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THE SECRET HISTORY OF AWKWARD SILENCES

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It's that terrible moment of realizing that no one's done the reading. The classroom is quiet. More than a few of the chairs are empty. A leaf-blower drones and sputters outside. Inside: rustles, sighs, anxious pencil-tapping, eyeballs rolling. There's the errant ping of a Facebook notification; someone half-guiltily adjusts her laptop volume so she can continue surreptitiously not paying attention.

It's uncomfortable. But now everyone's paying attention—just to see what will happen, who will give up first in what's become a stand-off, a test of wills. The classroom becomes a spontaneous performance of John Cage's silent 4'33": the distracting sounds and the sounds of distraction become the only things we're noticing. We're listening to ourselves listen. It's unbearable—or it's a moment of meta-cognition.

"No judgment, I promise." I say finally. "Frankly, I'm fascinated by how long we all held out. Who's done the reading for today?" Four hands waved vaguely, in a room of twenty or so students. "OK, what did everyone miss from Aphra Behn's *Love Letters Between a Nobleman and His Sister*?"

This willful silence occurs as I'm teaching a class at the University of California-Los Angeles on the secret history in eighteenth-century British literature. The secret history is a genre of thinly veiled political intrigues and romantic scandals that captivated female readers in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. During the period, Behn, Delarivier Manley, Eliza Haywood, and many other female novelists published many tales of seduction and betrayal, which often pointed the finger at men in power or those who would usurp it. The genre is an ancient one: Procopius's *Secret History* goes behind the scenes in sixth-century Byzantium to reveal the secret affairs, political and military machinations, and betrayals in Justinian's reign. [1]

Donna Tartt's 1992 novel of the same name brings those intrigues to the contemporary college campus, where a group of students becomes so caught up in their studies of ancient Greek that they murder a classmate in a botched (or successful) reenactment of a Dionysian rite. (Fittingly, their class participation suffers as they try to cover up their guilt, not just at having committed murder but also at not having done their translations.) [2] Writing about the proliferation of secret histories in contemporary publishing, Ed Park jokes: "Now bushels of articles and books promise to reveal secret histories of disco, the Beatles, Paris, the potato, emotion, various wars, myriad subcultures. (If someone writes a biography of Tartt, it should be called *The Secret History of The Secret History*.)" [3]

The conventions of the genre shift as standards of what's shocking change over time—less than one might imagine—but the interplay between juicy disclosure and even more titillating obscurantism is recurring. Published in three volumes between 1684 and 1687, Behn's *Love Letters* is a thinly veiled tale of an affair and an antimonarchist plot that had taken over the pages of the *London Gazette* two years earlier. The epistolary novel is framed as the recovered love letters between Philander and Silvia, thinly veiled pastoral romance versions of the real-life

schemers Ford, Lord Grey of Werke and his wife's sister, Lady Henrietta of Berkeley. The love letters are florid and repetitive; the assignments and plotting often occur outside of the text or are heavily coded. The story is so complicated that it probably requires a key—which I didn't provide—to track all of the references and historical context. Instead, the students read from a scan of an eighteenth-century reprint of the text, where there were more obstacles to reading: irregular type and unfamiliar long s's, scanning imperfections, and no contextual footnotes.

What to do when all those difficulties were suddenly very present in the classroom and had in fact been so difficult as to discourage any engagement? I asked the students who had read the selection to begin narrating the story to their neighbors, while the non-readers took notes on what they thought was going on. Some students had started to read the text and had given up, and they began to interject about how confusing it was or how they wished I had given them more historical context or information about the author. What had been a silent room gradually filled with different voices of students, at varying levels of interest and investment, trying to sort through those difficulties of knowing the text. They translated Behn's language into slang, editorialized about the story, digressed off-topic, compared the story to contemporary celebrity gossip, expressed annoyance at the assignment, and generally chatted among themselves.

In a few minutes, I asked them to share what they had heard—and to focus less on the convoluted plot, and instead say what they heard that was extraneous or didn't seem as important to talking about the book they hadn't read. How did they judge what was important? What hadn't they wanted me to overhear in their discussions about not doing the reading? Where had they gone off-track? What we had reproduced in the room were the effects of gossip, of overhearing conflicting or repetitive reports, of piecing together incomplete information: we had made a secret history of not reading *Love Letters*.

With that semi-ironic twist in the lesson, I pulled those observations about the digressive, repetitive nature of the class discussion into the text. We had just practiced close-reading the topsy-turvy class discussion, so how could we bring this critical awareness of destabilizing generic conventions to bear on the text? Because the story is told through the artifice of discovered correspondence, the *Love Letters* are full of exaggerated silences engendered by stiltedness of the communications medium. The lovers can barely tolerate the gaps between their letters, and they want to fill the spaces with long-winded, repetitive confessions and gossip:

Does *Silvia* know to what she exposes her *Philander*? Whose joy is so transporting, great, that when he comes into the grave cabal, he must betray the story of his heart, and, in lieu of the mighty business there in hand, be raving still on *Silvia*, telling his joy to all the amazed listeners, and answering questions that concern our great affair, with something of my love; all which will pass for madness, and undo me: no, give me leave to rave in silence, and unseen among the trees, they'll humour my disease, answer my murmuring joy, and echoes flatter it, repeat thy name, repeat that *Silvia*'s mine! and never hurt her fame; while the cabals, business and noisy town will add confusion to my present transport, and make me mad indeed: no, let me alone, thou sacred lovely creature, let me be calm and quiet here, and tell all the insensibles I meet in the woods what *Silvia* has this happy minute destined me: oh, let me record it on every bark, on every oak and beech, that all the world may wonder at my fortune, and bless the generous maid; let it

grow up to ages that shall come, that they may know the story of our loves, and how a happy youth, they called *Philander*, was once so blest by heaven as to possess the charming, the adored and loved by all, the glorious *Silvia*! a maid, the most divine that ever graced a story... [4]

When I read this passage aloud, I ran out of breath and tripped over the gamboling syntax. I had projected it onto the screen above the blackboard, and I made a few embarrassing mistakes of long s's as f's—even though I don't tend to notice them when I read eighteenth-century editions in my own research, the strangeness of the large projection made it difficult to read aloud. The repetitions of cabals and noisy confusions were more noticeable; I had to pause and check if those repetitions were my own bad reading or constitutive features in the text.

Frustrations abound: the disinclination for students to work through such an alien text is understandable. Crucially, these obstacles—unbridgeable historical distance, uneven or missing context, obscure symbols and references that aren't translated or decoded easily, flawed textual transmission—are amplified versions of the problems one always encounters in a secret history.

A reader is promised knowledge, but the act of knowing is always problematic in a genre that is explicitly devoted to translating one form of discourse (political gossip) into another (in this case, pastoral romance). We know from other gossipy genres—sensational tabloid publications, endlessly ramifying conspiracy theories—that there may be more misinformation than promised truths. The secret history makes its proliferating layers of mediation alternately frustrating and pleasurable. The genre's object of knowledge is first and foremost an awareness of those mediations rather than an unvarnished fact or truth.

In a classroom, a student might arrive believing that knowledge—about a subject, a collection of texts on a syllabus, a historical period—is there to be consumed from a lecture and/or discussion. The class appears to be an as-yet unread secret history, in which all will be revealed. Obscurities, misunderstandings, digressions, distractions, and misinterpretations are flaws in the transmission of that singular knowledge—whether those flaws are the fault of an unprepared student, a fractious class, or a vague, confusing teacher. Thinking of a classroom as a secret history of knowledge lets us see some alternative pedagogical possibilities: that learning is about paying attention to all the conflicting layers of mediation in a classroom and drawing connections between insights and that which obscures those insights. It's a pedagogy aimed at taking pleasure in critical self-awareness of how we think in spite of—or, rather, *because of*—distractions, disappointments, refusals, annoyances, and other junk that would seem to get in the way of tackling the subject at hand.

Cage's *4'33"* is a model for these classroom experiments because it shows us that the silence of abstract thinking is actually filled with extraneous sounds. It is as much a performance of distraction as it is one that makes us thinking of unmediated immersion. It calls our attention to the ways in which our thinking is always mediated by our environment, in conscious and unconscious ways. In a 1957 lecture, Cage explained: "There is no such thing as an empty space or an empty time. There is always something to see, something to hear. In fact, try as we may to make a silence, we cannot." He cautioned those who worried that his experiments in silence would work against the grain of making music: "sounds occur whether intended or not, one turns

in the direction those he does not intend. This turning is psychological and seems at first to be a giving up of everything that belongs to humanity—for a musician, the giving up of music—so too, for an English class, to focus (even briefly) on not reading might be a turn away from the content of literature. [5] The unintentional noise from those moments of silence produce reflections on what it means to process multiple media at once—as it could be that paying attention to impediments might make us into differently attuned readers of texts, of our learning experiences, of our lives.

When I taught at Haverford College from 2011 to 2013, I learned that my habit of asking abstract questions generated a lot of silences initially. The school's Quaker ethos of waiting to speak until one is moved to do so becomes a positive lens through which to view those silences. Silence is thinking, silence is reflecting. I started including caveats on the syllabus:

Class activities often start with an abstract prompt that will generate critical questions: *collect examples of x feature in a text and develop a very provisional theory about them, find a moment in the text that seems to contradict your theory, point out a passage where your expectations were confounded...*

This approach puts pressure on the class to do some substantial abstract and critical thinking. That's the goal of the class, and it's underscored by our subject "secret histories," of telling different kinds of stories about gender, writing, secrecy, authority, and reading than we're used to hearing. This approach also puts pressure on me as your teacher because I am helping you synthesize ideas in real time. I often don't have an answer worked out ahead of time—I'm asking questions as probes that you'll *interpret*, rather than *answer*—and I'm not fishing for the "right" response. You may have to pause for a few moments because you're coming up with an idea you haven't considered before. With those two caveats in mind, I ask that you be creative and open-minded about trying out your ideas and putting them into conversation with other classmates. I'm modeling one kind of thinking out loud, which means that I may sometimes need prompting about clarifying or restating an idea. I won't be embarrassed—such is the work of abstract thinking!

As I read over this long explanation, I'm self-conscious about the repetitions and long-winded reiterations. Behn's Philander was in love with his discourse of love for Silvia; he repeated his conventions for letting the world know it, to fill the space of letter and the silence of delayed correspondence. My syllabus evinces my pleasure in my own "difficult" pedagogical methods—it fills the space of skeptical silence with anxious reassurances and restatements. Indeed, sometimes this caveat doesn't make sense until I've repeated versions of it several times in class as we struggle with not having done the reading, being confused, being annoyed. It sinks in unevenly. It's a method that foregrounds the improvisatory, contingent nature of knowledge and interpretation, often by making those protocols of interpretation difficult. It requires context to be understood as a positive, productive condition for knowing, but that knowledge of the class is always changing.

Along with the syllabus, I often pass out Cage's rules for teachers and students, which have been reproduced widely on the Internet as a kind of syllabus for utopian learning. The conventions of calling these "rules" draws attention to their radical interpretability:

RULE ONE: Find a place you trust, and then try trusting it for a while.

RULE TWO: General duties of a student: Pull everything out of your teacher; pull everything out of your fellow students.

RULE THREE: General duties of a teacher: Pull everything out of your students.

RULE FOUR: Consider everything an experiment.

RULE FIVE: Be self-disciplined: this means finding someone wise or smart and choosing to follow them. To be disciplined is to follow in a good way. To be self-disciplined is to follow in a better way.

RULE SIX: Nothing is a mistake. There's no win and no fail, there's only make.

RULE SEVEN: The only rule is work. If you work it will lead to something. It's the people who do all of the work all of the time who eventually catch on to things.

RULE EIGHT: Don't try to create and analyze at the same time. They're different processes.

RULE NINE: Be happy whenever you can manage it. Enjoy yourself. It's lighter than you think.

RULE TEN: We're breaking all the rules. Even our own rules. And how do we do that? By leaving plenty of room for X quantities.

HINTS: Always be around. Come or go to everything. Always go to classes. Read anything you can get your hands on. Look at movies carefully, often. Save everything. It might come in handy later.

Though I love these directions, I want to pause on their designation as rules and ask what it means to encourage (or enforce) the kinds of abstract thinking that Cage and I are asking in our classes. What are the preconditions for making visible the value of abstract thinking? What forms of authority and coercion are built into Cage's rules—as we see in rule five's self-evident self-discipline, or rule seven's enforced work? What forms of dissent are possible when one is asked to follow these rules? What are the alternatives to these coercions, and how can we make them possible in a classroom?

To wit: the silent dissent to participate during the Behn class was not the last time that classroom discussion would run haltingly. One afternoon, a student came to my office hours and announced: "I want to talk to you about the secret history of awkward silences."

I was instantly taken by her evocative phrase and blurted out that I wanted to steal it for a poem (or a pedagogical essay. She consented.). She explained that she felt lost and uncomfortable with the silences I was drawing out in our class, and that the transfer students in the class felt like they were being singled out for not knowing how to behave appropriately in a UCLA classroom. I told her I wasn't aware of any student's status unless she made it known to me—and everyone, regardless of their status, was learning how to tolerate uncertainty— but the student pressed on. That was the key lesson of the secret history, she said: my explanation wasn't the only truth, and it was more important that so many students had misinterpreted my silences and my digressive, over-excited, self-indulgent riffing on their discussion. An unforeseen effect of my teaching style had been to exacerbate institutional tensions by highlighting differences in preparation, approach, and styles of learning among the many different types of students in the classroom. Instead of relying on my improvisational whims of teaching, I needed to build better scaffolding for these meta-cognitive moments and explain their value more clearly.

It was exciting to hear her frame this request and analysis in the language of the class. In telling me about the problems of paying attention to conflicting layers of mediation, she was paying attention to conflicting layers of mediation. A secret history is a text of vexed authority: who reveals, who conceals, who willfully misunderstands and misinforms? What are the records of those misinterpretations? How is misinterpretation a form of contingent knowledge that we can learn from? She had authorized herself and her classmates by close-reading her habits of processing (and not processing) what she was having trouble with. Indeed, she made herself the teacher in the next class as she explained her formulation of “the secret history of awkward silences” to the other students. After her presentation and explanation of the concept, the phrase became a touchstone for the class: it could be about taking time to reflect, refusing to participate, being distracted, dissenting from the line of questioning.

The concept became unexpectedly useful when we read Samuel Richardson's 1740 domestic epistolary novel *Pamela*. In the trajectory of the course, I situated the domestic novel as a response to the secret history—not a direct ancestor, but as a literary form that changed what we had known about earlier texts and the ways that interpretation may be managed and directed, even when we think it's up for grabs. In the preface to the novel, Richardson directs readers how to read the novel as a cautionary tale of a young woman's seduction—to learn particular lessons about female conduct and domesticity. The students in the class applied their vocabulary of “awkward silences” to Pamela's frequent fainting—variously interpreted as her repeated dodges to escape the seductions of Mr. B, rehearsals of feminine behavior she's learned from romances (which we had read earlier in the course), or forms of dissent. Her recurring swoons are pauses in the texts, moments of silence in which we aren't sure what has happened to Pamela's narration. As awkward gaps in the narration, they are signals of other kinds of vexed mediation in the novel: surveillance, interference into her letters, and enforced domestication.

Further: where do we see Cage's rules about self-discipline, work, and enforced reflection in Richardson's novel? How is Richardson's preface like a syllabus for understanding the book, a set of direction on how to read it as a set of instructions and guidelines?

IF to give *practical* Examples, worthy to be followed in the most *critical* and *affecting* Cases, by the *modest Virgin*, the *chaste Bride*, and the *obliging Wife*:

IF to effect all these good Ends, *in so probable, so natural, so lively a manner, as shall engage the Passions of every sensible Reader, and strongly interest them in the edifying Story*:

AND all without raising a single *Idea* throughout the Whole, that shall shock the exactest Purity, even in those tender Instances where the exactest Purity would be most apprehensive:

IF these, (*embellished with a great Variety of entertaining Incidents*) be laudable or worthy Recommendations of any Work, the Editor of the following Letters, which have their Foundation in *Truth and Nature*, ventures to assert, that all these desirable Ends are obtained *in these Sheets: And as he is therefore confident of the favourable Reception which he boldly bespeaks for this little Work; he thinks any further Preface or Apology for it, unnecessary: And the rather for two Reasons, 1st. Because he can Appeal from his own Passions, (which have been uncommonly moved in perusing these engaging Scenes) to the Passions of Every one who shall read them with the least Attention: And, in the next place, because an Editor may reasonably be supposed to judge with an Impartiality which is rarely to be met with in an Author towards his own Works.* [6]

I was excited by their applications and meta-reflections. I invited the students to write their final paper about the secret history of awkward silences in one of the novels we had read in the class. Such an assignment, I figured, would be a way of encouraging the kinds of creative appropriation and reflection we had practiced in the Behn class when we close-read our silence and chatter. We drew up the guidelines for the paper in class, with each student devising a suggestion about a different kind of a writing risk they might try to play with the idea of an awkward silence. They recommended trying non-academic writing, including moments of meta-reflection on their own writing habits, playing with the form beyond paragraphs, trying out different forms of dissent to challenge the prompt.

Pamela's constant writing and rewriting in the epistolary form makes us pay attention to how writing reproduces rules—that is the contract of an essay assignment, after all, even, especially, one that invites high-flying meta-reflection, experimentation, and risk-taking. What would seem to be generative can also reinforce rules and authority in non-obvious ways. Writing on the many interpretations of John Cage's *4'33"* as an exercise in sustained silence, Douglas Kahn draws attention to the ways that reading silence as generative is also an exercise in sustaining authority and practicing obedience:

4'33", by tacitly instructing the performer to remain quiet in all respects, muted the site of centralized and privileged utterance, disrupted the unspoken audience code to remain unspoken, transposed the performance onto the audience members both in their utterances and in their acts of shifting perception toward other sounds, and legitimated

bad behavior that in any number of other settings (including musical ones) would have been perfectly acceptable. 4'33" achieved this involution through the act of silencing the performer. That is, Cagean silence followed and was dependent on a silencing. Indeed, it can also be understood that he extended the decorum of silencing by extending the silence imposed on the audience to the performer, asking the audience to continue to be obedient listeners and not to engage in the utterances that would distract them from shifting their perception toward other sounds. [7]

In the end, the student essays on “the secret history of awkward silences” were as varied and uneven as any risky, meta-reflective papers should be. Park joked about the possibility of a “secret history of secret histories” in celebrating Tartt’s campus novel; I felt like I had received twenty-something secret histories of secret histories situated in the eighteenth century. In some places, they followed traditional models for critical reflection: close-reading and textual analysis, explanation of context and conceptual language, situating of arguments and nuanced reflection. Yet they were full of awkward moments, moments where reflection was vivid and revelatory, and also moments of uncertainty and even obscurity.

This, then, is the secret history of awkward silences: that we may use them generatively or obediently, or both. We may appropriate what we half-notice when we are distracted, annoyed, resistant, or uncertain as tools to reflect on our awkward, always mediated encounters with novels. This is not so much sustained silent reading as it is Cagean silent reading, a recursive hyper-attention to all the things that get in the way when we want immersive revelation from our reading and instead encounter something more obscure and unknowable.

Notes:

[1] Procopius, *The Secret History*, trans. G.A. Williamson (New York: Penguin Classics, 1966).

[2] Donna Tartt, *The Secret History* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992). There are many different kinds of silences in Tartt’s novel: brief, ominous, drowsy, abrupt, strained, long, grim, stunned, gloomy, uneasy, awful, charged, pleasant, crackly, morose, tense, pure, superstitious, white, puzzled, and, yes, awkward. At one point the narrator refers to “all those layers of silence on silence” (272).

[3] Ed Park, “As the Crow Flies,” *Los Angeles Times* (March 23, 2009). <http://www.latimes.com/style/la-bkw-park23mar23-story.html>

[4] Aphra Behn, *Love Letters Between a Nobleman and His Sister, part I* (1684) the seventh edition (London, 1759), 90.

[5] John Cage, “Experimental Music” (1957), quoted in Kyle Gann *No Such Thing as Silence: John Cage’s 4’33”* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 162.

[6] Samuel Richardson, *Pamela* (1740), ed. Thomas Keymer and Alice Wakely (London: Oxford World's Classics, 2008), 3-4.

[7] Douglas Kahn, "John Cage: Silence and Silencing" *Musical Quarterly* 81:4 (1997), quoted in Gann, 18-19