

APOLOGY FOR QUIETISM

A *Sotto Voce* Symposium

Part 1

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In memory of Richard Rorty

Introduction: “More Trouble than They Are Worth”

It is by now a tradition in *Common Knowledge* to justify ways of life and thought that are in general disrepute and to reassess words that have been abused. This journal has offered symposia on “Platonic insults” (“rhetorical,” “sophistic,” “casuistical,” “pharisaic”), on antisocial thinking, on types of relativism, and recently on a range of terms and practices (such as disinterest, proverb-based ethics, and *parrhesia*) that have become “devalued currency.”¹ The present symposium will reconsider *quietism*, *quietist*, and *quietistic*, words often used, unthinkingly, with intent to insult or degrade. A random survey of books and articles, in fields across the humanities and human sciences, found these terms keeping poor semantic company. Quietism is said to be a “blind alley,” a “danger,” a form of “complacency” (or despicable “luxury” for those who “can afford it”): a contempt-

1. “Platonic Insults,” *Common Knowledge* 2.2 (Fall 1993): 19–80. “Unsocial Thought, Uncommon Lives,” 12.2 (Spring 2006): 214–304; 12.3 (Fall 2006): 379–502; and 13.1 (Winter 2007): 33–112. “A ‘Dictatorship of Relativ-

ism?’” 13.2–3 (Spring–Fall 2007): 214–455. “Devalued Currency,” 14.1 (Winter 2008): 29–142; 14.2 (Spring 2008): 208–95; and 14.3 (Fall 2008): 380–471.

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ible “refuge” when—all ammunition gone—“there is nothing left but quietism.” The phrase “alleged quietism” comes up where caution is presumed cognate with defeatism or cowardice. Defending Hamlet’s circumspection, Harold Bloom describes it as “disinterestedness or quietism” (not a strategy, in other words, and not a symptom). Willing “to accept every permutation in his own self,” while refusing “to will the changes,” Hamlet is acting—by *not* acting—on considered principle.² Quietism is not without admirers, then. William James, in *Varieties of Religious Experience*, defends Miguel de Molinos’s theology (which Pope Innocent IX condemned in the seventeenth century) as “healthy-minded.” Isaiah Berlin approved of Greek thinkers who honored indifference, uninvolvedness, and freedom from desire (*apatheia*, *apragmosyne*, *ataraxia*), which are values now associated with quietism.³ Understood as a philosophy taking peace as its highest value, quietism is more or less inoffensive. It is when quietists clarify the degree of their preference for peace over every rival value, including truth and justice, self and clan, that invective and alienation set in.

The articles following in the first installment of this symposium introduce three varieties of quietism—political, religious, broadly cultural—and their histories. The editors call for papers, along these lines, on the seventeenth- and early-eighteenth-century Roman Catholic and Protestant forms of quietism that are most properly so called, as well as on early Christian and medieval Western precursors; on world religions (Gnostic, Eastern Orthodox, early Hasidic, Shi’ite, Jain and other Indic, Taoist, Zen) that have been described, accurately or not, as quietistic; and on secular points of view that have worn the adjective.

Each religious form, and most political forms, of quietism have become subjects of academic specializations, but positions less literally quietist remain relatively undefined. I mean, for instance, attitudes that were associated (by hearties in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries) with dandyism and cowardice but are better understood as responses to the futility of action. “Socialism takes too many evenings” may not be confirmable as a remark of Oscar Wilde’s, but it is known that Robert Walser, on meeting Lenin during the Great War, had only one question for him: “So you, too, like fruit cake?”⁴ “I like trees,” Willa Cather said in much the same milieu, “because they seem more resigned to the way they have to live than other things do.” “Every conviction is an illness” (Francis Picabia) and “nothing matters” (Leonard Woolf) are more evidence of a considerable genre. Kafka, presented his alternatives as a Jew, expressed “profound

2. Harold Bloom, *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1998), 1.

3. He had in mind Antiphon, Zeno, Theognis, and various other Cynics, Skeptics, and Sophists. Isaiah Berlin, “A Turning-Point in Political Thought,” *Common Knowledge* 7.3 (Winter 1998): 186–214.

4. Benjamin Kunkel calls this diffidence of Walser’s “beatific quietism,” though it is unbeatifically poised at the edge of burlesque (“a burlesque of conventionality”). See Kunkel, “Still Small Voice: The Fiction of Robert Walser,” *New Yorker*, August 6, 2007, 68–71, at 68–69.

fatigue” and asked: “What have I in common with Jews? I have hardly anything in common with myself, and should stand very quietly in a corner, content that I can breathe.” Closer to our own time, the *via activa* has become a running gag. “Nothing to be done” is how postmodern theater began, and to Estragon’s opening line, Beckett has Vladimir reply:

I’m beginning to come round to that opinion. All my life I’ve tried to put it from me, saying, Vladimir, be reasonable, you haven’t yet tried everything. And I resumed the struggle.

But the stage direction, which follows, at most authorizes a raised eyebrow: Vladimir “*broods, musing on the struggle. . .*”

“Hip quietism” is the name that Martha Nussbaum has assigned this attitude in its latest version, her verdict being that “it collaborates with evil.”⁵ Judith Butler, the hip quietist by whom Nussbaum is most annoyed, is among those who argue that critics of injustice, whether liberals or fundamentalists, sustain the injustices that they resist. Violence, Slavoj Žižek writes, is “systemic”—and much as Lévi-Strauss before him found systemic violence in binary thinking, and Foucault in philanthropic practices, so Žižek finds a blood lust for profit, for more and ever more linguistic signs, in the structure of language.⁶ What is to be done if even our fraternal acts, our means of expression, and our ways of thinking are implicated in violence? If opposition to a system is a form of participation in it, then every motive for criticism or resistance is suspect. Therefore, Žižek recommends: “do nothing” and “withdraw.” When an activist like Nussbaum hears “do nothing,” she hears the tenor of defeatism. Yet spoken as a quietist speaks, “do” may suggest *perform*, and “nothing” may imply *conspicuous* stillness. When Michel de Certeau said that, among the lessons history teaches, is how “to conform” in order “to evade,” he was describing shrewd and not timorous behaviors. Still, it is Žižek (although de Certeau was a Jesuit) whose idea of uninvolvedness seems the more principled and profound. “Withdraw” and “nothing” (unlike “evade” and “conform”) are terms central to the vocabulary of religious mysticism.

Meanwhile, Leon Wieseltier, a political journalist and yet student of religion, has written a surprising essay, “Emptiness,” in which he owns that he is “not empty enough”—the “habit of discourse” being for him “hard to break.”⁷ He has come to realize that among the sure ways “to elide reality is to keep talking about it.” Without crediting the hip quietists (whom he has criticized) for this insight, he wants us to learn, as he has learned lately, that “few activities are less effortful

5. Martha Nussbaum, “Professor of Parody,” *New Republic*, February 22, 1999, final paragraph, www.akad.se/Nussbaum.pdf (accessed July 28, 2008).

6. Slavoj Žižek, *Violence* (London: Profile, 2008).

7. Leon Wieseltier, “Washington Diarist: Emptiness,” *New Republic*, June 11, 2008, 56.

than speech”; and he informs his readership that, at least “for now,” he is “refusing to play” the great game. “Hitting the ‘off’ switches,” he will turn “away from what passes for history,” from “the gladiatorial combat of opinion, of transient things importantly stated”—and he suggests to our “logorrheic society” a “speech fast” as a remedy for fast talk. The magazine he helps to edit, *The New Republic*, is based in Washington, a world capital “of instrumental rationality,” where “the battle of ideas is never over.” Of the company he must keep there, Wieseltier complains: “The responsible citizen, the responsible critic: they are sleepless creatures.” One wants to ask, given the gothic description, if these creatures—“talking heads,” they are sometimes called—walk alone by night. For the figural repertoire used in portraying quietism features dark maladies, diseases of the will, paralysis of lively instincts. Could activism, activists, even action itself, be figured likewise?

Daniel Mendelsohn appears to think so. In an essay published the same week as “Emptiness,” he defends monotony, lethargy, and silence in the operas of Philip Glass as “mortifications” of the lust “to do” things—“bad things.”⁸ Mendelsohn is a professional classicist, and in defense of Glass he turns against Greek definitions of drama as an imitation of action. “Unless there are terrible problems, insoluble knots” on stage, Mendelsohn writes—noting that the Greek *drân*, from which the word *drama* derives, means “to act”—there will be nothing for the characters in a play or opera “to do.” It is “the inherent dramatic interest of badness” that moved Aristotle to emphasize the primacy of plot, but “there is no plot” in operas (like those of Glass) that concern good people (like Gandhi and Einstein). “For as we know,” Mendelsohn adds, “good men don’t tend to generate ‘plot.’” So deeply ingrained is the Western requirement of bad doings on stage that audiences talk inevitably about their experience of *Satyagraha* or *Einstein on the Beach* as “boring at first” but, in the end, “vaguely Eastern.”

Our culturally inflected preference for drama, trauma, and noise comes with an intellectual arsenal all its own, and even the structure of intellectual life in the West militates against peace and quiet. A thinker is required to broadcast claims. Simon Blackburn, a philosopher unaverse to claiming, is dismayed by the corrosive effect of “quietist,” “minimalist,” “deflationist” thinking on the claims of standard analytic philosophy. He argues that philosophers like John McDowell, Bjørn Ramberg, Huw Price, Robert Brandom, and other post-Wittgensteinians—above all, Richard Rorty—have encouraged a “denial of differences,” a “smoothing away of distinctions, whether of primary or secondary, fact versus value, description versus expression, or of any other significant kind.”⁹ Rorty made a

8. Daniel Mendelsohn, “The Truth Force at the Met,” *New York Review*, June 12, 2008, 24–28.

9. Simon Blackburn, “Wittgenstein, Wright, Rorty, and Minimalism,” *Mind*, n.s., 107.425 (January 1998): findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m2346/is_n425_v107/ai_20418157 (accessed July 29, 2008). See Crispin Wright’s reply, “Comrades against Quietism,” in the same issue.

point of accepting “quietism,” an insult meant to discredit his work, as a name for the approach to philosophy that he preferred. Then he refashioned the label as a badge of honor: quietism, on Rorty’s description, is a matter of intellectual peacemaking or peacekeeping. One does hear, now and again, though mainly in political contexts, that what quietists would bring us is the “peace of the grave.” But Rorty was speaking, as usual, of the public square (and by no means the gothic churchyard). What he said was, “simply,” that we can allow what appear to be incompatible or even opposed “linguistic practices” to “co-exist peaceably, side by side”; and he suggested that to do otherwise is to “develop social norms” whose function (not *result*, mind you: *function*) is to “let us gang up on people.”

It is Rorty’s essay “Naturalism and Quietism,” among his last published, that is the most significant for this symposium, because of the connection that he draws there between the quietisms of philosophy and religion. That connection, as Rorty understood it, is more than metaphorical:

Brian Leiter, in his introduction to a recently published collection titled *The Future for Philosophy*, divides the Anglophone philosophical world into “naturalists” and “Wittgensteinian quietists.” . . . I think that Leiter’s account of the standoff between these two camps is largely accurate. . . . But his account is misleading in one respect. Most people who think of themselves in the quietist camp, as I do, would hesitate to say that the problems studied by our activist colleagues are *unreal*. . . . From [the quietists’] point of view, questions about the place of values in a world of fact are no more unreal than questions about how the Eucharistic blood and wine can embody the divine substance, or about how many sacraments Christ instituted. Neither of the latter problems are problems for *everybody*, but their parochial character does not render them illusory. For what one finds problematic is a function of what one thinks important. One’s sense of importance is in large part dependent on the vocabulary one employs. . . . Consider Leiter’s assertion that “Neuroscientists tell us about the brain, and philosophers try to figure out how to square our best neuroscience with the ability of our minds to represent what the world is like.” The quietist response is to ask whether we really want to hold on to the notion of “representing what the world is like.” Perhaps, they suggest, it is time to give up the notion of “the world,” and of shadowy entities called “the mind” or “language” that contain representations of the world. Study of the history of culture helps us understand why these notions gained currency, just as it shows why certain theological notions became as important as they did. But such study also suggests that many of the central ideas of modern philosophy, like many topics in Christian theology, have become more trouble than they are worth.¹⁰

10. Richard Rorty, *Philosophy as Cultural Politics*, vol. 4 of *Philosophical Papers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 147–59, at 149–50.

Just how much trouble is an idea—any idea, even a central idea—worth? Rorty put this question on the midterm examination of our time. It is the one question on the exam that, if an answer is attempted at all, will have salutary effects on the balance of the examinee's life. For that contribution—pedagogical, political, and soteriological—to our lives, this symposium is dedicated to Richard Rorty's memory.

—*Jeffrey M. Perl*