

The Silence of the Apprentice

More than Nothing

When I started to think about silence I didn't imagine that there was so much to say on the subject, and I must confess that at one point I was tempted to write a blank page, which would have been an original but inelegant way to talk about it.

We live in a world where verbalization is the rule and silence has become the exception to such an extent that even ecology, which has the wind in its sails, neglects it.

I discovered on this occasion that silence "has a sound", and that it can reach from 0 to 10 dB, and that it is the one that accompanies us when we are in a desert.

Unfortunately, I remembered that in our time and in certain regions of the world, silence is synonymous with constraint and torture when it is a question of silencing and reducing to silence.

In Freemasonry, fortunately, Silence is agreed upon and the definition given by the Bible (Deut 27-9), namely "*a deliberate withholding of speech for the purpose of listening*" seems to me to translate well the spirit of it.

This silence, which I have been imbibing for a few weeks now, will accompany the entire course of the apprentice and it seems interesting to me to recall the conditions that presided over his entry into the lodge because the genesis of silence in the apprentice has been the object of a slow maturation.

As a simple postulant, the future apprentice did not live, but underwent the silence.

From the moment of his interrogation under the blindfold, he has experienced what might be called the mystery silence, which is in a way an introduction to the silent process that will be his in the days and months to come.

It is in a relative but anxiety-provoking silence and after a few comforting words that the applicant must undergo the interrogation, wondering, while being attentive to his answers, how many and which people are questioning him before leaving without answers to his own questions, but unconsciously prepared for his passage into the reflection room.

This preamble is not insignificant because in the ritual nothing is fortuitous, each act, each symbol that is transmitted to us arouses the awakening of our unconscious and allows us to integrate the message or messages intended for our spiritual evolution.

In the reflective practice, an initiatory place par excellence, where each object and each moment is charged with symbolic value, the future apprentice has not yet knocked on the door of the temple and will be confronted with Silence in its pure state, without any external noise.

When the authors describe the Reflection Room, they insist on the material or symbolic aspects such as the skull, the three cups, the V·I·T·R·I·O·L· formula, the philosophical testament or the stripping of the metals, but they only touch on the silence incidentally or only speak of it as an ambient atmosphere.

Personally, I would be tempted to give it a greater place.

It is in the study that the future mason's apprenticeship in silence begins, and I believe that silence cannot be dissociated from the act of stripping metals.

To be stripped of one's metals is symbolically to abandon one's passions, one's old conceptions, one's prejudices inherited from the profane life.

In the minutes that follow, the silence will certainly be a time for meditation and reflection that will allow the future apprentice to write his philosophical testament, but it will also be the symbolic moment when the "unlearning of the ill-gotten gains" of his profane life begins.

Since he was three years old, the man has learned to speak and write and the word, like his metals, has often been the expression of his prejudices and passions that he will have to silence if he wants to progress as a freemason and polish the rough stone that is inside him.

In a building language which was the one I used for more than thirty years, I will say that he must level the ground and remove the roots before laying the first stone and on a more prosaic level I will say that the future mason is invited to re-examine his received ideas and his subjective judgments by seeking by himself his truth in order to progress.

It is this silence which expresses the mourning of the ego and which closes his life of profane man to enter that of this new man who is the apprentice.

From this moment on, the silence that the postulant had known will no longer be lived in solitude, the silence will remain technically speaking certainly "a deliberate withholding of the word" but it will henceforth be a shared silence with his brothers; and there is one thing that will remain forever engraved in my mind during my first holding and which is associated with silence, it is benevolence, connivance, that is to say a convergence in the intentions that I read in the eyes of my brothers, and I really felt at this moment what the notion of brotherhood covered.

At the same time, we must not neglect the fact that the silent effacement of the apprentice in front of his predecessors, officers, masters, and companions during the entire duration of the outfits and within the framework of their solemnity constitutes a proof of humility and respect inherent to any operative hierarchy.

But above all, the silence of the apprentice, before being that of meditation and reflection, is that of observation and listening, because silence effectively accompanies learning.

The apprentice will learn first of all by observing.

Pedagogically speaking, one cannot effectively observe by speaking.

You have to watch others and try to understand.

I quickly understood this logic as soon as the Temple was organized before the Holding.

I had written down everything I had imagined. I had planned everything except the route to the closet, the anticipation needed to get there, and the key to open it.

I thought that I should write down everything that needed to be done and that I could do it more easily afterwards.

But I soon realized that this was not possible and I began to observe. All the while I was observing, I tried to

figure out the logic behind each detail. It was certainly longer because there is always much to learn, but I feel more comfortable now.

What does silence have to do with it?

Because in the hubbub of the fifteen minutes before his first outfit, the apprentice, who seems to have been the object of his brothers' attention until then, feels alone and experiences an inner silence.

At the beginning, there is always this temptation for the apprentice to ask questions every time something escapes him, but very quickly this desire to apprehend the meaning by himself takes over.

The apprentice gradually steps back, learns to observe, and invariably everything becomes clear. This technique has proven itself, and masons do not have a monopoly on it.

I have traveled a lot in Africa, and in the 21st century, silence still has a predominant place among African people.

In Mali, for example, the apprenticeship is based on the fact that the other (the apprentice) must watch what the Initiate does. This is a question of "observational silence," which is very close to what the apprentice mason experiences.

No rules are dictated; attention is simply gathered. We ask you to follow attentively what is being done, rather than to learn by listening. Everything is in the gesture.

The teacher or father refrains from using unnecessary words. He carries out his task and the pupil observes, and this in all the fields of agriculture, weaving, and blacksmithing....

To return to my point, the apprentice learns by observing, the ritual, but the apprentice also learns by listening, and the fact that he is not forced to take part in a debate frees him from the need to prepare to respond.

Graham writes in this regard that:

"In their dealings with each other, most men regulate themselves by the behavior and words of other men." This is why apprentices are advised to keep quiet. Only when the apprentice has silently assimilated the various data of knowledge (and tradition) and has silently managed to incorporate enough virtues, will he be able to utter an effective and useful word, a salutary word.

The word of the other inevitably leads to questioning, interrogations, but also to answers, dialogues, and therefore to changes of direction, struggles of influence and destabilizing questions, even conflicts.

Silence allows the apprentice to follow his own path, at his own pace, free from any sermon, and to respect the rules of Freemasonry and the ritual, while harmoniously reconciling his personality and the tradition.

To roughen the rough stone, to keep silent while mastering one's passions, to listen while reinvesting the acquired knowledge by reflection, such are the objectives assigned to the apprentice.

Silence is creative and the legend that surrounds the Roslyn Chapel in Great Britain illustrates this well and seems to me to be quite symbolic and worth quoting. It is a legend and as they say in Italy *"Se non e vero e bene trovato"* (If it is not true it is well found).

There are several versions and I chose the one that suited me best.

In this chapel, there is a beautifully decorated pillar with a twisted floral design called “*The Pillar of the Apprentice*”, according to legend, a model of this pillar was sent from Rome. The master mason started it, until one day, feeling unable to finish it, he refused to continue without going to Rome to make a precise inspection of the pillar from which the model had been taken.

In his absence, an apprentice finished the pillar as it is today: and the master, on his return, seeing the beautifully finished pillar, inquired who had made it; and driven by jealousy, killed the apprentice.

It was in silence that the apprentice had observed his master and added his own skills to the latter's, surpassing him and bringing about this tragic end. Some claim that the Silence of the Apprentice was born in this place, silence and remorse fell on a work that remained the place of recollection of the masters of English and Scottish masonry until 1736.

I have spoken W.:M.: