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Silence and Holes: The *Roman de Silence* and the Art of the Trouvère

Among the little-known works of the Middle Ages none has been the object of greater neglect than the *Roman de Silence*. So complete, in fact, has been the silence surrounding this thirteenth-century verse romance that it was not edited in toto until 1972, has occasioned no major critical effort (article or book), and—*mirabile visu*—is not even mentioned in Volker Roloff's thematic study of speech and silence in Old French.[1] That *Silence* has elicited so little attention is all the more startling given the eloquence with which it speaks to issues crucial not only to a hypothetical medieval audience, but to the present day. The explicitness with which *Silence* probes the relation between nature and culture, the precision of its reflection of social context—in short, its historical mimetism—make it a keystone in the anthropology of the High Middle Ages.[2] More important, the complex series of articulations which the text establishes between language and desire, between writing and sexual difference, between poetry and power (economic, military, political) pressures a reading of the *Roman de Silence* toward the modes of textual production inherent to every age. And if *Silence* constitutes a guide to the understanding of medieval culture and poetics, it also reads uncannily like a programme for the

1. *Reden und Schweigen. Zur Tradition und Gestaltung eines mittelalterlichen Themas in der französischen Literatur* (Munich: Fink, 1973). Those interested generally in silence should see B. P. Dauenhauer, *Silence: The Phenomenon and its Ontological Significance* (Bloomington: Univ. of Indiana Press, 1980); A. B. Greene, *The Philosophy of Silence* (New York: Richard Smith, 1940); M. Picard, *The World of Silence* (Chicago: H. Regnery, 1952).

2. This is the subject of a book I recently published and which forms the background of this essay: *Etymologies and Genealogies: A Literary Anthropology of the French Middle Ages* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1983). For a discussion of the *Roman de Silence*, see 195–97.

interpretation of modernism. Silence is golden—a gold mine of insight into medieval and modern discursive theory as well as practice.

Superficially, the central focus of *Silence* is prepared by an almost incidental subplot in which the quarrel between two counts over which will marry the eldest of two sisters and thus inherit the larger of two holdings (*la maisnee*), results in the death of both and a royal prohibition of cognatic succession. "Never again," proclaims King Ebain, "will a woman inherit in the realm of England as long as I hold land."[3] The exclusion of females, which angers those anxious to endow younger sons through affiliation, thus lays the groundwork for an elaborate biopolitical drama whose resolution occupies the rest of the romance. For when King Ebain then seeks to marry off the only daughter of the Duke of Cornwall and to invest the dead duke's son-in-law with the paternal duchy, that investiture, by Ebain's own decree, depends upon the production of a male heir (vv. 1295, 1455, 1588, 1684). The subsequent birth of a daughter to Eufemie and Cador (Ebain's nephew) poses the dilemma of lineal interruption which the author, who twice identifies himself as the otherwise unknown Heldris de Cornuälle (vv. 1, 6682), conceives simultaneously in genealogical and linguistic terms. That is, the parents decide to name their daughter Silentius, to hide her sexual identity, and, if the deception is ever discovered, simply to change her name to Silentia (see below p. 86).

Silence, raised in isolation (a medieval Wild Child), becomes aware, around the time of puberty, not only that she is a female "trapped in a male body," but that she is inexplicably attracted to poetry, more specifically, to a troupe of itinerant jongleurs with whom she escapes. So skilled in fact does she then become at the art of singing that she outperforms and outearns the jealous poets who plot to kill her. Meanwhile, Ebain's wife Eufeme has fallen in love with Silence and, failing twice to seduce her, succeeds in having her exiled to France armed with forged letters requesting her execution. The King of France, suspicious of Ebain's intention, learns the truth and houses Silence at his own court until Ebain recalls her to fight in the wars against rebellious barons. Peace restored, Eufeme again tries to seduce Silence and, again rebuffed, denounces her to Ebain. The King this time substitutes for exile an expiatory ordeal—to capture Merlin who, according to legend, will only be taken by a woman, as Silence, who succeeds in bringing the magician under her spell, is entrapped by the revelation of her true gender. Ebain is furious at his wife's perfidy, executes her, and marries Silence, daughter of his own nephew and the woman whose name—Eufemie—differs but by one letter from that of his former wife.

3. *Le Roman de Silence*, ed. L. Thorpe (Cambridge: Heffer and Sons, 1972), v. 314. All references are to this edition.

This summary (reminiscent of the old SATF introductions?) behind us, we can begin to read the *Roman de Silence* which in fact begins to read itself, for the medieval text prescribes the parameters of its own interpretation; and the theory and praxis of such a reading are intertwined. We begin, then, by noting that *Silence* participates in a long and respected Latin and vernacular tradition according to which nature, writing, and sexual difference are allied. Alain de Lille, for example, associates the "lawful path of sure descent" with Nature, who, in order to insure genealogical succession, endowed her handmaiden Venus with two instruments of rectitude—*ortho*graphy, or straight writing, and *ortho*dox coition, or straight sexuality:

> Also, I appointed for her work anvils, noble instruments, with a command that she would apply these same hammers to them, and faithfully give herself up to the forming of things, not permitting the hammers to become strangers to the anvils. For the office of writing I provided her with an especially potent reed-pen, in order that, on suitable leaves that desire the writing of the pen . . . she might, according to the rules of my orthography, trace the nature of things, and might not suffer the pen to stray at all in the trackless diversion of false style away from the path of proper description. But since for the production of progeny the rule of marital coition, with its lawful embraces, was to connect things unlike in their opposition of sexes. . . .[4]

Licit intercourse thus preserves the continuity of lineage and is indissociable from correct writing, or grammar, which excludes diversion from the "path of proper description," that is to say, linguistic property. Nouns and adjectives copulate according to the rules of heterosexual combination,[5] and people conjugate according to the precepts of regular construction.[6]

For Jean de Meun (inspired by Alain), Nature is the earthly agent of generational continuity, the guarantor of the species despite the death of individuals. Nature's confessor, Genius, is the "god and master of places and of property."[7] If Nature assures the survival of human lineage, her

4. Alain de Lille, *De Planctu Naturae*, in *Satirical Poets of the Twelfth Century*, ed. T. Wright (London: Longman, 1872), 475.

5. "Furthermore, my command enjoined Cypris that, in her constructions, she have regard to the ordinary rules for nouns and adjectives, and that she appoint that organ which is especially marked with the peculiarity of the feminine sex to the office of noun, and that she should put that organ characterized by the signs of the masculine sex in the seat of the adjective" (*De Planctu*, 476).

6. "Besides this, I added that the Dionean conjugation should not admit into its uniform use of transitive construction either a defective use, or the circuity of reflexiveness, or the crookedness of double conjugation since it is content with the direct course of single conjugation" (Ibid., 477).

7. "Genius, dist elle, biau prestres, / Qui des leus estes diex et mestres, / Et selonc lor propriétés / Toutes en ovre les metés, / Et bien achevés le besoingne / Si cum a chascun le besoingne. . . ." (*Le Roman de la rose*, ed. D. Poirion [Paris: Flammarion, 1974], v. 16285).

vicar preserves the proper places (*leus*) of speech or the order of representation itself ("les figures representables"). Genius embodies the figure of the writer, the scribe of that arch-text of the Middle Ages—the Book of Nature:

> Devant Nature la deesse,
> Li prestres, qui bien s'acordoit,
> En audience recordoit
> Les figures representables,
> De toutes choses corrumpables,
> Qu'il ot escrites en son livre,
> Si cum Nature les li livre.[8]

> Before the Goddess Nature the priest, who was very accomodating, recorded in audience the representable figures of all corruptible things, which he wrote in his book as Nature gave them to him.

Proper writing (the discreteness of place) and proper generation (the uninterrupted devolution of things according to their nature or property) are, through Nature and Genius, combined.

The *Roman de Silence* reads in many places like a vernacular version of Alain's *De Planctus Naturae* which its author most certainly knew; Heldris's relation to Jean is, because of the uncertainty of the date of the manuscript, much less certain. Nonetheless, here too Nature embodies the principle of difference, the "mould" of many things from unformed matter synonomous with the discreteness of names:

> Molles i a bien .m. milliers,
> Que cho li est moult grans mestiers,
> Car s'ele n'eüst formé c'une
> Sa samblance estroit si commune
> De tolte gent, c'on ne savroit
> Quoi, ne quel non, chascuns avroit.
> Mais Nature garda si bien
> En s'uevre n'a a blasmer rien. [V. 1887]

> There are a thousand thousand moulds of which she has great need, since, if she had only formed one, her image of all men would be so common that one would not know what nor what name each had. But Nature took care that there should be nothing to blame in her work.

The above portrayal of *Natura formatrix* is similar to descriptions found in numerous contemporaneous literary and philosophical texts, descriptions in which the nature or property of an individual thing—the unique nonessential quality distinguishing it from all others in its class—is linked explicitly to writing:

8. Ibid., v. 16278.

Les orelles li fait petites
Nature, ki les a escrites,
Les sorcils brun et bien seöir,
Nul hom ne puet si bials veöir. [V. 1917]

Nature made her small ears, Nature who wrote upon them such dark and well situated eyebrows that no one could see more beautiful ones.

Nature has literally inscribed Silence's features upon her face and in so doing reproduces the movement of the author whose own corpus of inscription is coterminous with the feminine body of romance.

Such an attempt to "close" the text upon itself is not to deny that the difference or property assured by Nature's names was, for the aristocracy of the thirteenth century, manifestly linked to the real differences of property attached to the patronym. The name of the family holding—its land and castle—was identical to that of the holder of title and of a title which assured the proper (primogenital) transmission of all three. What I am suggesting is that the propriety of names, thus posited at the level of nature, served to guarantee—through writing—what was perceived as a natural social order. This is why, despite the complaint of Nature (vv. 5997 ff.) and despite the elaborate debate between Nature and Nurture (*Noreture*) that runs throughout the *Roman de Silence* (vv. 2292, 2423, 2653, 5987) and is even expressed as an opposition between the raw and the cooked (vv. 5997–6114), there is no essential contradiction between heredity and environment. This is also why grammatical irregularity, language which differs, is conceived in terms of an act against nature. For Alain, once again, all rhetoric is the equivalent of social deviance:

> Furthermore, just as it has been my purpose to attack with bitter hostility certain practices of grammar and logic, and exclude them from the schools of Venus, so I have forbidden to the arts of Cypris those metonymic postures of rhetoricians which Mother Rhetoric embraces in her wide bosom, thereby gracing her speeches with many fine touches; for I feared lest if, in the pursuit of too strained a metaphor, she should change the predicate from its protesting subject into something wholly foreign, cleverness would be too far converted into a blemish, refinement into grossness, a trope into a fault, ornament into a show. [*De Planctu,* 478]

Grammatical and sexual prohibitions work hand in hand to prevent the use of "too strained a metaphor," which amounts to verbal and moral vice. Viciousness, in the tradition passed to the Middle Ages from Latin grammarians, is a rhetorical concept designating incorrect usage (barbarism and solecism) and carrying the bivalent resonance of a confusion of active and passive functions—a "retaining under the letters of the passive the nature of the active," that is, "an assumption of the law of the deponent"—and a confusion of genders. The homosexual, for example, is thus "both predi-

cate and subject, he becomes likewise of two declensions, he pushes the laws of grammar too far. He barbarously denies that he is a man. Art does not please him, but rather artifice; even that artificiality cannot be called metaphor; rather it sinks into vice" (*De Planctu*, 429).

The association of sophistry and sodomy which lies at the core of Alain's thought is evident in a broad range of both courtly and noncourtly vernacular forms. The rivalry of poets in the fabliau known as "La Contregengle," for instance, produces the charge of faulty logic ("Tu paroles moult folement. / Si me fez .I. argument / Et .I. sofisme tout boçu") alongside that of perversion ("Lez moi que j'avoie à voisins / .II. maus larrons de tes cousins; / Andui furent par bougresie / Ars en milieu de Normendie"); both being assimilable to verbal bestiality: "Tu n'as pas ta borde vendue, / Qui ainsi bestornes les nons."[9]

Nature in the *Roman de Silence* considers her work to have been linguistically perverted ("Que s'uevre li ont bestornee," [v. 2259]) by an act of false naming. As Cador confesses to Eufemie, whose own name suggests euphemistic inflation, the suffix of their daughter's name is against both nature and natural usage:

> Il iert només Silenscius;
> Et s'il avient par aventure
> Al descovrir de sa nature
> Nos muerons cest -us en -a,
> S'avra a non Scilencia.
> Se nos li tolons dont cest -us
> Nos li donrons natural us,
> Car cis -us est contre nature,
> Mais l'altres seroit par nature. [V. 2074]
>
> He will be named Silencius; and if it happens by chance that his nature is discovered, we will change this *-us* into *-a*, and she will be named Scilentia. If we withdraw then this *-us* we will restore natural law (us), because this *-us* is against nature and the other is according to nature.

Silence considers herself the "sophism of Nature" ("Dont se porpense en lui meïsme / Que Nature li fait sofime," [v. 2539]), as the *-us* that is against both custom ("Por che que l'-us est encontre us" [v. 2541]) and nature ("Car cis us n'est pas natureus" [v. 2554]) comes to constitute the gap—or specific minimal difference—within which this drama of language and lineage is played out.

This may seem like an excessive claim. Yet the *Roman de Silence*

9. *Recueil général des fabliaux*, ed. A. de Montaiglon and G. Raynaud (Paris: Librairie des bibliophiles, 1872–90), vol. 2, 257–60. "You speak very foolishly and construct for me an argument and a hunchbacked sophism." "Beside me I had for neighbors those two thieving cousins of yours; both were burned for buggery in the middle of Normandy." "You have not sold your tricks, you who bestialize (pervert) names."

focuses precisely upon the attempt to bring the suffix -a into consonance with the sexual identity of its bearer: "Silence atornent come feme" (v. 6664). No less than Chrétien's *Conte du Graal* (or, it might be argued, any courtly romance) Heldris's text is about the search for ancestral property and a proper name:[10]

> Segnor, que vos diroie plus?
> Ains ot non Scilensiüs:
> Ostés est -us, mis i est -a,
> Si est només Scilentia. [V. 6665]

Lords, what more can I say? Before she was named Scilensius. The *-us* was removed; the *-a* put in its place. And she was named Scilentia.

Once discovered, the proper name, according to the fictional possibility of verbal straightness or rectitude ("droiture"), restores the rule of nature, or sexual difference:

> D'illuec al tierc jor que Nature
> Ot recovree sa droiture
> Si prist Nature a repolir
> Par tolt le cors et a tolir
> Tolt quanque ot sor le cors de malle. [V. 6669]

On the third day after Nature had recovered its straightness Nature began to retool her body and to remove all traces of masculinity.

With Silence's assumption of her name the text also assumes its name, and the author is reduced literally to silence. "Segnor, que vos diroie plus?," Heldris asks, aware of the impossibility of further narrative progression.

To the extent to which the *Roman de Silence* maintains a false appellation and a nominal sexual difference ("Il a us d'ome tant usé / Et cel de feme refusé / Que poi en falt que il n'est males" [He has followed the custom of man for so long, and refused that of woman, that but for a little he is a man v. 2476]), in the interest of a true and real inheritance it symptomizes that which constitutes the proper of romance. That is, romance is written in the interstices between nature, an assumed propriety of names, sexual difference, and the rule of primogenital inheritance, on the one hand, and, on the other, the ruses of language expressed as artifice or hiding (and including silence), transgression of grammatical property, sexual inversion, and the deflection of a proper succession.

The impossibility of distinguishing the denotative impropriety of the heroine's name from its connotative propriety points, moreover, in the

10. See R. Dragonetti, *La Vie de la lettre au moyen âge* (Paris: Seuil, 1980); A. Leupin, *Le Graal et la littérature* (Lausanne: L'Age d'Homme, 1982); Ch. Méla, *Blanchefleur et le saint homme ou la semblance des reliques* (Paris: Seuil, 1979), 13–46; *Etymologies and Genealogies*, 203–12.

direction of a fundamental indeterminacy, the kind of indeterminacy which Alain identifies with the heteroclitic (and essentially dangerous) nature of poetry:

> Of such of these men as profess the grammar of love, some embrace only the masculine gender, some the feminine, others the common or indiscriminate. Indeed, some, as if of heteroclite gender, are declined irregularly, through the winter in the feminine, through the summer in the masculine. Some, in the pursuit of the logic of love, establish in their conclusions the law of the subject and the predicate in proper relation. Some who have the place of the subject have not learned how to form a predicate. Some only predicate and do not await the proper addition of the subject's end. Others, scorning to enter into the court of Dione, devise a miserable sport below its vestibule. [*De Planctu,* 463]

It is, ultimately, the mobility of poetic language and of sexual identity that represents for Nature the most potent threat to the *straight*ness—*correct*ness, *regular*ity, *ortho*doxy—of grammar and to the continuity of lineage. A lack of definition—and it should be remembered that the grammar of this early period was based upon the *recti*tude of definition—is tantamount to the dissolution of paternal relations and the transgression of Nature's and society's most sacred taboo. What this means is that the *Roman de Silence* represents an occulted attempt to transform poetry into grammar, or, put another way, to recuperate the oxymoronic impossibility of the hermaphrodite—the "malle de femiele," the "vallés meschine" (vv. 2041, 3763)—by the straightness of proper imposition: " . . . Nature/Ot recovree sa droiture." To the modern dictum "Nature abhors a vacuum" Alain and Heldris might have preferred "Natura abhoret hermaphroditos," with the understanding that the poet is himself the polyvalent figure who, in the words of the troubadour Bernart Marti, "will transform a bitch into a sire and raise today until tomorrow."[11]

Silence represents the systematic refusal of univocal meaning. A multiform figure like Merlin whom she captures, she is the liar, the deceiver and trickster—a "bel semblant" (v. 5001) who wears other clothes and takes other names in defiance of Nature's rule of difference: "Car cil a fait de son non cange, / Si l'a mué por plus estrange" (v. 3175). [For this one has changed his name and has thus made it stranger.] Silence embodies the pluralistic possibilities of fiction whose multiple functions she assumes. She both listens ("Silence entent et escolte," [v. 3403]) and is deaf ("Silence lor fait sord orelle," [v. 3533]). Silence silences ("Et c'on nos fait por lui taizir" [v. 3312]) and is silent. She speaks ("C'onques ne fu tels abstinence / Com poés oïr de Silence" [v. 2659]) and is even garrulous ("Dont respondi la dame fole: / Silence, trop avés parole!" [v. 6273]).

11. "Far vos a de gossa can / Et d'eyssa guiza levar / Lo dia tro l'endeman. . . ." (*Les Poésies de Bernart Marti,* ed. E. Hoepffner [Paris: Champion, 1929], 5).

The very undetermined nature of Silence, and in particular her undefined sexuality, transforms "li vallés qui est mescine" (v. 3785) into the object of universal desire. Queen Eufeme tries three times to seduce her, the King of France is enthralled, King Ebain eventually marries her. Such generalized desire for Silence again thematizes the writer's desire for the proper name enabling closure; it makes the possibility of an "outside" or a "beyond" language both the object of and the catalyst to eroticism. And while, for example, Euphemie may enjoy speaking to Cador ("Tant croist l'Amor plus a plenté / Car puis qu'en parler ont delit" [v. 752]), it is silence or that which is not said that nourishes passion:

> Car cho fait Eufemie irer,
> Que cascun jor voit que desire
> Et de son desir se consire.
> Ele desire qu'il seüst
> Qu'ele altre ami que lui n'eüst:
> Mais qu'en li tant de cuer n'a mie
> Que die a lui qu'est s'amie.
> Dirai jo dont qu'ele ait delit
> Quant el ne fait, grant ne petit,
> De quanque li siens cuers desire,
> Fors lui amer sans ozer dire? [V. 760]

> This upset Eufemie, since each day she sees that which she desires; and she is confused by her desire. She desires that he know that she would have no other friend but him. But she lacks the courage to tell him. Should I say that she is happy when she doesn't do in any way what her heart desires, but instead loves him without daring to speak?

What is remarkable here is neither that the nature of Silence's mother causes her to remain silent ("Cil l'aime et dire ne li oze" [v. 405]), nor that silence increases desire, but that the drama of speech withheld by the lover is set against—indeed is virtually indistinguishable from—the poet's hesitation before his own language: "Dirai jo dont qu'ele ait delit . . . ?"

The chiasmatically impossible effects of speech withheld make the lover analogous to the poet. For if Eufemie's desire is fed by the gaps or "trous" of that which remains unsaid, Cador recognizes the difficulty of silence, which makes of him a trouvère: "Ne li os, las! amor rover; / Nel taisir ne puis bien trover" (v. 663, see also v. 768). [Alas, I do not dare ask her for her love, nor can I find any good in silence.] The desire of the lover is a desire to speak, to avow, just as the desire of the poet is to break silence—

> Maistre Heldris de Cornuälle
> Escrist ces viers trestolt a talle.
> A çals quis unt commande et rueve,
> El conmencier dé suns qu'il trouve . . . [V. 1]

> Master Heldris of Cornwall wrote these verses such as they are. To those who have the power and command, in the beginning out of sounds he invented. . . .

—and to speak of Silence: "De la meschine vus voel dire . . . " (v. 753). In short, the erotic struggle to speak, which occupies such a large portion of the beginning of the romance (vv. 406–1119), encapsulates the arch-struggle of the poet or jongleur to articulate his own desire for silence. The dictum "Nel taisir ne puis bien trover" applies equally to Heldris and Cador and can be understood alternately as "there is no profit" and "there is no poetry" in silence.

The troubadour or trouvère is one who attempts to fill the silences or "trous" in speech (which he also makes by speaking). Similarly, the lover is one who desires the other, but only in so far as he or she desires speech. Sexual desire is ultimately a desire for language, which explains the emphasis throughout the *Roman de Silence* upon the word *golozer* meaning "to dispute," "to be jealous of," "to desire," and "to gloss." Eufemie is jealous of an imagined rival ("De l'une est Eufemie gloze" [v. 987]) but does not dare to break silence ("Qu'en li n'en a pas tant d'ozer / Qu'ele sor li l'oze glozer" [v. 989]). Both lovers are jealous and desirous of the speech of the other ("Et l'uns et l'autres le golouse" [v. 1340]), and their desire remains indissociable from that of the poet to speak of Silence ("A parler de l'enfant goloze" [v. 2345]). This may seem like a minor philological point hidden in a canonically minor work, but its implications in fact extend to much of what we understand about poetic elaboration in the High Middle Ages. It virtually stands on its ear that which positivist scholarship has from the beginning considered to be the medieval writer's servile glossing of Classical texts, the *locus classicus* of which is the Prologue to the *Lais* of Marie de France:

> Custume fu as ancïens,
> Ceo testimoine Precïens,
> Es livres ke jadis feseient,
> Assez oscurement diseient
> Pur ceus ki a venir esteient
> Et ki aprendre les deveient,
> K'i peüssent gloser la lettre
> Et de lur sen le surplus mettre.[12]

> As Priscian bears witness, it was the custom of the Ancients to speak obscurely enough in their books so that those who came afterward and would be obliged to teach (or learn) them would be able to gloss the letter and with their sense fill in the rest.

12. Marie de France, *Lais*, ed. J. Rychner (Paris: Champion, 1981), v. 9.

According to our reading of the couple "gloser/golozer," the poet (like the philologist) actively seeks the text's points of resistance—the holes or silences that have through time become elusive and obscure. The desire "to supplement sense," or to fill in such gaps, is, as R. Dragonetti and others maintain, ultimately a desire for the letter that is inseparable from the desire for poetry itself.[13]

Poetry is in the *Roman de Silence* thematized in terms of seduction. Silence, like Dante's Paolo and Francesca or the heroine of Marie's *Guigemar*, is allured by books. She is naturally attracted to letters ("Li enfes est de tel orine / Que il meïsme se doctrine") [The child's origin is such that he teaches himself (v. 2385)]) and to the trouvères whose skill she quickly surpasses. When, in fact, her talent comes to be recognized as an abundant source of income, it incites the jealousy of her teachers and underscores yet another resonance of the verb "trouver" with which the romance begins:

> Un clers poroit lonc tans aprendre
> Por rime trover et por viers,
> Tant par est cis siecles diviers,
> Qu'ançois poroit rime trover
> Qui peüst en cest mont trover
> Blos solement un sol princhier. . . .
> Volés esprover gent avere?
> Servés lé bien, come vo pere:
> Dont serés vus li bien venus,
> Bons menestreus, bien recheüs.
> Mais, puis qu'il venra al rover,
> Savés que i porés trover?
> Bien laide chiere et une enfrume,
> Car cend est tols jors la costume. [Vv. 14ff.]

> A Cleric might learn for a long time in order to compose rhyme and verse; yet this world is so debased that even if he composes rhyme he might stumble upon a stingy prince. . . . Do you want to test stingy people? Serve them well, like your father; for you will be a good and well received performer. But when it comes to asking for a reward, do you know what you might find? Hard times and miserliness, for this is always the custom.

If the trouvère is the one whose invention fills holes, it is the holes in his own pocket that he would like to fill. "Trouver"—"to find," "to invent"—also means "to earn." There is literally no profit in silence (see above p.

13. See Dragonetti, *Le Gai savoir dans la rhétorique courtoise* (Paris: Seuil, 1982), 111–30.

90), as linguistic and economic value are assimilated to each other. Silence, the inscription of the poet within the text, is, like Balzac's Sarazine (see Barthes's *S/Z*), a virtuoso who, as the object of universal desire, also becomes the source of seemingly limitless wealth. Silence is golden.[14]

Poetry, like money, represents the possibility of self-creating, purely specular and speculative value whose very lack of origin signals the impossibility of reproduction or genealogical succession:

> Car qui violt avoir amasser,
> Quant il n'en ist honors ne biens?
> Assés valt certes mains que fiens.
> Li fiens encrassce vials la terre,
> Mais li avoirs c'on entreserre
> Honist celui ki l'i entasse. [V. 46]

> For who wants to amass wealth when neither good nor honor can come from it? It is certainly worth less than manure. Manure at least enriches the earth. But the money one buries shames the one who hoards it.

The "honors" or "biens" mentioned above are the equivalent of a fief or of what in legal terms was known as a "propre"—immovable property, real estate, tangible wealth attached to a name quite literally rooted in the soil that also bears it. Money, on the other hand, represents a mobile personal good—that which potentially renders a propre saleable, nominalizes title. Because it is unattached, without origin, it is also considered sterile. "Pecunia quantum est de se per seipsam non fructificat," claims St. Bonaventure, echoing the dictum that can be traced all the way back to Aristotle and according to which "nummus non parit nummos."[15]

To cause money to parturate constituted an act against nature analogous to poetic invention. This is why, as A. Pézard and E. Vance have shown, Dante associates blasphemy, sodomy and usury, and why, as Nicholas Oresme—the most important medieval authority on minting—claims, currency manipulation is essentially the incorrect imposition of a name: "And besides, in these changes by which profit accrues, it is necessary to call something which is not a penny, a penny, and which is not a pound, a pound."[16] The usurer and the poet are colleagues—fellow disruptors of genealogy through monetary and verbal impropriety, interest (liter-

14. "Et se l'estorie ne me ment, / Il a des estrumens apris / Car moult grant traval i a mis, / Qu'ains que li tiers ans fust passés / A il ses maistres tols passés, / Et moult grant avoir lor gaägne" (v. 3138). [And if the story does not lie, he learned to play instruments. Because he worked hard at it, before three years had passed he had surpassed all his teachers and earned them great wealth.]

15. See *Etymologies and Genealogies*, 164–74.

16. Nicholas Oresme, *De Moneta*, ed. C. Johnson (London: Thomas Nelson, 1956), 26. See also A. Pézard, *Dante sous la pluie de feu* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1950); E. Vance, "Désir, rhétorique et texte," *Poétique* 42 (1980), 137–55.

ally the production of difference) and metaphor. Both meet, moreover, in the figure of Silence who produces song from the soundlessness of her name and money from song. Like the counterfeiter, she engenders herself, becomes, in the final account of her adventures, the author of her own tale.[17]

Silence's autochthonous invention of herself makes her the object of universal desire and incurs the enmity of her fellow poets who can only conceive of her unnatural musical skill in terms of plagiarism or theft: "Cis a emblé nostre savoir. . . . / Nostre damages doblera, / Car nostre avoir enportera" (vv. 3268, 3277) [This one has stolen our knowledge. . . . He will double our loss, for he will take away our wealth.] The *Roman de Silence* thus inscribes its own origin from which we can deduce an important element of external literary history in the rivalry of jongleurs whose competing accounts—like the rival counts with which the tale begins—make them sufficiently jealous of Silence to attempt to silence her: "Pur quoi iriens nos en Espagne, / Compaig, por golozer gaägne? / Nostre espoir gist en lui ocire" (v. 3329). [Why should we go to Spain, friends, to earn wages? Our hope is in killing him.] Here we glimpse the hidden agenda of such an inscription—the author's own relation to the text; for what is rhetoricized as the poet's desire for gain ("golozer gaägne") reflects ultimately what we have identified as Heldris's own desire to speak of Silence ("A parler de l'enfant goloze" [v. 2345]) and his jealousy of her.

This suggests that the *Roman de Silence* is essentially about the writer's relation to writing. And if the process of poetic production is mediated through a variety of metaphors of impropriety (perversion, sophistry, excrement ["li fiens," cf. above p. 92], money, and theft), the impropriety of metaphor traces a closed circuit of specific textual effects. The transgression of verbal, economic, and sexual property provokes an indeterminacy that within the world of romance occasions desire, which in turn produces the unnatural and heteroclitic language of poetry. As Cador confesses, desire denatures: "Mais jo sui tols desnaturés / Et si cuic estre enfaiturés"

17. Silence to Ebain: "Sire, se Dex bien me consente / Il n'est pas drois que je vos mente. / Mes pere fist de moi son buen. . . . [in text] / Et quant jo ving a tel aäge / Que gent comencent estre sage / Mes pere me fist asavoir / Que jo ja ne poroie avoir, / Sire, ireté en vostre tierre. / Et por mon iretage quierre / Me rova vivre al fuer de malle, . . . / A. XV. ans vig a cort, bials sire. . . . / Vos m'envoiastes dela mer. . . . / Puis reving jo en vostre tierre, / S'aidai a finer vostre guierre. . . . / La vertés nel puet consentir / Que jo vos puisse rien mentir, / Ne jo n'ai soig mais de taisir" (v. 6590). [Sire, as God well desires, it is not right that I lie to you. My father made me his heir. . . . And when I reached the age at which people begin to be wise, my father explained to me that I could never have an inheritance in your country, Sire. And in order to seek my inheritance, he commanded me to live in the guise of a male. . . . At the age of fifteen, I came to court, beautiful sire. . . . You sent me across the sea. . . . Then I returned to your land and helped to end your war. . . . The truth cannot permit that I lie to you about anything. Nor have I cared ever to remain silent.]

(v. 1031). And, as Eufemie discovers, what it denatures is language itself:

> Li jors apert et Eufemie
> Saut sus que ne s'atarja mie.
> Vient en la cambre a son ami.
> Dist li: "Amis, parlés, haymmi!"
> Dire li dut: "Parlés a moi,"
> Mais l'Amors li fist tel anoi
> Que dire dut: "Parlés a mi,"
> Se li a dit: "Parlés, haymmi!"
> "Parlés a mi" dire li dut,
> Mais, "haymmi!" sor le cuer li jut.
> Si tost com ele ot dit "amis,"
> En la clauze "haymmi!" a mis.
> "Ami" dut dire, et "haymmi!" dist,
> Por la dolor qui en li gist. [V. 889]

The day broke and Eufemie who did not delay jumped up. She came to her beloved's room and said to him: "Friend, speak, hate me." She meant to say, "Speak to me," but Love pulled such a trick as to make her say "Speak, hate me" instead of "Speak to me." But "hate me" remained on her heart. As soon as she said "amis" she said "hate me!" She should have said "Ami," and she said "hate me!" because of the pain that is in her.

It is hard to imagine a more eloquent expression of desire and the desire for speech ("Amis, parlés. . . . Parlés a moi") as catalysts to linguistic distortion ("Si tost com ele ot dit 'amis,' / En la clauze 'haymmi!' a mis"). Desire alienates language which, alienated, becomes an even greater source of desire and the desire for language: "Cis mos 'amis' fait esperer / Cador qu'or pora averer" (v. 903).

Two metaphors of dislocation and distance dominate the *Roman de Silence* above and beyond the ways in which the process of poetry is thematized. The first has to do with clothing and has a long history in the Middle Ages, one evident in both popular and learned traditions. The author of "La Vieille Truande," for example, assimilates fables and fabliaux to "cloth, shoes, and songs":

> Des fables fet on les fabliaus,
> Et des notes les sons noviaus,
> Et des materes les canchons,
> Et des dras, cauces et cauchons. [Montaiglon and Raynaud, vol. 5, 171]

Out of fables one makes fabliaux; out of notes, new sounds; out of material, songs; and out of cloth, socks and shoes.

Within the realm of high culture Macrobius (fifth century) claims that "a frank and open exposition of herself is distasteful to Nature, who, just as

she has withheld an understanding of herself from the uncouth senses of man by enveloping herself in variegated garments, has also desired to have her secrets handled by more prudent individuals through fabulous narratives. . . . In truth, divinities always have preferred to be known in the fashion assigned to them by ancient popular tradition, which made images of beings that had no physical form, represented them as of different ages though they were subject neither to growth nor decay, and gave them clothes and ornaments though they had no bodies."[18]

The relation of truth, Nature, to its representation or image is thus that of the body to the clothes which are a potent paradigm of representation in Macrobius's terms—bodiless, empty, less capable of expressing a reality exterior to it than of covering up an absence that is also, finally, scandalous, Macrobius continues: "Numenius, a philosopher with a curiosity for occult things, had revealed to him in a dream the outrage he had committed against the gods by proclaiming his interpretation of the Eleusinian mysteries. The Eleusinian goddesses themselves, dressed in the garments of courtesans, appeared to him standing before an open brothel, and when in his astonishment he asked for the reason for this shocking conduct, they replied that he had driven them from their sanctuary of modesty and prostituted them to every passer-by." Beneath the garment of representation lies the scandal of courtesans, just as beneath the ill-fitting masculine clothing of Silence lies a female anatomy: "Il est desos les dras mescine" (v. 2480).

It may be argued that what we find beneath the robe of Silence is not an absence but the presence of the body, which, Heldris maintains, is merely another layer of clothing: "Li cors n'est mais fors sarpelliere" (v. 1845). What remains essential, however, is not whether or not Nature lurks beneath the veil of representation, but the incongruity of the rapport between the body and that which covers it. Clothes are for Heldris the equivalent of a refusal of nature: "Quant li enfes pot dras user, / Por se nature refuser / L'ont tres bien vestu a fuer d'ome" (v. 2359, see also v. 2826). [When the child could use clothes to refuse her nature, they dressed her well in the guise of a man.] Clothes, like the letter that masks sense, serve more to obscure than to make plain. As Silence admits, they merely patch that which they cannot contain: "Vos savés bien de ma nature: / Jo sui, fait il, nel mescrées, / Com li malvais dras encrées" (v. 3640). [You know well my nature: do not be deceived, I am like bad cloth which is patched.]

The second major articulation of the effects of desire upon language has to do with wax, letters, and heat:

18. Ambrosii Theodosii Macrobii, *Commentarii in Somnium Scipionis*, ed. J. Willis (Leipzig: Teubner, 1970), 7–8. See also the representation of Nature's garment in Alain de Lille's *De Planctu*.

Escriziés moi ens en le cire
Letres que om bien puisse lire.
Faites le cire dont remetre.
Enne perist donques la lettre?
Oïl, par Deu! par le calor.
Nient plus n'a cuers d'amant valor
De bien retenir s[a] mimorie,
Que cire encontre fu victorie
De retenir la lettre escrite.
Qu'angoisse d'amor n'est petite
Car cho qu'est voirs cho fait mescroire,
Et tenir fause coze a voire; . . . .
Si en sunt mult en grant batalle
Que al sorplus ne facent falle [Vv. 1169, 1187]

> Write for me thus in wax letters that we can read. Remelt the wax. Does the letter perish? Yes, by God, because of the heat. No more does the heart of a lover have the power to retain its impression (memory) than the wax the written letter. For the pain of love is not small and makes one mistake the truth and hold false things for true. . . . They are so troubled that they almost missed love-making (surplus).

Just as heat melts the inscription upon wax, desire erases memory, which produces the effect of paranoia. Not only is cognition troubled ("Car ki bien aime n'est sans dote, / Ne ne puet tenir droit rote, / Ne cho qu'il set ne puet savoir" [For whoever loves well is not without doubt, nor can he hold a straight path, nor can he know that which he knows] (v. 1165), but all interpretation, because of the multiplicity of its possibilities, becomes impossible ("Car cho qu'est voirs fait mescroire, / Et tenir fause coze a voire" [For it makes one disbelieve that which is true, and hold a false thing as true]). It is, finally, the inaccessibility of univocal and stable knowledge that renders meaning, identified above with Marie de France's "surplus sense of the letter," fallacious: "Si en sunt mult en grant batalle / Que al sorplus ne face falle." [They are so troubled that they might miss the surplus.]

The wax, letters, and heat paradigm points in the direction of a literal dislocation: "Li frois ne puet avoir valor / Ki puisse vaintre my calor" (v. 1019), complains Cador, playing upon the difference of only one letter between his own name and his desire for Eufemie and drawing our attention to the omnipresence of such wordplays. Read at the level of the letter, the *Roman de Silence* can be said to be based upon a series of graphemic displacements—of prefixes (Nature/Noreture, ozer/glozer, medecine/mescine); of suffixes (Eufeme/Eufemie, Silentius/Silentia); of accents (conte/conte); of accents and letters (oire/oirre/oir/oïr), etc. And it can be said to be about a series of stolen letters.

The central section of the romance turns around an exchange of forged, misplaced, and misinterpreted letters between Ebain, his wife, and the King of France.[19] Here historical mimetism joins the problematics of displacement outlined above, for rarely do we catch such a profound look at the workings of the medieval chancellery. Yet rarely do we find a more conscious rendering of the deliberate and unwitting errors of sense produced by the office responsible for the composition, transcription, transmission, and interpretation of letters. Thus Eufeme's desire for Silence leads her to intercept and alter the letter of safe conduct Silence carries into exile:

> Pense que se li briés esploite
> Que li rois violt en cire metre
> Qu'ele mesme fera tel letre
> Dont cil avra grant dostorbance,
> Sel puet quil portera en France. [V. 4276]

She thinks that she will distort the letter that the king wants to put into wax and that she will make a letter that will cause great harm to the one who carries it to France.

As in the Pauline dictum, the letter kills: "Car sa mort porte escrite en cire." (V. 4374). [For he carries his death written in wax.] It literally prescribes dismemberment—

> De par roi Ebayn, son segnor,
> Escrist al roi de France un brief
> Qu'il tolle al message le cief
> Qui les lettres a lui enporte. [V. 4320]

From King Ebain, her lord, she wrote a letter to the King of France that he should cut off the head of the messenger who brings the letter to him.

—and is itself dismembered:

> Que il por rien ne l'en deporte,
> Car il a fait al roi tel honte
> Qu'il ne le violt metre en conte. . . .
> Cest brief a la roïne escrit. [Vv. 4324, 4331]

For he (the King of France) should not fail in this for any reason for he (the messenger) has done to the King (of England) such shame that it cannot be put into writing. . . . Such is the letter the queen wrote.

The "shame of Silence" ("Car il a fait al roi tel honte") cannot be detached from a certain textual fissure—the scandal of that which cannot be said

19. For a contemporary discussion of the problematics of letters, see J. Lacan, "Le Séminaire sur 'La Lettre volée'" in *Ecrits* 1 (Paris: Seuil, 1970), 19–78; J. Derrida, "Le Facteur de la vérité," *Poétique* 21 (1975), 96–147; B. Johnson, "The Frame of Reference: Poe, Lacan, Derrida," *Yale French Studies* 55/56 (1977), 457–505.

("Qu'il ne le violt metre en conte"), which is that the letter is always already dislocated and that silence, spoken, always distorts. This is the secret contained in the letter's fold and why the folding and sealing of letters comes, in the exposure by Ebain's priest of Eufeme's forgery, to occupy such a large place:

> Quant ele clost et mist en ploi
> Tolt alsi qu'ele n'eüst cure
> Que jo veïssce l'escriture! . . . .
> Et quant ele ot mon brief ploié
> Sil me rendi bien ferm loié
> Et je l'enseëlai en oire. [Vv. 4990, 5073]

When she closed (the letter) and folded it she made sure I did not see the writing! . . . And when she had folded my letter she returned it to me well closed, and I sealed it in haste.

Folded and sealed, the letter signals a specular reversal of the historically mimetic conditions of its production. Put in other terms, the tale does not simply reflect the distortions of human intention it supposedly portrays but actually produces them, as the Queen's defense makes clear: "Dist que li brief vint par un conte. . . . Et c'un cuens paltoniers fallis / Canja les letres par envie / Por tolir a l'enfant la vie" (vv. 5100, 5112). [She says the letter came from a count (tale). . . . And that the felonious count (account) changed the letters out of jealousy in order to have the child killed.] Taken literally, the felonious tale ("cuens paltoniers") perverts the letter because of jealousy or desire ("Canja les letres par envie"), which, because it is also the sign of desire for the letter, transforms the romance into a map of its own misreadings.

The *Roman de Silence* is in fact all about misreading. Silence is a female version of Alexis with whom she shares a common parental name, Eufemie, Eufemiien (Alexis's father). Both refuse the law of the father, depart and return to the paternal roof where they encounter the problem of recognition. Together they summon the spectre of troubled reading. Cador, informed of his daughter's return in the guise of one of the jongleurs he has banished ("Veés la vostre fil Silence, / Si a apris des estrumens" [Here is your son Silence; he has learned to play instruments (V. 3539)], fails to see: "Son fil demande et il le tient: / Il le convoite et nel voit nient" (v. 3619). [He asks for his son and he is holding him: he desires him and does not see him at all.] This failure of vision is at bottom a matter of reading in which the count (as well as the tale) is blind to his (its) own progeny (or meaning) and in which Silence becomes the very figure of Alexia. All of which transforms the problem of indeterminacy with which we began into the perceptual and cognitive impossibility of seeing, reading, hearing, or speaking the silence whose transgression is the premise of fiction.

In conclusion, the *Roman de Silence* symptomizes the paradox of the poet who speaks the impossibility both of silence and of an always already dislocated speech. Its heroine, by her own account, represents the specular image of that which poetry cannot say, which is that to speak the truth is to be disinherited:

> Ne li vallés ki est mescine
> Ne violt pas dire son covine,
> De sa nature verité,
> Qu'il perdroit donques s'ireté. [V. 3871, see also v. 4169]
>
> The squire who was a girl did not want to tell the secret of her true nature, for she would lose her inheritance.

To name oneself—"Silence ai non . . ." (v. 6140)—is to contradict oneself, as the myriad of contradictions attached to the name joins what we might think of as the fiction of fiction or the poet's desire "to begin without making a sound" ("Car moult grans volentés me point / De muevre rime et conmencier, / Sans noise faire, et sans tenchier" [v. 104]) to the critic's desire to have the last word by making Silence speak and, finally, to silence her.