

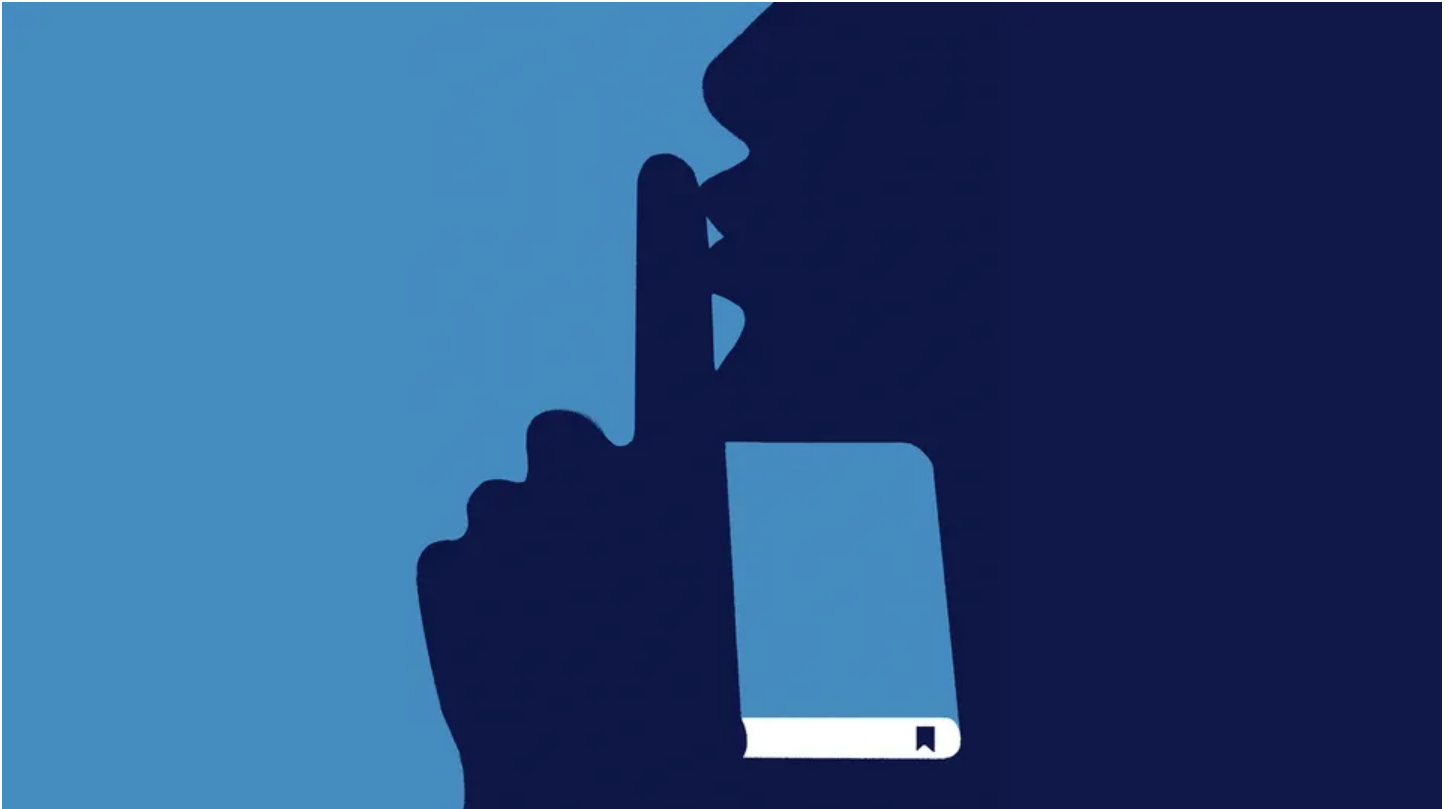
BOOKS

HOW GOLDEN IS SILENCE, ACTUALLY?

A secret history of shutting up.

By Anthony Lane

August 3, 2026



Pythagoras reportedly required his students to remain silent for five full years before they could presume to speak. Illustration by Ben Hickey



Save this story

One of the virtues of John Bunyan, the author of “The Pilgrim’s Progress,” is how little he bothered with the high and mighty. He preferred the low and ordinary, in his discourse as in the company he kept. In “Grace Abounding

to the Chief of Sinners”—his spiritual autobiography, which went through many editions after first being published, in 1666—revelations tumble upon him when he is least expecting them. “I was walking to and fro in a good man’s shop, bemoaning of myself in my sad and doleful state,” he writes. We’ve all been there. Suddenly, mid-shopping, he hears the word of the Lord:

It brought light with it, and commanded a silence in my heart, of all those tumultuous thoughts, that did before use, like masterless hell-hounds, to roar and bellow, and make an hideous noise within me.

The storm is nothing, it seems, compared with the eye at its core. Often added to the end of “Grace Abounding” is Bunyan’s account of his arrest, in 1660, for preaching in public. He was torn from his wife and children (an act that he likens to “pulling the flesh from the bones”) and imprisoned. When a magistrate proposed that he hold his tongue and leave the country, warning that he would “stretch by the neck for it” if he disobeyed, Bunyan replied simply that, if released, he would carry on preaching. An illustration in an American edition of the book from 1905 bears the caption “Bunyan refuses to be silenced.” So, there you have it. Silence is the holy hush that descends upon you, amid the clatter of a sinful world, *and* the gag that you have to rip off if truth is to be told. How can it be both?

Puzzles of this kind are strewn throughout “Silence: A Literary History” (Oxford), a new book by Kate McLoughlin. It’s a shame that Bunyan doesn’t rate a mention in her survey, because he has much to say about not saying much; it’s also a surprise, because the book is, to say the least, accommodating. It runs to six hundred and ninety-six pages, two hundred and twenty-one of which are consumed by notes, in a typeface so tiny that your intraocular muscles may file suit against your brain. Dropping the volume on your foot would cause an agonized and very non-silent yelp.

To be fair, McLoughlin has her hands full. Silence is one of those spillover

themes, like desire or faith or sickness, to which it is difficult to set a limit. So irrepressible is her hunt for evidence that she does not falter even when it leads to the bathroom door:

The Anti-Noise League, founded in 1933, led efforts literally to turn down the volume of everyday life. In 1935, the League held an exhibition at the Science Museum in South Kensington, featuring exhibits such as the ‘Silent Symphonic W.C. Suite’, a lavatory with a ‘very silent’ flush.

Where, you wonder, will the quest conceivably end? I was hoping that McLoughlin, who teaches English literature at Oxford, might round things out by attending a thrash-metal festival, or a campanology contest, or maybe a resounding royal flush, but even then she would, I suspect, be moved to explore the quivering silence that succeeds an extremity of sound. As it happens, she reserves her most elegant chapter for last, guiding us through the witty winding down of Haydn’s Symphony No. 45, the “Farewell,” in which “the score directs the musicians, section by section, to snuff out the candles on their music stands and leave the stage.”

Chronologically, “Silence: A Literary History” covers everything from the empty halls of “Beowulf” to COVID lockdowns and beyond. (There are glances even further back, too; I like to think of Harvard professors turning deep green with envy at the news that Pythagoras required his pupils to keep quiet for *five years* before they could presume to pipe up.) Space is found not only for “the twelfth-century Premonstratensian abbot Philip of Harveng” but also for the BBC show “Strictly Come Dancing,” which, in 2021, cut the music mid-routine, thus allowing the audience to share, however briefly, in the silence to which the dancing competitor—an actress, deaf since birth—was accustomed. The result was, for prime-time TV, something to marvel at. Pythagoras would have given it a ten out of ten.

As the book rolls on, we pass familiar monuments. McLoughlin lingers to pay

her respects to Donne, Milton, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Keats—who writes of “the silence when some rhymes are coming out,” as if they were snails emerging after the rain—and a mustering of major novelists, including Samuel Richardson (whose epistolary epic “Clarissa,” not far short of a million words long, teems nonetheless with the unspoken), George Eliot, Henry James, and Thomas Hardy. The last of these keeps presenting us with couples who can’t, won’t, or feel no need to say what they mean, let alone what they mean to each other, even as they carry on conversing. “Jude the Obscure” is a case in point:

When they talked on an indifferent subject, as now, there was ever a second silent conversation passing between their emotions, so perfect was the reciprocity between them.

It is typical of Hardy that he should move from such parlor drama to the vast and exhausted quiet that followed the Armistice, at the end of the First World War. In a poem titled “And There Was a Great Calm,” from 1920, he writes of bewildered soldiers murmuring, “Strange, this! How? All firing stopped.” McLoughlin quotes those words and backs them up by reproducing a graphic of an audio recording made by the U.S. Army Signal Corps at that exact time, in 1918. Stuttering lines, on the left, jerking up and down, denote the rattle of guns; on the right, the lines are all but flat, as silence descends. (Can an official document become a work of art, by dint of what it gravely represents?) In memory of that hour and in honor of the dead, a two-minute silence is still observed across the United Kingdom at 11 A.M., on the eleventh day of the eleventh month, every year.

As customs go, a nationwide suspension of normal activity is unusual. (I was once at a British airport, trudging through security, when the two-minute silence struck; the expression on the faces of the travellers around me, as the conveyor belts shuddered to a halt, was one of international bafflement.) Only once, though, in passing, does McLoughlin refer to the two-minute silence, as if discomforted by its state-sponsored formality. On the whole, she leans

toward more radical forms of reticence, born of protest or despair down the centuries. “In the 2020s, as in the 1600s and 1700s, political upheavals have a silencing effect,” she writes. Of the three components of the quiet life that she cites—“traumatised silences, Stoic silences, and happy silences”—the third tends to get muscled out, at least within this book, by the other two. Thanks to McLoughlin, we are introduced to “the silences that surround transness—hiddenness, rejection, defiance of conventional categories” and to “the terrifying silences of the climate crisis.” And don’t forget the kind of silence that “fosters careful attentiveness to other non-human life-forms.” In other words, if you shout at your dog, you’re barking up the wrong tree.

There is something in “Silence: A Literary History” to suit all tastes. Whatever flavor you fancy, take a lick. “Here are embarrassing silences, controlling silences, silences that provoke outrage and sympathy, silences that shift and slip away,” McLoughlin writes. The temptation to sniff the pages for a vanilla silence or a strawberry silence is almost overwhelming. On a single page, silences are described as “variously breath-taking, poignant, consternating, hilarious and self-evidently true,” and then, a few lines on, as “saddening, breath-taking, soothing, demanding, difficult to understand and awe-inspiring.” That’s a lot of breath to take.

In terms of latitude, much of what McLoughlin chooses to investigate is silence-adjacent, as it were, rather than the genuine article. The craving for solitude and serenity, say, may be intense, but it doesn’t logically imply the shutting of one’s trap. Not all retreats are monastic, and seclusion can easily nourish a hothouse of gossip. Also, gratifying though it is that the book should avert its gaze from the literary A-list in favor of lesser-known figures, there is a discernible sleight of hand, or a hefty wrench, as they are levered into place. The most entertaining of these is undoubtedly Margaret Cavendish, the Duchess of Newcastle, who died in 1673, at the age of fifty, leaving more than twenty volumes of poems, plays, and essays. It’s true that she called herself “a

Monster for Silence,” and that she wrote a play titled “The Lady Contemplation” (1662), but she was, in the flesh, the quintessence of volubility—one of those people who, by her own account, gabble “so Much, and Fast, as none can Understand what they Say, or would Say, Indeed, so Fast, as they make neither Stop, nor Distinction.” Hark to the gulping of those commas. “Cavendish had chutzpah,” McLoughlin declares, and it’s hard to disagree, but let’s be frank: one thing the Duchess did *not* possess was a talent for keeping mum.

With Shakespeare, predictably, McLoughlin is on firmer ground. We are alerted to the startling scene in “Coriolanus” when the hero addresses his wife as if she were an abstract noun: “My gracious silence, hail!” She does not reply. (Think of the options for an actress here. Should she modestly lower her gaze, obeying the salutation, or flinch, or freeze the guy with a fierce glare?) McLoughlin’s most searching work is inspired by “The Winter’s Tale,” whose concluding scene unfolds on a plane of the miraculous. Years after Leontes, a king contorted by jealousy, has ordered that his wife, the blameless Hermione, be put to death, a curtain is drawn back to reveal what appears to be a statue of her. It stirs, and mutely comes to life. “If this be magic, let it be an art / Lawful as eating,” Leontes says. When Hermione speaks at last, it is pointedly not to him but to their daughter. All the more delightful, therefore, to learn from McLoughlin of an early-nineteenth-century production of the play in which Leontes was dressed as Napoleon—boo, hiss!—and his marmoreal queen as an English lady, nobly greeting him with a diss.

But how, pray, can you concoct a literary history of silence and not spare even a sentence for “Henry IV, Part 2,” which features a character *called* Silence? During the orchard scene in the fifth act, a little the worse—or, this being Shakespeare, the better—for drink, Silence, a minor country magistrate, grows untrue to his name and begins to sing. Falstaff, listening to these scraps of ditties, remarks, “I did not think Master Silence had been a man of this

mettle.” Silence’s answer is both woozy and bridling: “Who, I? I have been merry twice and once ere now.” In 1945, there was a celebrated staging of the play at London’s Old Vic, starring Laurence Olivier and Ralph Richardson. The critic Kenneth Tynan reviewed it in this magazine, and wrote of the ripened scenes in the orchard, “If I had only half an hour more to spend in theatres, and could choose at large, no question but I would have these.” The breaking of silence in a tipsy twilight, if only for the sake of comical nonsense, can be as blessed as the break of dawn.

It is unfair, perhaps, to chide the author of “Silence: A Literary History” for her omissions, but her decision to plumb the religious depths of her subject and leave untouched the legal ramifications—the use and abuse of Miranda rights, for one thing, which are a staple of much crime fiction—may strike some readers as perverse. McLoughlin herself is nicely alive to such charges, kicking off her final chapter thus: “Despite its length, readers may pounce on what *isn’t* in this book.” Pouncing, of course, is one of the eternal joys of reading, just as sports fans know no keener pleasure than that of kvetching about the players who weren’t picked for a vital game and who would have surely made all the difference. Hence my belief that Nietzsche, who shows up only fitfully in McLoughlin’s book, is the tight end that she needs. Here he is, sounding off in “Ecce Homo”:

The rudest word, the rudest letter, are more good-natured, more honest than silence. Those who keep silent almost always lack subtlety and politeness of the heart; silence is an objection, swallowing down necessarily produces a bad character—it even ruins the stomach. All those given to silence are dyspeptic.

As so often, Nietzsche throws down a gauntlet that we didn’t realize was there for the throwing. His emphasis is not, like McLoughlin’s, on types of silence, multifarious as they are, but on the disorder—the basic psychological ill health—that underlies them all. Such an approach would come in handy, I reckon, if

you were prepping for your first viewing of “Persona,” Ingmar Bergman’s unsparing two-hander of 1966, in which one character prattles incessantly and the other says nothing whatsoever, having lapsed into self-cloistering silence in the midst of performing a Greek tragedy. There is no better illustration of speechlessness being deployed as a weapon, forcing the loquacious, as if at gunpoint, to fill the void with words. Alas, “Persona” earns not even a footnote from McLoughlin, who, apart from a nod to Harpo Marx, seems oddly unenticed by cinema, despite the fact that it’s the only dramatic art form that was born and grew up in silence. How can tribute not be paid to the delicious joke in Mel Brooks’s “Silent Movie” (1976), in which the only audible word is “*Non!*,” uttered by Marcel Marceau, the world’s most famous mime? To be fair, McLoughlin does offer compensation, providing an extraordinary detail from Marceau’s early life of which I was unaware:

Marcel began to teach the Jewish children he helped smuggle from France into Switzerland how to communicate silently at times of danger by moving their bodies rather than opening their mouths.

For whom is “Silence: A Literary History” intended? To judge by the vocabulary deployed in its pages, the book belongs in the inner sanctum of literary theory, where the walls are hung with gnarly rhetorical tropes. If you can tell your adynatons from your asyndetons; if you know that an anacoluthon refers to a snapping off or veering away in the grammatical structure of a sentence and not to a snake that will slowly squeeze the verbs out of you; if you can say the word “ecthlipsis” without spitting on the person beside you, and the phrase “problematically anthropomorphic” without blowing bubbles; if that feels like child’s play, congratulations.

And what to make of this?

In 2016, the 16,141,241 people who voted Remain in the UK’s Brexit referendum, myself included, got to know what it felt like to be on a losing side in an historical turning-point.

Disbelief, anger, grief, shame, denial. After the US presidential election later that year, I deleted my Facebook and Twitter accounts. Part of me knew it was more important than ever to keep fighting; another part needed to turn off the noise.

That is McLoughlin, baring her political all. Even if you agree with her (and somewhere, flowing beneath her book, is the assumption that no Brexiteer, or reactionary of any stripe, could possibly want to read it, or feel at home with literary finesse), it is nevertheless peculiar to see her break cover in this fashion. It could be argued that academic writing in the humanities has never seemed more dangerously adrift from common parlance, and that scholars like McLoughlin, sensing that risk, are right and brave to reach for a chatty personal candor, now and then, in order to snag their readers' sympathy and keep them engaged. The trouble comes when, having ventured on such a tangent, the critic has to lurch back on track. Here is McLoughlin, turning her attention to the long wake of the English Civil War, when a circumspect rural retirement was à la mode:

Being a Remainer after the Brexit vote was a taste of what was a widespread experience in the second half of the seventeenth century and early eighteenth century.

Hmm. I may be wrong, but I don't *think* that David Cameron, who led the Remain campaign, was exhumed and hanged in chains by the victorious Leavers, or that his dead head was cut off and stuck on a spike for more than twenty years—the punishment meted out in 1661 to Oliver Cromwell, or, at any rate, to his guilty corpse, after King Charles II was restored to the throne. Nor is it quite clear what this excursion into historical parallels has to do with silence. Uncoupling from social media, as McLoughlin did, may be a wise move, but to what degree does it muffle the universal racket? Never having joined Facebook, Twitter, X, Instagram, TikTok, or any of the other treats from Pandora's app store, I'm unqualified to comment. All I know is that I have yet to attain the tough tranquillity of a Trappist.

In spite of—or, to be charitable, because of—these and other eccentricities, “Silence: A Literary History” is worth your time, whether or not you have the stamina to plow straight through. It functions best as a trigger book. Open it at random, pick a chapter, and you are pretty much guaranteed to be launched upon a trajectory of unfamiliar thought. Who knew that Thoreau wrote something with the natty title of “Some Scraps from an Essay on ‘Sound And Silence’ Written in the Latter Half of this Month,—December, 1838,” in which he instinctively alludes to his subject as female? (“It were vain for me to interpret the Silence. She cannot be done into English.”) Likewise, shortly before urging us to try Anne Brontë’s “Agnes Grey,” with its combative vision of silence as a kind of armor—“I was used to wearing a placid smiling countenance when my heart was bitter within me”—McLoughlin informs us that, when Thackeray threw a party for Charlotte Brontë, her taciturnity “unnerved her host so much that he actually slipped out of his own house and spent the evening at his club.” Trust the Brontës to be a squadron of Shtumtroopers, silencing people to bits.

Most appealing of all are those moments at which McLoughlin turns into an eager chatelaine, not so much dropping names as introducing them to one another, in the hope of a giddy intellectual chemistry. Where else could Alfred, Lord Tennyson, share a parenthesis with Ed Sheeran and the Foo Fighters? Who but McLoughlin could cram Jane Austen, Jack Benny, *and* Immanuel Kant into a single sentence? And what of Pink Dandelion—neither a folk-rock group, as you might imagine, nor a refreshing cordial but the name of a professor at the University of Birmingham, in England, who specializes in the history of Quakerism? The whole book is noisy with noiselessness; you can practically hear the clink and fizz of glasses being refilled. As the party winds down, you are left with a cheerful irony: so dense has been the crowd of creatives advising us, through the ages, on the essential art of silence that by the end you’ve had enough. You just want them to shut up. ♦

Published in the print edition of the August 10, 2026, issue, with the headline “The Quiet Life.”