a Fly buzz—when I died," as if the flaps of time were folded wrong. Yet in-betweenness is the logic of the novel. The whole story is, as its title implies, a kind of fictional semicolon, and it repeatedly stages moments of pause that draw attention to a deep disquiet in everyone's attitude to the war and to themselves. Two examples.

Between the Acts is the story of villagers putting on a history pageant in the garden of the local aristocrat. The pageant's director, a certain Miss La Trobe, the John Cage of her day, has decided to begin the second act with ten minutes of silence, to be filled by ambient sound. "She wanted to expose them, as it were, to douche them, with present-time reality." This goes all wrong; the audience doesn't know how to pay attention to reality, and then it suddenly rains. "Reality too strong," mutters Miss La Trobe (B, p. 179). But shortly the rain stops, and the play continues to its sensational closing gesture, which involves all the actors onstage picking up a mirror and turning it round to face the audience:

All stopped. And the audience saw themselves, not whole by any means, but at any rate sitting still.

The hands of the clock had stopped at the present moment. It was now. Ourselves. . . . All shifted, preened, minced; hands were raised, legs shifted. . . . All evaded or shaded themselves—save Mrs. Manresa who, facing herself in the glass, used it as a glass; had out her mirror; powdered her nose; and moved one curl, disturbed by the breeze, to its place.

. . .

"The play's over, I take it," muttered Colonel Mayhew, retrieving his hat. [B, pp. 185–86]

32. Woolf, letter to Smyth, 14 Nov. 1940, *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, 6:444.

The play is indeed over, but the novel goes on and the local curate rises to make a speech, which soon comes round to church finances. He is just mentioning a deficit of one hundred and seventy-five pounds in the church entertainment fund when twelve warplanes go zooming overhead, bisecting his rhetoric and cutting in half the phrase “opportunity to contribute” in between the first and second syllables of *opportunity* (see *B*, p. 193).³³

Second example (of *Between the Acts* as a fictional semicolon). From a description of the house of the local aristocrat in whose garden the pageant takes place:

Empty, empty, empty; silent, silent, silent. The room was a shell,
singing of what was before time was; a vase stood in the heart of the
house, alabaster, smooth, cold, holding the still, distilled essence of
emptiness, silence. [*B*, pp. 36–37]

This is a room so empty and silent you can hear its heartbeat echo from syllable to syllable: three times on “empty”; three times on “silent”; three times on “was”; and twice on “still.” The stillness is secured by a semicolon at the center of each sentence. Think how different this room would feel if the writer had used, instead, dashes. We are looking at a vase in a room in a house in a village in an England that has gone very, very still, deadly still. Some readers find *Between the Acts* a bright, breezy, playful entertainment; I find it eerie. There is something void at the center of this novel, radiating from the writer’s mentality. This is a room waiting for *nothing*.

Let’s move back two thousand years, before the invention of the semicolon, and contemplate a room waiting for *something*. Here is a stillness inscribed on a Grecian urn by a hand of the third or second century BC, the oldest written testimony we have to Sappho’s poetry. Fragment 2 is a hymn of invocation, calling the god Aphrodite (Kypris) to come from where she is (Krete) to where Sappho is (a sacred grove):

]
here to me from Krete to this holy temple
where is your graceful grove
of apple trees and altars smoking
with frankincense.

And in it cold water makes a clear sound through
apple branches and with roses the whole place

33. Note that VW divides the word wrongly—placing “opp . . .” before the planes and “. . . portunity” after, so that there are three *ps* in all (*B*, p. 193): Why?

is shadowed and down from radiant-shaking leaves
 sleep [*koma*] comes dropping.

And in it a horse meadow has come into bloom
 with spring flowers and breezes
 like honey are blowing
 []

In this place you Kypris taking up
 in gold cups delicately
 nectar mingled with festivities:
 pour.³⁴

The center of the poem is a catalogue of suspended animation, its stillness framed by a single act. In its first word the poem sets out an adverb meaning “here, hither, to this place,” an adverb usually followed by some imperative verb like *come* or *go*. But here the imperative doesn’t arrive till the last word: “pour.” By implication Aphrodite arrives at the same moment; until then the sacred grove and the poem reverberate with the lack of her.

At the center of the center of this reverberation is a dropping down of sleep; the stillest place in the poem is the Greek word κῶμα (*koma*), here translated “sleep,” but this is no ordinary afternoon nap. *Koma* is a rare and weird word, used in the medical texts of the lethargy we still call a coma, turning up in poetry always with connotations of another world. This is the heavy sleep of Zeus after sex;³⁵ this is the punishing sleep of gods in the underworld who must hold their breath for a year because they’ve broken an oath.³⁶ *Koma* partakes of the timeless time of divinity. Yet the poem is set in the human present tense; Sappho waits for a god who does actually arrive. Expectation is rewarded. Nectar is poured. How very different the texture of this stillness from the void space Woolf placed at the heart of *Between the Acts*. Sappho’s poem is festive—she’s like the owner of a luxury spa ticking off the features of her hot tubs and yoga salons. Contrast Woolf, who replaces all physical detail with the “distilled essence” of an empty silent room, and whose personal loneliness seems to ring from every human relationship in the novel. Sappho describes a world of things in the right place at the right time, where the rhythms of divinity mesh with those of the human,

34. Sappho, *If Not, Winter*, p. 7.

35. See Homer, *Iliad* 14.359.

36. See Hesiod, *Theogony* 798.

where worship is a graceful and possible exchange. There is no such sanctuary in *Between the Acts*. Woolf concludes her novel by telling us, “The house had lost its shelter” (B, p. 219). She does not say how the 1939 house of the story has lost its shelter, but it is clear that the larger 1941 house of her life in England has been laid wide open by (what she saw as) the gigantic mistake of World War II.

Let’s now cross the Aegean Sea, from the seventh-century BC Lesbos of Sappho to the seventh-century BC Sparta of Alkman and consider the stillness of mistakes. Lesbos and Sparta were the two great centers of musical and poetic excellence in this century, and Alkman (the Bob Dylan of his day) was celebrated for intense lyric poems on cosmological as well as personal topics. Only two hundred or so lines of Alkman’s verse survive and almost nothing is known of his biography. But there was an ancient rumor that Alkman was born a slave and freed by his master because of his poetic talent—most likely apocryphal, yet some of his poems show a surprising intimacy with poverty and want. For example, fragment 20:

[?] made three seasons, summer
and winter and autumn third
and fourth spring when
there is blooming but to eat enough
is not.³⁷

The poem is an existential cry framed as an economic blunder. Both Homer and Hesiod (before Alkman) had referred to the seasons as being three: winter, summer, fall. But for a poor Spartan poet with nothing left in his cupboard at the end of winter, along comes spring as an afterthought of the natural economy, fourth in a series of three, unbalancing his arithmetic and enjambling his verse. The verse is an iambic dimeter (such as, “I wandered lonely as a cloud”)³⁸ repeated four times and followed by a broken-off fifth verse that hangs there like a hunger pang (“is not”). We might, with John Cage, characterize this as a change of mind and a turning around. Or we might, with Aristotle, compare it to the psychological event of metaphor. Aristotle has this to say about metaphor in the *Rhetoric*:

Maximum wittiness comes from metaphor and from deceiving the reader/listener beforehand, for it becomes clear to him that he has

37. Alkman, frag. 20.

38. See William Wordsworth, “I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud,” www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45521/i-wandered-lonely-as-a-cloud

learned something from it turning out the opposite of what he expected. And at that moment the mind seems to say to itself, “How true, and yet I mistook it!”³⁹

The true mistakes of metaphor are worth spending a moment on, Aristotle implies. To arrest the mind in its headlong rush for certainty may teach us something unexpected. I have a friend who is a sculptor named Peter Cole. One day I asked him what he is after in a sculpture, and his answer was, “I like to keep the hesitation in.” I thought this a good answer. “What is a hesitation, if one removes it altogether from the psychological dimension?” asks Giorgio Agamben in his book *The End of the Poem*.⁴⁰ For Sappho a hesitation might be a way of waiting for God; to Rauschenberg it might be four months of erasing someone else’s drawing; to John Cage four minutes and thirty-three seconds of not playing the piano. But Agamben is concerned with another less-pretty experience of hesitation: the state of exception we call asylum, detention, or refugee status. Throughout the world nowadays are sites where people caught in a certain kind of stasis, in between real states of life, have their time emptied of everything but time.

Agamben’s concept of *bare life*, introduced in his book *Homo Sacer*, is a way to talk about these stranded, placeless, timeless people. Bare life he describes as a zone in between outside and inside inhabited by persons who can be killed without the killer incurring a charge of murder: like Jews, gypsies, homosexuals, the disabled, in the extermination camps of the Nazis; like the subjects of medical experimentation throughout the history of science; like migrants who flee various despairs to end up in what is called asylum.⁴¹ These asylum seekers have something in common with Sophokles’s Antigone who, about to exit the stage to be buried alive, describes herself in this way:

I’m an in-between thing, aren’t I
neither a dead one among the dead nor a live one among the living.⁴²

Antigone’s word for “in-between thing” is *metoikos*—made of *oikos*, the noun for “house” or “home,” and *meta*, a prefix implying change or difference. It is the ancient Greek term for a resident alien. A metic in fifth-century Athens was either an immigrant or a freed slave. Metics were allowed to live in the city but not own property; allowed to share the burdens of citizenship

39. Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 3.11.

40. Agamben, “The End of the Poem,” in *The End of the Poem: Studies in Poetics*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, Calif., 1999), p. 109.

41. See Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Heller-Roazen (Stanford, Calif., 1998).

42. Sophokles, *Antigone* 852–53.

(like taxation) without its privileges (like voting or freedom from judicial torture). The status of metic was controversial among Athenians themselves because they, like us, had changing and contradictory notions about whether allowing immigration, or freeing slaves, was worth the trouble.

Metics were like people placed within quotation marks—and no one willing to claim authority for quoting them. When Antigone goes off to her death, Kreon declares himself not responsible. He does so by using her own word *metoikos* back to her, in a gesture of darkest sarcasm. He says:

We relegate her
to a place of absolute aloneness.
Whether she lives or dies is her own choice.
We are clean of this girl.
Her status as “metic” on earth is here revoked.⁴³

Kreon takes Antigone’s metaphor literally, more than literally, and relegates her to metic status among the dead, in so far as she was always already foreign among the living. So do rulers or governments put people in quotation marks, stop them in their tracks, cancel their status as full human beings—not by killing them but by placing them in between life and death. To put a word in quotation marks, says Agamben, is to “cite” it, to pull it out of its customary meaning but refuse to let it settle into a new meaning. We are unable to carry its thought through to a conclusion. We are unable to rid ourselves of it or take leave of it; the quoted word becomes “unsubstitutable.”⁴⁴ Jacques Derrida uses the analogy of clothespins; he says quotation marks allow you to “put [a sentence] out to dry,” as photographers hang negatives on a clothesline.⁴⁵ And in Marcel Proust we find Swann characterized in this way:

When he used an expression that seemed to imply an opinion about an important subject, he took care to isolate it in a tone of voice that was particularly mechanical and ironic, as though he had put it between quotation marks, seeming not to want to take responsibility for it.⁴⁶

43. *Ibid.*, 887–90.

44. Agamben, “The Idea of Thought,” in *Idea of Prose*, trans. Michael Sullivan and Sam Whitsitt (Albany, N.Y., 1995), pp. 103, 104.

45. Jacques Derrida, *Signéponge/Signsponge*, trans. Richard Rand (New York, 1984), p. 2.

46. Marcel Proust, *Swann’s Way*, vol. 1 of *In Search of Lost Time*, trans. Lydia Davis, ed. Christopher Prendergast (New York, 2004), p. 100.

Important, therefore, that Kreon does not give orders to have Antigone executed. That would be to voice a definite opinion, it would allow him to take leave of her. Instead, he hangs her up to dry; he buries her alive with a bit of food; she is suspended in bare life; he is suspended in the gigantic hesitation of not thinking it through. “Whether she lives or dies is her own choice,” he says, which is sort of true, but he will never be “clean” of her. He has made her unsubstitutable.

Kreon in a way invents quotation marks. By borrowing Antigone’s word *metoikos*, mechanically or ironically, he acknowledges that he cannot tell her story in his own voice; he cannot think it through. She confounds his vocabulary and jeopardizes his truth-telling. Truth-telling by means of quotation, with or without quotation marks, is the project of a recent work by Jenny Holzer. Her series of canvases called *Dust Paintings*—which quote documents obtained from the US government through the Freedom of Information Act—record systematic prisoner abuse by Special Forces Units of the US Army at firebases in Afghanistan (fig. 3).⁴⁷

The paintings give us the words of a detainee, speaking through a translator whose English is rough and whose handwriting is hasty. Spelling, grammar, and syntax are rudimentary in the documents. Big black marks of official redaction obscure parts of the text, which floats, in many of the paintings, on a background of cloudy shimmering heavenly blue brushstrokes. One reviewer called the blue brushwork “a visual caress.”⁴⁸ Not much caressing goes on in the texts of the documents, many of which record the experience of a certain Jamal Naseer who, after weeks of being sleep-deprived, screamed at, starved, beaten, and soaked in snow and ice, died in American custody. Official report: natural causes. I asked Holzer about the blue backgrounds. She told me the blue is a shade called phthalocyanine and showed how the surface is built up with this blue laid on first, then layers of other paint on top, mostly gray, to dissipate and cloud the appearance. Later she wrote me an email saying, “The blue comes up through many gray layers, to have the background dead cold almost subconsciously stained, and permit the contrast with the warm white letters.” And she added, “Now that’s art nonsense.”⁴⁹

She is a person allergic to nonsense. Nor does she intend the tone of the *Dust Paintings* to be mechanical or ironic. They lack quotation marks yet imply a subconsciously stained viewer. No one can think through the bare life and bare death of Jamal Naseer, she implies; it is something unsubstitutable;

47. See Jenny Holzer, *Dust Paintings* (New York, 2014).

48. Thomas Micchelli, “Memory and Regret: Jenny Holzer’s ‘Dust Paintings,’” *Hyperallergic*, 20 Sept. 2014, hyperallergic.com/149831/memory-and-regret-jenny-holzers-dust-paintings/

49. Holzer, email to author.

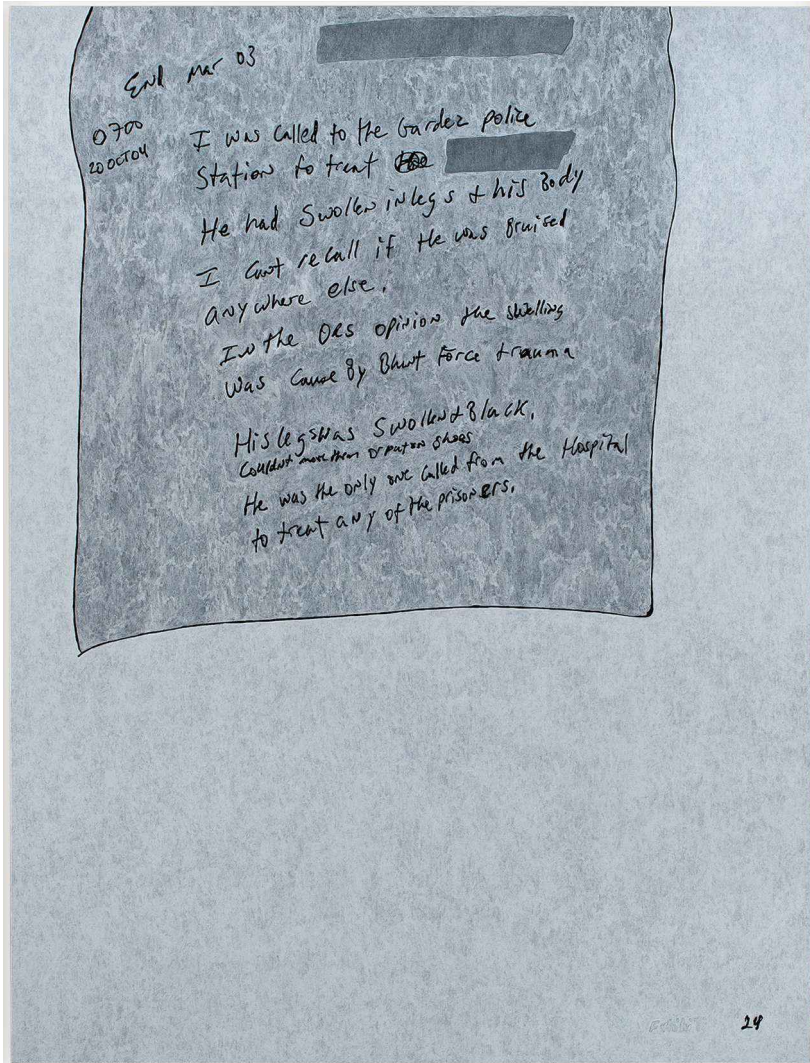


FIGURE 3. Jenny Holzer, *I Was Called* (2013). Oil on linen. 58 × 44 in. / 147.3 × 111.8 cm. US government document. © 2013 Jenny Holzer, member Artists Rights Society (ARS), N.Y.

we are all well past the point of being able to rid ourselves of it. The heavenly blue paint keeps drawing us back in, deeper in, to a hesitation. When an exasperated visitor to one of Holzer's recent exhibits asked her, waving his hand at the torture reports on the wall, "Why do you make paintings out of stuff like this?" she answered, "*Because people keep paintings.*" Stillness takes time.

There are many stillnesses we didn't get around to in this essay—snow; fog; moonlight; chastity; the gerundive; Odysseus tied to the mast while sailing past the Sirens (the Sirens who, according to Franz Kafka, were anyway silent); the stillness of unsent letters; the stillness inside an egg; the stillness of all the omnibuses in London driving around empty on 18 December 1936 while a king was abdicating on radio; the stillness of all the swimming pools in the world that are closed at night; the stillness of Thomas Edison's last breath, which is preserved in a glass tube in a museum in Detroit, Michigan. And finally I would have liked to mention lips, or the action of closing the lips one upon the other, for which ancient Greek had the verb *μύειν*, giving us English "muteness" and "mystery," as well as various words for sounds that can be made with closed lips, all of which brings to mind those persons in detention centers or asylum who choose to stitch their lips shut as a gesture of resistance or rage. But having no idea what to say about those people, I stopped. "Approaching a mystery, one can offer nothing but a parody," wrote Agamben in his book *Profanations*.⁵⁰

50. Agamben, *Profanations*, trans. Jeff Fort (New York, 2007), p. 41.