

The Standard of Conversation and Expectant Silence: Reflections of Albert Jay Nock and Josef Pieper

--Epigraphs--

“The more one thinks of it, the more one finds in Goethe's remark that **the test of civilization is conversation**....The civilization of a country consists in the quality of life that is lived there, and **this quality shows plainest in the things people choose to talk about when the talk together, and in the way they choose to talk about them** [with reticence or reverence, for example]....Conversation depends upon a copiousness of general ideas and an imagination able to marshal them....and where the attraction of maturity, as well as maturity [itself] prevails....and where a man is accepted as a creature of 'a large discourse, looking before and after'....Man has **certain fundamental instincts [dispositions, tendencies]** which must find some kind of collective expression in the society in which he lives. The first and fundamental one [sic] is **the instinct of expansion, the instinct for continuous improvement in material well-being and economic security**. Then there is **the instinct of intellect and knowledge, the instinct of religion and morals, of beauty and poetry, of social life and manners**. Man has been more or less consciously working towards a state of society which could give collective expression to these instincts [or inherent “predilections” (41) and “sensibilities” (40) to be expressed also in a Sacred Liturgy]....Moreover, human society, to be permanently satisfactory, must not only express all these instincts [including its propensity and capacity to receive Grace], **but must express them all in due balance, proportion, and harmony**....The term *symphonic*, which is **so often sentimentally applied** to the ideal life of society, **is really descriptive**; for the tendency of mankind from the beginning has been towards a functional [operational] blending and harmony among these instincts, precisely like that among the choirs of an orchestra. It would seem, then, that **the quality of life in any society means the degree of development attained by this [symphonic] tendency. The more of these instincts [“his sense of intellect, beauty, morals, religion, manners” (34)] that are satisfied, and the more delicate the harmony of their interplay, the higher and richer is the quality of life in that society; and it is the lower and poorer according as it satisfies fewer of these [multiple] instincts and permits disharmony [cacophony] in their interplay.**” (Albert Jay Nock, “The Decline of Conversation,” from his own 1928 Anthology, *On Doing the Right Thing* (New York and London: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1928—and reprinted in 2007 by the Ludwig von Mises Institute in Auburn, Alabama), pp. 25-27, 34, 42-43,—my bold emphasis added; italics in the original)

[An acute question was first posed on 6 March 2016 by Mr. Daniel Fülep of Hungary to Bishop Athanasius Schneider of Astana, Kazakhstan; and his quoted question is then followed below by the Bishop Schneider's own forthright reply:]

“Your Excellency said **about the Final Report** of the [4-25 October 2015] Ordinary Synod [on the Family, in Rome] that it **'seems to inaugurate a doctrinal and disciplinary cacophony in the Catholic Church, which contradicts the very essence of being Catholic.'** Can you explain what you mean?”....

[With a further development of his earlier musical metaphor, and now proposing a deeper analogy, Bishop Schneider then briefly replied, as follows:]

“**Cacophony is the contrast of symphony.** Symphony means that all the voices **combine** to produce harmony, proclaiming the same. **In cacophony one of the voices seems incorrect. It's against the truth of the melody.** And so when this Final Report fails to affirm clearly the immorality of cohabitation of divorced people, when it fails to state clearly the condition established by God for the worthy reception of Holy Communion, **others will use this failure [in order] to proclaim a lie, so their voice will be against the truth,** just as a false voice in music is against the truth of the symphony.” (*Rorate Caeli*, 22 April 2016—Presenting an Exclusive Interview with Bishop Schneider, as earlier made by Daniel Fülep, the Director of the John Henry Newman Center of Higher Education in Sümeg, Hungary, on 6 March 2016—my emphasis added.)

“**However manifold the forms of this [attentive, receptive] silence** and of their unconscious **roots** and conscious **motives** may have been, **is it not always the possibility of hearing, the possibility of a purer perception of reality, that is aimed at?.... This listening silence** is much deeper than the mere refraining from words and speech in human intercourse [or conversation]. **It is a means of stillness,** which, **like a breath,** has penetrated into the inmost chamber of one's own soul....

“[By contrast,] **A particular form of not being silent** has been understood, since time immemorial, **as brother to despair** [*Desperantia, die Verzweiflung*]: namely, *verbositas*, talk, chatter, the ceaseless activity of merely making words....When such chattering talk,...**when such deafening talk, literally to thwart listening** [which is “**a constant temptation**”], **is [also] linked to hopelessness,** we have to ask: **is there not in silence—in listening silence—necessarily a shred of hope?**

“**For who could listen in silence to the language of things if he did not [also] expect something** to come of [from] **such awareness of the truth?** And, in a newly founded **discipline of silence,** is there not a chance **not merely** to overcome the sterility of everyday talk [*verbosity*], **but also** to overcome its brother, hopelessness—possibly only **to the extent that we know the true face of this relationship** [between verbosity and despair]?...[For,] the [disciplined] **resolution to remain silent...[may even serve] as a kind of training in hope?**”

(Josef Pieper, *The Silence of Goethe* (South Bend, Indiana: St. Augustine's Press, 2009), pp. 25-27—my emphasis added, and some slight re-translations of the original German)

After recently re-reading Albert Jay Nock's 1928 collection of essays entitled *On Doing the Right Thing*,¹ I had the thought to counterpoint his insights about conversation and civilization with my mentor Josef Pieper's insights about silence and hope and the attentive perception of reality. For, both of these classically educated and unmistakably learned men sought “a purer perception of reality” and “the truth of things” (*i.e.*, the “*veritas rerum*”), which may also be properly understood as “reality manifesting itself to a knowing mind.”

Although many other texts by Josef Pieper might have been chosen to reveal his cultured reflections on silence and contemplation and the arts (such as *Only the Lover Sings, i.e., Nur der Liebende Singt—Amantis Cantare*), this essay will, instead, concentrate only on a part of Josef Pieper's little book, entitled *The Silence of Goethe (Über das Schweigen Goethes)*.²

Albert Jay Nock is both a more astringent—and yet a more insouciantly and intellectually detached—secular critic of temporal society than Josef Pieper ever was. However, my German mentor could also be very trenchant himself sometimes, as well as passionately engaged: for example with his examination of the phenomenon of Sophistry and its timeless temptation; or with his perspicacious discernment of the abuses and deeper corruptions of language itself, and its grave social and political, as well as personal, consequences.

Nock, moreover, was once an Episcopalian clergyman, although he later departed from that religious vocation and commitment, and may well have lost his Christian faith altogether and permanently so, although that is not to be reliably known. For, he was a very private man about such things, to include his former wife and his two sons—very silent and reticent, indeed. By contrast, Josef Pieper, though also a modestly reserved gentleman, was an intellectually vivid and an abidingly faithful Roman Catholic layman, attentively reverent and in the married state, married for many years to a very beloved wife, who pre-deceased him; and he was the father of their three children, two sons and one daughter. Nock and Pieper both cherished literature and wrote lucid prose—and they both had deeply

1 Albert Jay Nock, *On Doing the Right Thing* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1928—and reprinted in 2007 by the Ludwig von Mises Institute in Auburn, Alabama), 249 pages. Nock's second chapter, “The Decline of Conversation,” which will be one focus, is to be found on pages 25-47, and all further references to this chapter and book will be placed above in parentheses in the main body of the essay.

2 Josef Pieper, *The Silence of Goethe* (South Bend, Indiana: St. Augustine's Press, 2009), 67 pages. All further references to this text will likewise be placed in parentheses above in the main body of the essay.

reflective and cultured minds. So much more could be said, but not here.

Let us first consider Albert Jay Nock's view of the American Civilization, not only his perception of its palpably consequential defects, but also our civilization's perceived excesses and inordinate disproportions. We should remember that Albert Jay Nock was writing all of this in 1928, only one year before the Stock Market Crash, and when he was himself fifty-eight years of age. His vantage point during those inter-war years might now give some fresh—and still applicable—insights to us. His longer view of history and culture will especially shed some sobering light upon our now beset (and seemingly centrifugal) American Empire and also upon our currently decomposing, incommensurately multicultural American Civilization.

Nock, once again, first speaks of balance and proportion if one is to live in a more “permanently satisfying” civilization and “human society.” For, he says,

If too much stress is laid on any one instinct [such as the “instinct of expansion... and material well-being and economic security”], the harmony [of the composite fundamental instincts] is interrupted, uneasiness and dissatisfaction arise, and, if the interruption persists, disintegration sets in. The fall of nations, the decay and disappearance of whole civilizations, can be finally interpreted in terms of the satisfaction of those instincts. Looking at the life of existing civilizations [hence the “American Civilization” as of 1928], one can put one's finger on **those instincts that are collectively overdone at the expense of others**. In one nation the instinct of expansion [is, for example,] relatively over-developed. (26-27—my emphasis added)

Throughout his essay, Nock makes us again and again, and in manifold ways, aware of **the danger of hypertrophied over-specialization**, both in human society and in any individual member's personal faculties: *i.e.*, in his formative and disciplined, intellectual and moral faculties, to include the scope and quality of his conversation.

About this matter of conversation, Nock then speaks of his own recent experience as of 1928:

In all I have read [and observed], however, very little has been made of the significance of the things we choose to talk about and our ways of talking about them. Yet I am sure that Goethe's method would give a better measure of our [American] civilization than any other, and that it would pay an observer to look into it. (28)

When, as a somewhat reflective Roman Catholic myself, I also consider the general nature of the conversation of other Catholics today in our society (almost 90 year later)—the loyally faithful ones as well as the nominal ones—I better understand the current and growing disorders in the human elements

of the Catholic Church. For, the evasiveness and superficiality—and often sentimental fideism (and theology)—of the brief exchanges of words which I have recurrently witnessed are at least demoralizing, even somewhat asphyxiating overall. And such exchanges could hardly be called reflective discourse, much less worthy acts of conversation, at least not in Albert Jay Nock's modest and cultivated sense. However, here too, as with Nock himself, “I speak under correction.” (42) Perhaps a reader would inform me as to where my family and I might continuously find vivid and reciprocal and substantive Catholic conversation.

Returning to Nock's own protracted experience with conversation in America, we notice at once his forthrightness:

The most significant thing that I have noticed about conversation in America is that there is so little of it, and as time goes on there seems less and less of it in my hearing. I miss even so much of the free play of ideas as I used to encounter years ago. It would seem that my countrymen no longer have the ideas and imagination they formerly had, or that they care less for them, or that they are diffident about them and do not like to bring them out. At all events the exercise of ideas and imagination has become unfashionable [in 1928]. When I first remarked this phenomenon I thought it might be an illusion of advancing age, since I have come to years when the past takes on an unnaturally attractive colour. But as time went on the fact [of the decline of conversation] became unmistakable and I began to take notice accordingly. (29-30)

With suppleness Nock now makes use of a certain “Mr. Finkman as a type” (30)—a type of the compulsive, expansive businessman and an avid accumulator of material wealth—after Nock's first making grateful “acknowledgements to Mr. Montague Glass,” the proudly and thoroughly Jewish fictional writer (and Jewish lawyer) who created the memorable literary characters of “Potash and Perlmutter,” or “Abe” and “Mawrus,” respectively. For, the new character of Mr. Finkman himself considered it “a supreme occasion in every respect” to dine at his senior partner Maisener's house and “after dinner...we go in the parlor and all the evening until midnight we sit and talk it business.” (30) What a focused conversation!

With characteristic deftness and detachment Nock then anticipates an objection to his using “Mr. Finkman as a type”:

This might be thought a delicate matter to press, but after all, Mr. Finkman is no creation of one's fancy, but on the contrary he is a solid and respectable reality, a social phenomenon of the first importance [in a financial and “purely and exclusively commercial” (31, 33) America, that is,], and he accordingly **deserves attention** both by the positive side of **his preferences and addictions** and by the

negative side of **his distastes.**” (30-31—my emphasis added)

We are already implicitly invited by Nock to imagine the nature and qualities of Finkman's conversation, in light of his ebullient “preferences, addictions, and distastes.” We might already expect a certain concentration and disproportion.

Furthermore, about this Mr. Finkman, Nock slyly says:

All I suggest is that **the influence of his tastes and distastes** upon American civilization **should be understood.** The moment one looks at the chart of this civilization one sees the line set by Mr. Finkman [“as a type”], and **this line is so distinct** that one cannot but take it as **one's principal lead.** If one wants **to get a measure of American civilization,** one not only must sooner or later **take the measure of Mr. Finkman's predilections,** but will save time and trouble by taking it [that measure] at the outset. (31—my emphasis added)

Nock gradually poses a question to his reader:

Why should Mr. Finkman himself, after six days' steady service of the instinct of expansion, **be at his best and happiest when he yet “talks it business” on the seventh?** It is because he has managed **to drive the whole current of his being** through the relatively **narrow channel** set by the [concentrated] instinct of expansion. When he “talks it business,” therefore, **he gets the exhilarating sense of drive and speed....**By this **excessive simplification** of existence Mr. Finkman has established the American formula for success. He makes money, but **money is his incidental reward; his real reward is in the continuous exhilaration that he gets out of the process of making it....**He [like others, too, and once again] has **crowded** the whole stream of his being into the channel **cut** by the instinct of expansion, **and his sensations correspond** to his achievement. (32-34—my emphasis added)

Thus Mr. Finkman's conversation is both concentrated and attenuated, for: “When one 'talks it business,' one's ideas may be powerful, but they are special [“particular”]; one's imagination may be vigorous, but its range is small.” (34) Mr. Finkman, therefore, has great difficulty appreciating that “Conversation depends upon a copiousness of general ideas and an imagination able to manage them [*i.e.*, such larger general ideas].” (34)

To give us an example or so of **the immature “style of particular declaration and perfunctory assent”** (35) at a commercial dinner party, Nock speaks through his friend of what happens at table after an interval of mute silence, **inasmuch as all “these characteristics mark the conversation of children and, therefore, may be held to indicate an extremely immature civilization”** (35—my

emphasis added):

“Then some puffy old bullfrog of a banker retrieves his nose out of his soup-cup, stiffens up, coughs behind his napkin, and looks up and down the line [of the table]. 'Isn't it remarkable how responsibility brings out a man's resources of greatness? Now who would have thought two years ago that [President] Calvin Coolidge would ever develop into a great leader of men?'

[Then comes the “perfunctory assent”:] *Guests, in unison, acciaccato* [slowly, viscously, emphatically]—**“Uh-huh.”**....

[Or another “particular declaration:”] “Just think, for instance, of all the good that Mr. Rockefeller has done with his money.”

Guests, fastoso [sumptuously or splendidly]—**“Uh-huh”**

My lively friend [who reported these incidents] may have exaggerated a little—I hope so—but his report is worth an observer's careful notice for purposes of comparison with what one hears oneself. **His next remark is worth attention as bringing out still another specific characteristic of immaturity.** (36-37—my emphasis added)

Then Nock lets his lively friend speak in his own words:

“But what goes against my grain,” he continued, “is that if you pick up some of this infernal guff and try to pull it away from the particular and personal, **and to make a real conversation out of it**, they sit on you as if you were an enemy of society. Start the banker [the “puffy old bullfrog”] **on the idea of leadership—what** it means, **what** the qualifications for leadership are, **and how far** any President can go to fill the bill—**and all he'll do is grunt**, and say, 'I guess you must be some sort of Red, ain't you?'"....

[And Nock comments on his lively friend's insights:] **How can you have any conversation if all you are expected to do is to agree? It is a mark of maturity to differentiate easily and naturally between personal or social opposition and intellectual opposition.** (37-38—my emphasis added)

By then returning more specifically to the preoccupations and inordinate attachments of Mr. Finkman and his likely sort of conversational discourse, Nock may thereby contrastively reveal a little more about his own more spacious, yet somewhat inwardly detached, “theory of conversation” and implicit view of “the ideal practitioner of social amenities” (40) and “an active sense of manners” (44):

Mr. Finkman's **excessive simplification** of life has made anything like the free play of ideas utterly incomprehensible to him. He never deals with ideas, **except such limited and practical ones as may [instrumentally] help get him something**, and he cannot imagine anyone ever choosing, even on occasion, to do differently. When he “talks it business,” **the value** of ideas, ideals, opinions, sentiments, **is purely quantitative**; putting any other value on them is a waste of

time. Under all circumstances, then, he tends to assume that other people **measure the value** of their ideas and opinions as he does his [*i.e.*, quantitatively and instrumentally], and that they employ them accordingly [hence reductively and “astigmatically”]; and hence, like my friend's [“bullfrog”] banker, when some one tries to lead up into a general intellectual sparring..., he thinks he is a dangerous fellow with an ax to grind. This puts the greatest imaginable restraint upon conversation....[also] to see...**the conversion of conversation into mere declaratory particularization...in a commercial way.** (39—my emphasis added)

Nock then diffidently proposes to contrast “the impression of maturity” (42) to be felt in a cultured conversation with a more immature orientation, as is to be felt in the conduct of certain children:

I have had little to do with children, so I speak under correction; but I should imagine that one would become bored with their **intense** simplification of life, **their tendency to drive the whole current of life noisily through one channel**, their vehement **reduction** of all values to that of quantity, their inability to take any but a personal [and often somewhat selfish] view of things. **But just these are the qualities of American civilization as indicated by the test of conversation.**

They [“these qualities”] inhere in Mr. Finkman and are disseminated by his influence to the practical exclusion of any other. (42-43—my emphasis added)

In Europe, however, Nock often noted the maturity of gracious conversation, “even in conversation with children, though as I said, due allowance ought to be made for the fact that my experience with children is not large.” (43) He is now pleased to give an example:

I have a friend, for instance, whom I go to see whenever I am in Brussels, **and it is the joy of my life to play at sweet-hearts with his three daughters** who range from seven to sixteen. My favorite is the middle one, a weedy and nonchalant charmer of twelve. She does not impress me as greatly gifted; I know several American girls who seem naturally abler. **But in conversation with her I detect a power of disinterested reflection, an active sense of beauty, and an active sense of manners**, beyond any that I ever detected in American children; and these [qualities] **contribute to a total effect of maturity** that is agreeable and striking. (43-44—my emphasis added)

And what a contrast to the effective intellectual immaturity and constrictedness of Mr. Finkman and the Puffy Bullfrog Banker, despite their chronological age!

As Albert Jay Nock approaches now his summary insights of American Civilization and its general standard and quality of conversation as they appeared to him in 1928, he becomes more astringent, but without haughtiness or zealotry:

An observer passing through America with his mind deliberately closed to any

impressions **except** those he received from conversation could make as interesting a conjectural reconstruction of our civilization as the palaeontologists...make of a dinosaur. He would postulate a civilization which expresses the instinct of expansion to a degree far beyond anything ever seen in the world, but which does not express the instinct of intellect and knowledge, **except as regards instrumental knowledge** [as distinct from properly “formative knowledge”], and is characterized by an extremely defective sense of beauty, a defective sense of religion and morals, a defective sense of social life and manners [especially, for Nock, in comparison with certain parts of Europe, as is conveyed in his other books]. Its institutions [those of the American Civilization] reflect faithfully **this [specific and differentiated] condition of excess and defect**. (44-45—my emphasis added)

By way of illustration of his meaning, Nock now returns to Mr. Finkman as a person and as a representative type:

A very brief conversation with Mr. Finkman would enable one to predicate **almost precisely** what kind of schooling he considered an adequate preparation for life [and it would not be the Greco-Roman Classics!], what kind of literature he thought good enough for one to read, plays for one to see, architecture to surround oneself with, music to listen to, painting and sculpture to contemplate. It would be plain that **Mr. Finkman had succeeded in living an exhilarating life from day to day** without the aid of any power but concentration—without reflection, without ideas, without ideals, and without any but the most special emotions—that he thought extremely well of himself for his success, and was disposed to be jealous of [protective of] the peculiar type of institutional life which had enabled it [his success] or conduced to it. (45—my emphasis added)

Nock, with some exaggeration, then claims that a keen observer would conclude that such a civilization of such a predominant type would be “marked by an extraordinary and inquisitorial intolerance of the individual and a corresponding insistence upon conformity to pattern [as in contemporary “political correctness”]. (45) Howso? We might wonder; and the Libertarian Nock offers an answer:

For, in general, it is reflection, ideas, ideals, and emotions that set off the [distinctive or exceptional] individual, and with these [purportedly superfluous qualities] Mr. Finkman has had nothing to do; he has got on without them to what he considers success, and hence he sees no need of them, distrusts them, and thinks there must be a screw loose with the individual who shows signs of them. (45-46)

Resorting to some irony now, as well as to his characteristic persona of detachment, Nock wants to give Mr. Finkman and his type of success more scope in our civilization, in order to see just what kind of fruition this unusual experiment would produce. We might wonder, “Is he serious?” But here is

his arguably Rabelaisian or Pantagrueline proposal:

It seems to me important that Mr. Finkman should have room according to his strength [and hubris?], that he should [but at what cost?] be **unchecked and unhampered in directing the development of American civilization to suit himself**. I believe it will be **a most salutary** [and both purifying and purgative!?] **experiment** for the richest and most powerful nation in the world [as he purportedly perceived it in 1928] **to give a long, fair, resolute try-out** [as in baseball] **to the policy of living by the [imperial] instinct of expansion alone**. **If the United States cannot make a success of it, no nation ever can, and none, probably, will ever attempt it again**. So when critics denounce our [American] civilization as barbarous, I reply that, if so, a few generations of barbarism are a cheap price for the [salutary? demoralizing? punitive?] result. Besides, **Mr. Finkman may prove himself right; he may prove that a man can live a full and satisfying inner life without intellect, without beauty, without religion and morals, and with but the most rudimentary social life and manners**, provided only he has **unlimited** exercise of the instinct of expansion, and can drive ahead in the expression of it with the whole [channeled] force of his being. **If Mr. Finkman proves this, he will have the laugh on many like myself who at present have the whole course of human history behind our belief that no such thing can be done....**For just this is the great American experiment [*i.e.*, the unlimited expansionist Hubris!]. (46-47—my emphasis added)

As we move on to consider and to savor Josef Pieper's own modest reflections on silence—and especially on how we are deeply nourished by a certain “**discipline of silence**” and, indeed, by certain forms of **attentively expectant silence**—it is fitting first to incorporate one more “restraint upon conversation” (39), as Albert Jay Nock experienced it himself and then later came to understand it:

Another odd manifestation of this restraint [on conversation] is the almost violent [effervescent] eagerness with which we turn to **substitutes for conversation** in our social activities. **Mr. Finkman must not be left alone in the dark** [or with too much silence!] **with his apprehensions** [about unprofitable inactivity] **a moment longer than necessary**. After such a dinner as my debonair friend described [with the “puffy bullfrog of a banker,” too], **it is at once necessary to “do something”**—the theatre, opera, cabaret, dancing, motoring, or what not—**and to keep on doing something as long as the evening lasts**. It is astonishing to see **the amount of energy devoted to keeping out of conversation**; “doing something” has come to be [as of 1928, in any case] a term of special application. Almost every informal invitation reads, “to dinner, and then we'll do something.” It is even more astonishing to see that this fashion is followed by persons whose intelligence and taste are sufficient, one would think, to put them above it. Quite often one finds oneself going through **this routine** with persons quite capable of conversation, **who would really rather converse**, but who go through it apparently because it is the thing to go through. **When this happens, one marvels at the reach and authority of Mr. Finkman's** [expansive]

predilections—yet there they are. (40-41—my emphasis added)

We may consider such a setting today in 2016 with our new amusements and technologies.

Reflections on Silence by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and Josef Pieper

“The significance of the things we talk about and our ways of talking about them” (28)—as “the test of civilization” (25) in the poet Goethe's eyes—should also include our ways of not talking about certain things: to include our purposive silence, especially in certain settings and when present among certain kinds of audiences. Thus, Goethe's and Nock's standard and test of conversation as a mark of a civilization would fittingly also include the larger matter of silence and our sometimes deeper dispositions to silence, as well as the reasons for our various forms of silence.

However, Albert Jay Nock's essay “The Decline of Conversation” does not in any way choose to mention, much less discuss, Goethe's own explicit or implicit words concerning silence, but Josef Pieper has done so in his little book *The Silence of Goethe*.

In his book Dr. Pieper will take us on a brief but attentive thematic journey through all of Goethe's writings over a period of some sixty years—to include his letters and diaries, as well as all of the fifty volumes of the Weimar Edition of Goethe's *Opera Omnia* —all of which Josef Pieper had had access to, and had read in sequence and in unexpected quietude, during the final days of World War II when he was on an island as a prisoner of war. In his own modest and grateful words, Josef Pieper says:

In this way a long-cherished plan [to read Goethe] **came to fruition in a few glorious weeks**. Through an almost magical stroke of good fortune I was plucked, as was Habakkuk [c. 620 B.C.], by the hair of his head and **taken from the lethal chaos of the last months of the war** [in 1945], **to be planted into a realm of the most peaceful seclusion**, whose borders and exits were, of course, controlled by armed sentries. But I was not locked away so completely that I could not succeed in making contact with **a friend who lived quite close to that island** [and who had in his library all the works of Goethe and was, moreover, very glad to lend them out sequentially to his young friend Pieper (b. 4 May 1904)!]. (1—my emphasis added)

As Josef Pieper even then already considered and admired the capaciousness and versatility of Goethe (1749-1832) during his long life, he was soon to discover much more and even to discover a surprise, quite unexpected:

The richness of this life revealing itself over a period of more than sixty years

appeared before my [attentive and receptive] gaze in its truly overpowering magnificence....What a passionate focus **on reality in all its forms** [unlike Mr. Finkman, the specialist!], what an undying quest to chase down all that is in the world, what strength to affirm life, what ability to take part in it, what vehemence in the way he showed his dedication to it! Of course, too, what **ability to limit** [to discipline] himself to what was appropriate; what firm control in **inhibiting what was purely aimless** [without purpose]; **what religious respect for the truth of being** [the “*veritas rerum*”]! I could not overcome **my astonishment** [my wonder, the *mirandum*, the *thaumazein*]; and the prisoner [now] **entered a world without borders**, a world in which the fact of [my] being in prison was of absolutely no significance.

But no matter how many astonishing things I saw in these unforgettable weeks of undisturbed inner focus, **nothing was more surprising or unexpected than this**: to realize how much of what was peculiar to this life [of Goethe] occurred in [his] **carefully preserved seclusion [and quietude]**; how much the seemingly communicative man who carried on a world-wide correspondence **still never wanted to expose in words the core of his existence**. (2-3—my emphasis added)

(In the library of his own home in Münster at Malmedyweg 4, Josef Pieper once told me, and with a warm smile, that he very greatly appreciated the apt descriptive words about him then recently spoken by one of his own University colleagues, namely that “Josef Pieper is a Cosmopolitan Eremite!” That is to say, that he had much foreign correspondence and many friends internationally, but was he was somewhat reclusive in Münster and unmistakably lived a quiet and private life!)

In his own later writing, Dr. Pieper said about Goethe himself that, “in his advanced age [in 1814, at 65 years of age],” he had privately said to a friend (a woman) “that **true happiness is really only to be found in sympathetic sharing**,” and, yet, he also more and more “**had become outstanding for his reticence**.” (3—my emphasis added) In examining this paradox and its nuances of reverent mystery, Josef Pieper will gradually try to convince us, too, that Goethe's growing reticence and quietness, and even with some signs of taciturnity (but not of muteness), led him to a certain perceptive stillness and an attentively and receptively expectant silence—as if he were also expectantly hoping to be fertilized from without, if not quite to receive something indispensably important “*desursum descendens*” (“coming down from above,” as expressed in the New Testament Letter of Saint James).

Josef Pieper quotes several of Goethe's private expressions of desired detachment from—and some repugnance for—any involvement in noisy and turbulent “current affairs,” and he is quoted as saying, in 1816, such things as “**we and our ilk prosper only in stillness**” (7—my emphasis); and, much earlier, in late 1786, “**What is best is the deep stillness in which, against the world, I live and grow, and gain what they cannot take from me by fire and sword**.” (8—my added emphasis) Dr.

Pieper's twofold comment on this passage is that it was, indeed, “a powerfully affirmed, secret maxim of Goethe's existence, which is **only entrusted to his diary**”; and that, “for the man who loves quietness and the hidden life to such an extent, **silence becomes a habit.**” (8-9—my emphasis added)

Josef Pieper adds other responses of Goethe as they occur in very different contexts, even in reply to a military general, so as to accent a common theme in Goethe's thought and recurrent abstentions:

[After] complaining about the catastrophic war situation [“during the retreat from France”] and all the misery that followed from it...his neighbor [at table], a general, with impeccable correctness but also with a certain firmness, more or less called him to order; and then Goethe says: “I vowed inwardly to be in no hurry to break **my customary silence** again.” “**Almost a vow of silence**”....[For, in 1821, in one of his private letters,] he had...referred to **the paradox of a reticent writer's existence** in the beautiful sentence: “This is then **the great charm** of the otherwise questionable life an author: that one is **silent** with one's friends **and at the same time prepares a great conversation** with them which **reaches out** to every part of the world.”....**The insight of the observer and ponderer** meets here [too] with **the innermost, fundamental tendency of the man** [Goethe himself] **who wishes to live his life “without noise.”**....Goethe was **glad** “**if** a voice **contradicts** the jubilant applause that people express for actions and events which lead them to destruction”; **but** he himself did not want to be this voice....[Such is the “contemptuous ring” and tinge of condescension to be found in the man:] **the magnanimous [man], the high-minded, the confident man who aims at greatness and tries to make himself worthy of it.**....According to [Saint] Thomas [Aquinas] **there is rightly contempt for all that is mean-spirited....Such contempt is as little at odds with humility as it is at odds with truth, since no one's just claim to honor is being injured** [*Summa Theologiae* II-II, Q. 129, a.3 and a. 4]. (9, 11, 12-13—my bold emphasis added; italics in the original)

Josef Pieper may now surprise us a little by mentioning Goethe's silence with, and distancing irony [“*ironia*”] towards the multitudes, in connection with his own deeper sense of mystery and “the inadequacy of language” (15) and his own disposition to silence “where there is talk of a divine Being” (15):

Goethe's silence is ironical in this [same] way with regards to his public. He wrathfully refuses to say what they want to hear: “If I had nothing to say except what pleases people [*e.g.*, Mr. Finkman], I would certainly say nothing, nothing at all.”....Without giving it a thought, Goethe presumes that **his silence** will [then] be **misunderstood** by the many [“*in societate multorum*”]. He says **of his liberalist indifference in religious matters** that it only “appears” so, that it is “only a mask behind which I sought to protect myself against pedantry and arrogance,” **a mask of silence.**....The experience of the “inadequacy of language,” which is “only a surrogate” has all too often—as we read in a letter of Goethe's in March 1816—prevented him from “saying what I could and should have said.” (14-15—my

emphasis added)

We see here, as Dr. Pieper adds, “also a reverent shyness at work” (15). Moreover, “in a letter written [on 15 March 1832] just under a week before his death,” Goethe, “the master with words” (15), said: “Our best convictions cannot be expressed in words. Language is not capable of everything.” (16) Another motive for reverent silence.

Then, in a sort of intermediate summary, Josef Pieper himself says:

There are still **many facets to Goethe's silence** that one could report. It is not easy to exhaust the study of all aspects. One would have, for example, to speak of **the silence of the man who is all too vulnerable**; a word would be needed about **the loyalty of the man who, with regard to the shortcomings of friends, maintains an inner silence**, a silence imposed on himself....Goethe never passed judgment “about his friends and persons he loved.”....One must also contemplate the wise economy—which has nothing at all to do with selfish comfort—that makes him simply ignore the negative and pass over it in silence as if it did not exist. In one of his first letters to Charlotte von Stein [20 March 1776] this wisdom is already formulated like a principle. “Of all things on earth that can be harmful and lethal to me, annoyance [irritability!] is the least. Of course there is never a lack of reasons for it; it is just that I don't bother with it.”....And [forty-two] years later: “I am saying nothing about our internal affairs....**I know nothing that spoils my day more than such faction gossip.**” (23-24—my emphasis added)

But now we shall even more gratefully, I believe, come to consider Josef Pieper's final insights about silence and its relation to perception and to hope—a hope that is supported, moreover, by two virtues: magnanimity and humility.

In the last five pages of his deepening inquiry (pages 25-29), Dr. Pieper interweaves many important strands of thought, and these pages certainly deserve a slow and attentively reflective reading—and again and again. (Moreover, the English translation here is somewhat awkward at places, also in the syntax, and it may therefore even obscure our prompt understanding of Dr. Pieper's meaning.)

Here is what Josef Pieper has preciously distilled out of all of his reading of Goethe in 1945 on an island and as a prisoner of war, and this is what he first published in German in 1949, when he was only forty-five years of age:

However manifold the forms of this silence and of their unconscious roots and conscious motives may have been, is it not always **the possibility** of hearing—the **possibility** of a purer perception of reality—that is aimed at? And so, is not Goethe's type of silence, above all, **the silence of one who listens?**...[Has he] not the sensitivity of one who is hindered by fuss and noise from hearing what he

considers to be genuine reality?...Is that [his abiding “respect for all truly, quietly living buds”] not said about someone who wants only to hear and listen?... **This listening silence** is much deeper than the mere refraining from words and speech in human intercourse. **It means a stillness**, which, like a breath, has penetrated into the innermost chamber of one's own soul...This listening silence, which is [attentively and expectantly] open—deep into the inner self—to the language of existing things...[his] exercising himself “in seeing and reading things as they are”; “this exercise,” Goethe writes [“from Rome”], “and **my fidelity** in letting my eye see freely, my complete renunciation of all pretension, are here [in Rome] **giving me great happiness in quietude.**” (25-26—my emphasis added)

Dr. Pieper's next set of summary insights about “**the meaning of being silent is hearing**” (27) also reminds us of Saint Paul's phrase, “*fides ex auditu*” (Romans 10:17—“faith comes from hearing”). More fully Josef Pieper now says, as follows:

The meaning of being silent is hearing—a hearing in which **the simplicity of the receptive gaze** [the “*oculus simplex*”] at things is like the naturalness, simplicity, and purity of one receiving a confidence, the reality of which is *creatura*, God's creation. (27)

In all of Josef Pieper's multi-volume writings a reader will find that his fundamental disposition and attitude is to discover first and abidingly the portion of good in whomever or whatever he is considering, even when he knows and attentively notices the flaws or the weaknesses of a thinker or a writer, and maybe also his personal negligences and ingratitude. Therefore, in his further commentary on Goethe's silence, Josef Pieper will now politely and proportionately resort to a “relative, correlative proposition”: namely, “insofar as [to the extent that] **Goethe's silence** is in this sense **a hearing silence**, to that extent it [“Goethe's silence”] has the status of a model [for us], a paradigm—**however much**—in individual instances—[our] **reservations and criticism are justified.**” (27—my emphasis added)

For, Dr. Pieper certainly knew of Goethe's propensities to Naturalism and Enlightenment Illuminism and some forms of “esotericism” (see pp. 11-12), to include even a “secret society” for an elite founded on art. Earlier Pieper had also hesitantly revealed Goethe's own 1811 words to Passow: “We academics should have kept the truth to ourselves....I have always thought it was bad, a misfortune that gained ground more and more in the second half of the last century, that no distinction was made any more between the esoteric and the exoteric.” (11)

In contrast to Goethe's more objective orientation to reality and culture, Pieper now considers the more subjectivist existentialists and “the heroic nihilism of our age [circa 1930-1950]” (27), both of

which orientations have, indeed,

proclaimed **the attitude of the knower** [the aggressive and contemptuous “gnostic”] **to be by no means that of a silent listener** but **rather** as that of **self-affirmation** over and **against being**: [such putative] insight and knowledge are **naked defiance**, the severest **endangering** of existence in the midst of the [purported] superior strength of [a] **concrete** being. [Hence,] The resistance of knowledge opposes superior power. (27—my emphasis added)

In contrast to this existential revolt and willful defiance—as if knowing were prior to being—we have the attitude of Goethe, as Josef Pieper understands it in his gradually deepened conviction:

However, that the knower is **not** a defiant rebel against concrete being, **but above all else a listener who stays silent and, on the basis of his silence, a hearer**—it is **here** that **Goethe represents** what, since Pythagoras, may be considered **the silence tradition of the West**. (27—my emphasis added)

On the premise that contrast clarifies the mind, Dr. Pieper now wants to consider “**a particular form of not being silent**.” (28—my emphasis added) He argues that, “since time immemorial,” one form of non-silence—namely mere “wordiness” or “loquaciousness”—has been understood to be a sister or a proximate “brother to despair [*die Verzweiflung*].” (28) That is to say,

Verbositas [verbosity], talk, chatter, the ceaseless activity of merely [and often enough sophisticatedly!] making words....This link [between verbosity and despair] is to be found in the writings of Cassian, a famous monk of the fifth century. Others are [Pope] Gregory the Great [d. 604 A.D.], Isidore of Seville [d. 636], and Thomas Aquinas [d. 1274]. similarly, the link is found in the analysis of “daily existence,” which is one of the lasting discoveries of Martin Heidegger [d. 1976]. Also in the dark [1933] book of the **Christian Epimetheus** [“Afterthought,” the Titan Husband of Pandora; and the Brother of Prometheus, Greek “Forethought”!]—left to us by the poet Konrad Weiß [d. 1940]—**the concrete form of that not being silent is brought before our eyes** in an exact and rich utterance. He speaks of **the many people who have time to discuss things helplessly—with faces characterized by worry**—“and whose curiosity (the kind that wants to find satisfaction in daily things) **amounts to avoiding disappointment rather than hoping**. It is **that expression of a face, which**, focused on a concrete thing, **does not enjoy the quiet fulfillment of further certainties** that are **not** of a political nature.” (28—my emphasis added)

But, Josef Pieper returns to one of his abiding and cherished themes: hope and the virtue of hope. And he thus asks us, finally, a set of profound questions, and poses them with an attentive expectancy:

Is there not in silence—listening silence—necessarily a shred of hope? For who could listen in silence to the language of things if he did not expect something to come of such awareness of truth? And, in a newly founded discipline of silence, is there not a chance, not merely to overcome the sterility

of everyday talk [“when such deafening talk, literally out to thwart listening, is linked to hopelessness”], but also to overcome...hopelessness...?....Could not the...resolution to remain silent [in a “listening silence”]...serve as a kind of training in hope? (29—my emphasis added)

Josef Pieper recommends (in his end note # 76, on page 36), that his reader also consult his book, *On Hope (Über die Hoffnung)*,³ especially his Chapter on Despair (*die Verzweiflung*)—Chapter 3—where he elaborates not only upon “despair as an offspring of *acedia* [spiritual sloth],” but also Martin Heidegger's analysis of “everyday existence” and the uprooted “*evagatio mentis*” (“the roaming unrest of spirit”).

In his profound chapter on despair—or prematurely anticipated, final nonfulfillment—Josef Pieper offers us also these sobering, and very profound, words:

The deepest and most authentic depth of hope was opened up to mankind by the original event of the redemption. Through this event, too, the possibility of despair was increased by one more dark abyss of darkness. Natural man can never say as triumphantly as can the Christian: It will turn out well for me in the end. Nor can the hope of natural man look forward to an “end” like that of the Christian. But neither can a heathen be tempted to the same depths of despair as the Christian—and, indeed, as the greatest Christians and the saints. For the same flash of light that reveals to the creature the supernatural reality of grace lights up also the abyss of his guilt and his distance from God.⁴

CODA

May this varied and counterpointed journey in the companionship of Albert Jay Nock and Josef Pieper now especially have helped us to enhance henceforth our own Catholic **conversation** and the attentive, receptive, expectant depth of our **silence**. Good conversation and a listening silence go very well together, as we may now a little better appreciate.

May we also now better be able to transpose these themes of conversation and silence into the realm of the sacred—the virtue of hope, the two forms of hopelessness (presumption and despair), the Gift of Fear (*Donum Timoris*), the reality and indispensability of Grace, Prayer, Human Liberty, the Gift of Final Perseverance, and the risk-filled possibility and challenging adventure of finally attaining Eternal Life (*Vita Aeterna*) and Beatitude.

3 Josef Pieper, *On Hope* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1987)—a very profound little book that may very well change your life for the higher and greater good. Chapter 3 on “Anticipation of Non-Fulfillment: Despair,” is to be found on pages 45-61. The special consideration of Martin Heidegger's rare insight is to be found on page 58.

4 *Ibid.*, pp. 49-50.

We may also incidentally note that the word “*Conversatio*” itself means a “**Way of Life**” in Christian Latin, as it was still gratefully understood by Saint Augustine of Hippo with his unmistakable “*Gaudium de Veritate*” (*Confessiones* X:23—“the Joy that Comes from the Truth”).

--Finis--

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