

Mihai Nadin

WORDS: A PARABLE

— to Roland Barthes
In memoriam

One day they decided that they were fed up with the language they spoke. They had begun to master it so well that they became disgusted over the way a thought could be hidden or a feeling expressed. They long ago tired of their newspapers which happened after they had already decided to stop reading literature, especially poetry, whose poison — remember those hymns and odes? — penetrated the soul so easily that it brought on the sickness of not being able to discern truth from the mere mirage of truth. The first one to sense that they were in a crisis was a neighbor who seemed to be a party activist but was only a priest. They did not perceive his reaction, however, because not even one of them went to that next Sunday's mass. The family just stayed at home, father with his dog — from whom he expected no word anyway — mother in the kitchen. The children — now playing with a ball, then with some toy — were free of the burden of having to hear what they long ago stopped believing. In a short time, other

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neighbors took notice. A policeman, even the doctor in the house went through the shock of discovering their crisis. "Medicine is just as misleading as everything else. We've had enough of it!" The doctor would have recommended that they undergo psychiatric treatment, but they didn't seem at all disposed to listen to him.

They just decided to live without words. This meant to no longer call things by name — anyway, things could no longer be called by their right names — to no longer say what they felt but just to feel, and if they could, to directly transmit their feelings to each other. Once things became words, they were interpreted, registered, catalogued. Through words, thoughts and feelings, even intentions, were controlled right from the moment of their conception.

In the beginning, they accepted the use of written signs. They still filled out forms or wrote — quite poorly in their use of words — petitions. But feeling they should be consistent, they stopped. Eventually the children stopped attending school. The radio was ostracized along with the television and telephone (naturally). Thus they liberated themselves from more than words and their rules of functioning, which was their real intention. Contact with regimentation had ended. The constraints they tried to evade through the use of words seemed to vanish even though the actual pressure felt all around them didn't. Perhaps they were fooling themselves but they did so out of a conviction that bordered on fanaticism. They rejoiced over any limit broken and tried to see — with a curiosity hard to describe — how far they could go in the liberty gained at the price of renouncing words.

As time went on, they discovered the other side of the coin. While happiness could be expressed without words — and sometimes it was better not to express it that way — a feeling of unfulfillment lingered, a kind of emptiness, even a fear that they might still, still betray themselves in some way. They needed help — and there was no question in their minds that they didn't need any — could come or not, could be what they needed or not. They wordlessly transmitted an awful lot of things to one another, themselves amazed that it was possible. But just as many things that they would have liked from the bottom of their hearts to make known or understood to others remained unshared. Domination through words disappeared, but other kinds of domination — perhaps worse than the one they had escaped — arose, even among them. Nevertheless, whatever price they paid within the family circle was recompensed tenfold by their new relationship with the outside world. This, in fact, constituted their triumph.

They escaped from their own and the others' hypocrisy, from lies, from the pressure of unnecessary precepts and from rules they knew to be wrong. At least, it seemed that they escaped.

How could they know that the priest continued denouncing them ever more furiously in his sermons? He even wrote a letter to his superior describing the matter and requesting instructions. The school director soon joined him, made it known to the hierarchy that the children were breaking the law regarding mandatory education and requested, on his part, further instructions. The entire bureaucratic apparatus — which derived from the palpable reality of the word — was set in motion. Rival political parties abruptly declared armistice. Even consultations with parties from other countries — whose politics were condemned for any reason — were carried on in the hope of learning what they would do in such a case. If the phenomenon spread, their existence would cease. The vote of such persons interested them less and less, but this precedent was dangerous. The computers that were programmed for anything but the refusal of language were blocked by unfilled forms.

Then began that long period in which day after day, at the most impossible and unexpected hours, relatives appeared at their home to convince them to go back to the way they were, policemen and psychiatrists from the division of criminal psychology, university professors paid to test their knowledge in this unusual case, priests, politicians, reporters, a group of deaf-mute children who had to show them how terrible it was not to be able to speak or hear, artists, a delegation of writers, even foreign visitors — among them a famous parapsychologist who claimed that it was in his power to bring this strange family back to speaking and listening. Public curiosity amused the family for a while. Then it became more and more unbearable until they finally barricaded themselves in their home.

Their solidarity and mutual understanding seemed to grow, even though the instrument of the word was irrevocably banished from their lives by now. They had lots of fun after discovering that microphones had been installed in their home in order to check whether they still weren't speaking, and if they did, then what about and from what viewpoint. The idea that the whole affair might be a matter of criminal activity, sabotage, or espionage was taken into consideration. They were filmed through hidden cameras and their lip movements were analyzed in the hope of discovering the buds of words blooming from their mouths. The national academy of sciences offered a prize to any researcher who

could come up with a way to make them use words and a famous university announced the convening of a congress based on the phenomenon of word rejection. The publicity surrounding the case aroused all sorts of speculation and approaches to a solution.

Most people could not understand what the whole matter was about. It only seemed funny to them to live without words. But those who tried the experiment soon discovered that they could not go back to using words which after a while lost all meaning. One only picked up different sounds that were transmitted in succession. Writing also disintegrated in different ways that often resembled each other. Sometimes a written word would take on the form of an object or something from daily life: a tree, a leaf, clouds floating in the sky, insects. . . . Some who tried out freedom from words were attracted merely through the publicity surrounding the case, victims of the desire for celebrity because they did not know how to enjoy this new freedom or just couldn't hold out. Instead of the expected reward, defeat sent them back to the lives they had hoped to flee.

So little by little, the world split into two groups, the greater composed of those who spoke, heard, wrote, and made decisions and felt responsibility for everything and everyone. The smaller group tried not to forget exactly why they decided to no longer speak or write or read or make decisions for others. They rediscovered simple pleasures, sensed earthquakes, protected themselves from lightning without knowing how but in a better way than their counterparts who had studied the matter. They made love with heretofore unexperienced ardor, but they could also destroy one another without pity, not realizing how strong they were, no matter what their degree of vanity. They lost all sense of the past, living either in the present or in the confused time of expectation which they could not define. The promises made to convince them to return to using words did not impress them as they no longer knew what "promise" meant. Neither did they any longer fear the disappointment of the promise broken or a future unfulfilled. Future no longer existed. The other part of mankind — speakers and writers — concerned them only to the extent that the latter threatened their lives. Otherwise, they seemed immune to everything. Even certain diseases disappeared from their midst, further encouragement in their chosen way.

Of course things could not go on like this. The first way of research ended with the conclusion that language should be perfected so that it would no longer be capable of deceiving. Moral norms to govern its use were proposed, but the results of the

discussion of the topic proved catastrophic. The definition of norms still involved language and a vicious cycle resulted. Other research, carried on in secret at the outset, recommended the radical method of genetic alteration. It was necessary, scientists declared, to intervene at the level of the cell and to determine an irreversible process of susceptibility to words and their rules of usage. Or an artificial word-sensitive system had to be implanted along with a miniaturized memory. No guarantee for success could be given. It was always possible that the operated persons used language mechanically and in this case, the essential would not be obtained because it was not a machine that had to be restored, but men with their weaknesses and aptitudes, capable of lying to one another, of convincing themselves even of what they do not believe, of submitting or giving the impression of submitting, or resisting or only pretending to. The mass extermination of those beyond the realm of the word was proposed, a solution with such unforeseeable consequences that only a minority overcome by elitist élan accepted it. Historical research into the phenomenon concentrated on the first manifestations and discovered some heretofore ignored characteristics. It all started with a family, so the family had to be reinvented for the ones who refused words. Families had in the meanwhile disappeared from the rest of society as man began to avoid legal ties in preference to coming together and going separate ways without complications. Children no longer presented a motive for establishing a family for the simple reason that childhood was an exceptional condition. Maybe dogs, which some historians discovered in early relationships, should be reinvented as faithful animals to which one had to say something, to keep under domination, to feed. Numerous experiments were carried out based on such observations, but they all failed. Even the League for the Protection of Non-Speaking and Non-Writing Persons intervened, strongly demanding, on behalf of its objects, that all attempts be brought to an immediate halt. More and more tension permeated the atmosphere. The secret police, which had already acted by pushing some of the rebels across national borders and by isolating the rest from those who could prove susceptible to the force of non-speaking, discovered that their methods were being used by their neighbors, historical enemies of their land, who chose the exact opposite direction for advancing towards the future (or at least, that is what the newspapers — which usually knew the most about everything — wrote on both sides). So the method had to be discarded. You only got rid of your own non-speakers and non-writers and found yourself with ones

from across the border which you still had to rear in worship in order to show your neighbors that what was no good by them was appreciated by you. The Organization of Civilized Persons inscribed as a major item on its agenda, after years of wasting time, the settlement of this crisis. Finally the army came up with an immediate and thorough solution.

So it was that on one cold morning under a sky that could not be more splendid, in which the stars still glimmered while the sun's disk was rising beyond the horizon, a rocket left Earth carrying on board the dissidents of the species gathered from the world over. A detailed description of the case, codified in such a way that any inhabitants of other planets could understand it, was placed in a container specially constructed to resist the worst accident imaginable. A gigantic banner of instructions dominated the instrument panel: one WORD is all that is needed to direct the ship back to Earth!

Each time men look to the heavens and discover a small star going farther away, the same question comes to their minds, after which they bow their heads, recalling that they were spoken to, written to, drawn to, and shown that they had no right to raise their heads nor was there any point in doing so. The spaceship had long ago left Earth's sphere of attraction. Not even the most fervent words of repentance could change its course. He who is with us listens to our words. He who is against us can no longer hear them.