QUIET...PLEASE

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I believe that quiet is a moral good. I'm not alone in thinking so. Recently my local newspaper, *The Missoulian*, printed a spate of antinoise letters from Montanans who crave quiet. I am sympathetic with most of them. I quote from one of my favorites in the following:

> When I was a boy in a place that no longer exists, it was often quiet. Most Saturday nights in small-town Connecticut, the loudest sound was our neighbor singing, regardless of season, "Auld Lang Syne," as he staggered home from the bar. And always, Mrs. Poppalini's big wooden spoon clack clacked as she stirred a pot of homemade red sauce.
>
> As an alternative to such blissful serenades, we have created a world with blather and buckets of information we neither need nor want, with "services" which are gross intrusions. When cell phones ring in the bathroom stall, civilization is surely kaput.
>
> This constant assault on our nerves, on the tiny portion of peace we might find in our lives is extolled—as were other appalling "advances," as progress. Quiet, yes; I want quiet and peace away from this world of hyper-gizmo. But even more do I long for one sound—the sledgehammer blows of Luddites transforming the spawn of IBM and Microsoft into piles of plastic splinters. Everyone has a dream. This is mine. (Chaberek A11)

Mr. Chaberek is writing from Superior, Montana, a town of approximately 1,500, nestled up against one of the largest national forests in the

lower forty-eight, a good part of which is proposed wilderness. And still he experiences a "constant assault on (his) nerves," the urge to commit technocide, and the desire to return to a place and time that were significantly quieter and that very likely no longer exist.

Thoreau, of Walden Pond, population, 1, expressed a similar frustration (and sardonic humor) in his concluding remarks on the Fitchburg Railroad: "So is your pastoral life whirled past and away... I will not have my eyes put out and my ears spoiled by its smoke and steam and hissing" (80). The railroad was a whirling, whizzing, whistling, rattling, stampeding—to use a few of Thoreau's adjectives—intrusion to many nineteenth-century Americans. It was like a comet, says Thoreau, "for the beholder knows not if with that velocity and with that direction it will ever revisit this system" (75). Twentieth-first century Americans endure considerably more racquet. Mr. Chaberek lists a few contemporary spoilers: cell phones, PCs, kids' computer games, pets' automatic water dishes, among them.

The Noise Pollution Clearinghouse (NPC), based in Vermont, lists road traffic, jet planes, jet skis, garbage trucks, construction equipment, lawn mowers, leaf blowers, and boom boxes, among the audible "litter" that is "broadcast into the air." Currently twenty million Americans are exposed to noise levels that lead to physical and psychological problems (Blanchard 17). The Clearinghouse raises awareness about noise pollution; creates, collects, and distributes information and resources; aims to strengthen laws to control noise pollution; establishes networks among antinoise advocates; and assists activists. Their mission is to "create more civil cities and more natural rural and wilderness areas by reducing noise pollution at its source" (*NPC*).

A second organization, this one in Canada, The Right to Quiet Society (RQC), has similar goals and seems somewhat more concerned with "programmed audio": canned music, radio, and TV soundtrack that is broadcast in such public places as doctors' offices, airports, and even gas stations. And the World Health Organization (WHO) sponsored two recent, major studies of noise pollution, acknowledging in 1995 that noise is a very significant public health problem that damages human and animal health (Berglund and Lindvall). These organizations identify "quiet" as an environmental value similar to clean air and water, and they call "noise" a pollutant, something that negatively impacts the "commons," a public good, and compare it to second-hand smoke.

I define terms and explain the negative effects of noise in the next section. After that I look at quiet as a value. I do not intend to defend that idea analytically. Arguments in defense of some inherent good ultimately run up against axioms, assumptions usually, that are indefensible by argument.

I'm fairly certain this would happen to any deductive argument I develop on behalf of the inherent value of quiet. So, instead, I work with literature that gives us a sense of what quiet is and in the process helps us appreciate its value.

Much of what I've read focuses on the negative effects of noise but does not give equal attention to quiet, and most of the existing literature on quiet treats it as a monastic value. While I am interested in quiet as a monastic value and will work with Thoreau's, Richard Byrd's, and Rilke's treatments of it in contemporary monastic-like settings, what I am really aiming for is a partial account of its value in non-monastic life, in, perhaps, the lives of my neighbors of Superior, Montana. The Swiss philosopher Max Picard's poetic little book, *The World of Silence,* has been of great help on that count.

Noise

The NPC notes that the word "noise" is derived from the Latin word "nausea," meaning seasickness, and the Clearinghouse says "it is among the most pervasive pollutants today" (About Noise and NPC). The NPC also defines noise as "(1) unwanted sound and (2) any sound not occurring in the natural environment, such as sound emanating from aircraft, highways, industrial, commercial and residential sources" (Definitions 6). Given these definitions it is not clear if an unwanted sound made by some nonhuman, natural source—for example a coyote or a murder of crows or wind—can be "noise." And there is a significant subjective element in determining which sounds are "unwanted" or even "natural." WHO also defines noise as a class of sound that is unwanted (Berglund and Lindvall 12). These organizations tend to distinguish between "environmental noise" (also called "community noise") and noise inside the industrial workplace. Advocacy groups as well as WHO are most concerned with environmental noise. The main sources of environmental noise are transportation (road, air, and rail), industries, construction, and such neighborhood noises as TVs and radios. Indoor sources include ventilation systems, appliances, and office machines. Motor sports, speedboats, snow blowers, and other recreational toys are noise-makers too. A *U.S.A. Today* 2000 poll listed industrial or commercial sounds, aircraft engines, highway traffic, amplified music, and racetrack crowds as the noises about which people most often complain (Schomer and Associates 2).

Complaints are one indicator of when sound becomes noise. Another indicator is the effect of certain sounds on human health and quality of life. The WHO, which considers noise pollution a very significant threat

to human physiological and psychological wellbeing, notes that the effects of noise depend on not only sound pressure levels—volume—but also on (1) the type or quality of noise—rough, high or low frequencies, impulsive (guns or horns), and nonimpulsive (refrigerators or air conditions, e.g.); (2) the number of noise events; and (3) the "image" of the noise, or what people imagine caused it. The effects of perceived environmental noise include hearing impairment, sleep disturbance, possible cardiovascular and immune diseases, the inability to concentrate on tasks, interference with social interactions, and stress. Some of the more interesting studies strongly suggest that women, especially middle-aged women, are more sensitive to noise than men, that there is a relation between noise exposure and delayed reading acquisition and content recall in young children, and that noise exposure affects long-term memory.

The WHO report summarizes a great many studies and the organization acknowledges that to some extent one person's noise may be an event that another person is oblivious to or may even enjoy, that, as they put it, "attitude," both personal and cultural, matters (Berglund and Lindvall 43, 120). And studies of especially vulnerable populations—the blind, the hearing impaired, and even fetuses—have not yet been done. Still, enough studies point to significant health and quality of life risks that WHO recommends communities take these risks seriously, monitor noise, and enact and enforce appropriate noise ordinances.

In a very recent book called *Noise* Bart Kosko cites studies on the impact of noise on animals. For example "low-frequency sonar appears to harm whales and other marine mammals that rely on their hearing to detect prey sound signals and to communicate with one another and to avoid predators" (56). The sonar is caused by the military and by commercial vessels and affects not only whales but also manatees. There is good evidence that correlates the U.S. Navy's use of low-frequency sonar with beached whales in several parts of the world and in some instances they died of "decompression sickness" or the "bends," a condition that results when a diver surfaces too quickly. In other cases dead whales were found with bleeding eardrums and injury to brain tissue, presumably from the effects of low- and mid-frequency sonar. Whales will also sing longer in areas where sonar is being used. "They presumably sang longer in the presence of the sonar noise to maintain a comparable signal-to-noise ratio amid the man-made acoustical interference" (Kosko 58). Urban noise disturbs wild songbirds, who must sing for a longer duration in order overcome low-frequency background noise in cities. Probably this situation results in more stress for these birds, and, as Kosko points out, this may be yet another factor working against the survival and diversity of species, many of which, as recent Audubon counts

show, have plummeted over the last forty years (Kosko 58). Environmental advocates have been unhappy with the Environmental Protection Agency and the National Park Service for years over the number of snowmobiles in Yellowstone National Park. Recently, and yet again, the EPA found the machines' noise violated sound standards for wildlife in Yellowstone. At present, 720 snowmobiles and 78 snow coaches are allowed in Yellowstone each day (Stark 7).

In 1972 Congress put the Environmental Protection Agency in charge of noise pollution. But in 1982 the EPA's Noise Abatement and Control Office funding was pulled. Presently there are no national laws against noise pollution and few state or local laws. Since 1982 the world certainly hasn't become any quieter. In a mere fifty years the U.S. population has more than doubled and brought with it the sorts of noisy and annoying technologies that severely offend many people like Ed Chaberek (and myself). For example, since 1970 the number of cars in the world with their engine and exhaust noise, horns, and shrill security devices rose from 200 million to 700 million ("Number"). U.S. air traffic, one of the major soundscape polluters, has increased nearly six-fold during the same period. And, according to a report presented to the U.S. Congress in 2004, even though much progress has been made in reducing air traffic noise and chemical pollution during this time, technology will not keep pace with the projected rate of growth in air traffic in the near future (Waitz). Cars and airplanes are the two biggest noise offenders and the rate of noise pollution from these sources is increasing 3-5 percent annually (Blanchard 17).

What is quiet? These organizations don't have nearly as much to say about quiet as they say about noise. The term is not included in NPC's "Noise Control Terms Made Somewhat Easier" glossary. Presumably quiet is the absence of noise. A "quiet environment is one in which people can read, listen to music of their choice, converse, sleep peacefully," the NPC's page on "Protecting the Commons" states. It is most certainly a good, even a moral good, one can conclude from the NPC's section on the commons, in which they say their mission is to protect a quiet commons from "exploitation, abuse, and degradation" by "bullies" who are "claiming rights and freedoms that are not theirs, while degrading resources that are ours." And the Right to Quiet Society calls quiet a "basic human right." I develop the idea of quiet as a moral good in the next section.

Quiet

First of all, I use the terms "quiet" and "silence" synonymously, as do

most of the authors of the literature I cite. I am not talking about the complete absence of sound when I use the word silence. Nearly every religious tradition, including, but not limited to, early Christianity, contemporary Quakers, Zen, Judaism, Islam, various Native American traditions, Sufism, and even versions of the Assyro-Babylonian flood stories that attribute that famous, devastating flood to a god angered by noisy cities, values silence. Silence is a communal value (as in Quaker meetings). It's also a personal value. Pythagoras required new disciples to be silent for five years. And "Abba Agathon, an early Christian monk, held a pebble in his mouth for three years until he learned thoroughly to hold his peace" (McCumsey 322). And silence is an environmental value (though it may not be a necessary condition for communal and personal silence). References to silence are scattered throughout religious texts, though rarely developed in a sustained way. Perhaps that's because making a lot of noise about silence is self-defeating. Much that has been said directly about silence in religious and in secular traditions is either poetry or parable. For example, Isaac the Syrian said, "speech is the organ of the present world. Silence is the mystery of the world to come" (McCumsey 323). And Abu Yazid al-Bistami, a 19th century Sufi, said "no lamp I saw brighter than silence, no speech I heard better than speechlessness" (McCumsey 323-24).

Quiet is a key value and a relatively well-developed concept in the monastic tradition. For millennia monks have sought solitude in order to experience silence, an environment free of unwanted noise. Susan Power Bratton notes how many monks often retreated to the wilderness in order to lead a contemplative life without the distractions of social obligations, interactions, and, most especially, human noise. For example, she quotes from a history of Egyptian monks that describes Nitria, a community whose monks' cells were about nine miles apart in order to achieve "a mighty silence and a great quiet among them" (48).

Alan Altany says that "solitude goes hand in glove with silence, which is why the monk values his or her solitude as integral to monastic spirituality. Silence and solitude are as mother to the monk, leading him into the abyss, shorn of distractions, to be alone with God" (179). "The monk, in silence, waits for divinity, truth, and faces death. Solitude and silence are not so much attempts to stop the world or to escape it, but engage it in a new way" (173). And later in his essay Altany suggests that solitude and its silence also purifies a human world of its own images and its own noise, a world that has lost touch with things other than and bigger than itself, things mysterious and awe inspiring. I very much like the two metaphors that Altany uses to describe the monk's silence:

> The monk in silence is what the Japanese might call *fura-fura*, a piece of tattered cloth flapping in the wind or an empty gourd floating in a stream. Such silence can become the sound of a wisdom which reminds the world, for all its science and business and technology, to seek to recover its own depths. (80)

I want to contextualize and work in more depth Bratton's and Altany's ideas in two texts: Thoreau's *Walden* and Richard Byrd's *Alone*. Both men chose temporary monastic experiments for similar reasons and with some similar outcomes. They write beautifully about silence as both external and internal states. Later on I develop their ideas more philosophically using a text called *The World of Silence* by the French philosopher Max Picard and Rilke's *Book of Hours*.

Richard Byrd spent most of the Antarctic winter of 1934 alone in an underground hut called Bolling Advance Weather Base. It was the first inland station ever occupied in the world's southern-most continent of some 4.5 million square miles (Byrd 3). Byrd nearly died there of carbon monoxide poisoning caused by a faulty heating and ventilation system. He summarizes his reasons for going there in the following:

> This much should be understood from the beginning: that above everything else, and beyond the solid worth of weather and auroral observations in the hitherto unoccupied interior of Antarctica and my interest in these studies, I really wanted to go for the experience's sake. So the motive was in part personal. Aside from the meteorological and auroral work, I had no important purposes. There was nothing of that sort. Nothing whatever, except one man's desire to know that kind of experience to the full, to be by himself for a while and to taste peace and quiet and solitude long enough to find out how good they really are.
> It was all that simple. And it is something, I believe, that people beset by the complexities of modern life will understand instinctively. We are caught up in the winds that blow every which way. And in the hullabaloo the thinking man is driven to ponder where he is being blown and to long desperately for some quiet place where he can reason undisturbed and take inventory. (Byrd 3-4)

After nearly fifteen years of continuous planning for expeditions to both Poles and Antarctica, among other places, fund raising, leading crews to and from terribly inaccessible environments, conducting research there, and follow-up international lecture tours, Byrd says "I wanted something more than just privacy in the geographical sense. I wanted to sink roots into some replenishing philosophy... Where I was going I would be physically and spiritually on my own" (7).

Thoreau states his reasons for going to Walden similarly:

> I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is

> so dear; nor did I wish to practice resignation, unless it was quite necessary. I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life, to cut a broad swath and shave close, to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms, and, if it proved to be mean, why then to get the whole and genuine meanness of it, and publish its meanness to the world; or it were sublime, to know it by experience, and be able to give a true account of it in my next excursion. (59)

Byrd's reasons for going to Advance Base remind me very much of Thoreau's reasons for going to Walden Pond: a desire to be physically and philosophically independent; a desire to find philosophic and spiritual depth; the recognition that one must actively resist the complexities and the hullabaloo of modern life and find a calm and quiet center in order to really achieve independence and depth; the "instinctual" need, as Byrd put it, for quiet and solitude. I do not want to argue that a person must live alone under conditions "that are not very different from what they were when the first men came groping out of the twilight of the last Ice Age" (Byrd 7) or in a hut along a secluded pond for two years in order to find quiet and its benefits. Nor must a person be utterly alone in order to be solitary. Thoreau makes this point when he says "[t]he really diligent student in one of the crowded hives of Cambridge College is as solitary as a dervis in the desert" (88). And the Quaker at a meeting sits with other Quakers quietly waiting for the Spirit to quicken her. Solitude is a state of mind as much as anything. And quiet is a condition for solitude, though I hesitate to say it is a necessary condition. Byrd's and Thoreau's cases are exaggerated. Still, it is helpful to look at "that kind of experience to the full," as Byrd said, in order to grasp the nature of it and its value.

On March 28, 1934, Byrd said goodbye to his crew as they headed back to Little America, the party's permanent base some 178 miles north of Byrd's Advance Base, where he would spend the next four and one-half months alone, tending to his basic needs, most notably keeping reasonably warm and fed, and monitoring the weather at latitude 80 08 south, longitude 163 57 west. The temperature was fifty degrees below zero when his men left him. Except for very unreliable, twice weekly radio communication, he would have no contact with any living being until August, when a crew, sensing he was in some considerable distress that he wasn't telling them about, arrived to help on August 11.

The following is his account of his first night alone at his Advance shack:

> About 1 o'clock in the morning, just before turning in, I went topside for a look around. The night was spacious and fine. Numberless stars crowded the sky. I had

> never seen so many. You had only to reach up and fill your hands with the bright pebbles. Earlier, a monstrous red moon had climbed into the northern quadrant, but it was gone by then. The stars were everywhere. A sailor's sky, I thought, commanded by the Southern Cross and the wheeling constellations of Gydrus, Orion, and Triangulum drifting ever so slowly. It was a lovely motion to watch. And all this was mine: the stars, the constellations, even the earth as it turned on its axis. If great inward peace and exhilaration can exist together, then this, I decided my first night alone, was what should possess the senses... It occurred to me then that half the confusion in the world comes from not knowing how little we need.
>
> That night, anyway, I had no consciousness of missing conventional sounds and stirrings. (56-7)

Thoreau doesn't record his first night at the pond in *Walden*, but some of his accounts of his time there are similar to Byrd's account of his first night in the Antarctic wilderness. At Walden he says, "I have, as it were, my own sun and moon and stars, and a little world all to myself" (85). And he refers to Walden as a "lower heaven" (56), "a new and forever unprofaned" part of the universe (57), "cosmical" (58), as "sky water" (122), and he praises its "celestial" (58) and "Aeolian" music (85) many times.

Thoreau's literary and Romantic tendencies are very pronounced in most of his writing about Walden Pond, while Byrd is more plainspoken, yet still eloquent. Thoreau's poetic devices—his metaphors, images, his fondness for evanescence and music—as well as his quirky and playful sense of humor require a great deal of the reader, as he warns us in the chapter entitled "Reading." Byrd is more direct. These sensibilities and stylistic differences aside, their monastic desires for solitude and quiet, their experiences of solitude, and what they take away form those experiences are quite similar.

I am struck by how physically proximate, spiritually near, and personally intimate the universe suddenly becomes when these men strike a monastic pose. The heavens are both defamilarized and personalized at once. The macrocosm is reduced to their respective microcosmic worlds as the microcosms become macroscopic, part of the larger universe. For example, looking at the night sky Byrd says "all this was mine: the stars, the constellations, even the earth as it turned on its axis" (56-7). And Thoreau says he too has his "own sun and moon and stars and a little world all to myself" (85), though he does qualify this boast with an "as it were." The so familiar starry, spacious sky is suddenly so near "you had only to reach up and fill your hand with the bright pebbles" and the moon is monstrous and red, the constellations "wheeling," "drifting, and they were a "lovely motion to watch," says Byrd (57). Thoreau writes, "a field of water betrays the spirit that is in the air. It is continually receiving new life and motion from above. It is intermediate in its nature between land and sky" (123). And later he calls Walden Pond "God's drop" (126). The spirit world, the immense and

unfathomable presence of God, *is* Walden, and vice versa, and is part of Thoreau's own little world, which he has all to himself. Both men are finding the spiritual depths they sought. And, as Byrd puts it, "I had no consciousness of missing conventional sounds and stirrings.... If great inward peace and exhilaration can exist together, then this...was what should possess the senses" (57). And Thoreau, who loved to sit summer mornings "rapt in reverie, amidst the pines and hickories and sumacs, in undisturbed solitude and stillness, while the birds sang around or flitted noiseless through the house," says he "grew in these seasons like the corn in the night" and "silently smiled at [his] incessant good fortune" (73). These lyrical passages are inspired by the sort of peaceful, quiet, yet exhilarating inner state, as Byrd so aptly describes it, that the monk or Quaker seek next to God. In May, Byrd writes,

> [p]artly as an amusement I have been speculating on thought harmony. If man is, as I believe, an integral part of the universe and since grace and smoothness mark the movements of most things—such as the electrons and protons within the atom and the planets within the solar system and the stars within the galaxies—then a normal mind should function with something of the same harmoniousness. (143-44)

In this state the macrocosm, whether it's the stars, planets, constellations, or the spiritual immensity of God, collapse into the microcosm of the personal self and vice versa. Or to use Altany's metaphors, the self becomes the tattered cloth filled and moving with wind, the gourd engorged with water in the flowing stream of life.

What is silence and what role does it play in these philosophic and spiritual contexts? Neither Byrd nor Thoreau sought out or found utter silence, though Byrd's Antarctica was much quieter than Thoreau's Walden. During the long Antarctic days and then during the total darkness of the Antarctic winter Byrd's senses were skewed but intense. Byrd paid special attention to the sky because it had form and texture, spectacular color, and the almost constant movement of aurorae and constellations, unlike the land, which was flat and often covered in complete darkness. His tactile sense was attuned to the killing cold, mostly. His meals were canned or consisted of boiled beans and were largely disappointing. His olfactory sense let him down: he could not smell the carbon monoxide that nearly killed him beginning sometime in late May. And since there were no human-caused sounds, other than the music he played some evenings on the phonograph, and few natural sounds inside or outside his underground hut, he most of all noticed and deeply appreciated the quiet. This is how he remembered early May:

> The blizzards departed, the cold moved down from the South Pole, and opposite the moon in a coal-black sky the cast-up light from the departed sun burned like a

> bonfire. During the first six days the temperature averaged –47.03 degrees; much of the time it was deep in the minus forties and fifties. The winds scarcely blew. And a soundlessness fell over the Barrier. I have never known such utter quiet. Sometimes it lulled and hypnotized, like a waterfall or any other steady, familiar sound. At other times it struck into the consciousness as peremptorily as a sudden noise. It made me think of the fatal emptiness that comes when an airplane engine cuts out abruptly in flight. Up on the Barrier it was taut and immense; and, in spite of myself, I would be straining to listen—for nothing, really, nothing but the sheer excitement of silence. Underground, it became intense and concentrated. In the middle of a task or while reading a book, I was sometimes brought up hard with all my senses alert and suspicious, like a householder who imagines he hears a burglar in the house. Then, the small sounds of the hut—the hiss of the stove, the chatter of the instruments, the overlapping beats of the chronometers, would suddenly leap out against the soundlessness, all seeming self-conscious and hurried… I came to understand what Thoreau meant when he said: "My body is all sentient." There were moments when I felt more *alive* than at any other time in my life. Freed from the materialistic distraction, my senses sharpened in new directions, and the random or commonplace affairs of the sky and the earth and the spirit, which ordinarily I would have ignored if I had noticed them at all, became exciting and portentous. (119-20)

And now Thoreau:

> This is a delicious evening, when the whole body is one sense, and imbibes delight through every pore. I go and come with a strange liberty in Nature, a part of herself. As I walk along the stony shore of the pond in my shirt sleeves, though it is cool as well as cloudy and windy, I see nothing special to attract me, all the elements are unusually congenial to me. The bullfrogs trump to usher in the night, and the note of the whippoorwill is borne on the rippling wind from over the water. Sympathy with the fluttering alder and poplar leaves almost takes away my breath; yet, like the lake, my serenity is rippled but not ruffled. These small waves raised by the evening wind are as remote from storm as the smooth reflecting surface. Though it is now dark, the wind still blows and roars in the wood, the waves still dash, and some creatures lull the rest with their notes. The repose is never complete. (84)

Thoreau, the poet, makes good use of onomatopoeia and a good deal of consonance and alliteration to evoke the natural sounds he heard along the shore of Walden. Interestingly, when he says his whole body is one sense, he's often taken to mean his body is acutely sensuous at the particular moment. But perhaps we should read him more literally than that, for the only sense perceptions he reports, with the exception of the chill on his arms, are auditory perceptions, and they are all caused by nature. Thoreau's Walden is never utterly silent, not even in winter when the pond "closes its eyelids and becomes dormant for three or more months" (182). In fact, his chapters titled "Winter Animals," "Former Inhabitants," and "Winter Visitors" are largely about the animals he heard. The only human companion—an older man he occasionally fishes with, who is deaf and sometimes hums—is silent,

and their intercourse "is one of unbroken harmony, far more pleasing to remember than if it had been carried on by speech" (113).

Much of his chapter called "Sounds" distinguishes between noise, which is human-caused, and stillness, which is usually filled with natural sounds. The most obnoxious and intrusive noise he endures and records is caused by the nearby Fitchburg Railroad. Thoreau seems to have a love-hate relationship with this relatively new, smelly, and noisy technology. He mythologizes it (a winged horse or fiery dragon), calls it heroic and commanding (76), praises its master (commerce) for its enterprise and bravery, and writes about how the railroad, with its national and international cargo makes him feel like a "citizen of the world" (77-8). But all this personification and mythologizing is couched in a very long series of hypotheticals—"If all were as it seems, and men made the elements their servants for noble ends!... " (76). And the two-paragraph series of hypotheticals concludes with "[i]f the enterprise were as heroic and commanding as it is protracted and unwearied!" (76). The tone of it all is mildly sardonic, even a little mocking. In the end I think he largely hates the railroad, and the long series of hypotheticals—the if-if-if-if-if, which sound like the engine's huffing and puffing—and the long extended sentences—propelled by conjunctions, disjunctions, and a great many dashes—that abruptly start and stop against the exclamations and semi-colons, the images of fire, heat, of constant motion and the vanishing pastoral scenery whizzing by like an arrow, all this has a rushed, breathless, raucous, carnival-like feeling (76-80).

White space—silence—immediately follows this near parody of the railroad. Then Thoreau begins a long section on sound. He starts as follows:

> Now that the cars are gone by and all the restless world with them, and the fishes in the pond no longer feel their rumbling, I am more alone than ever. For the rest of the long afternoon, perhaps, my meditations are interrupted only by the faint rattle of a carriage or team along the distant highway.
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> Sometimes, on Sundays, I heard the distant bells, the Lincoln, Acton, Bedford, or Concord bell, when the wind was favorable, a faint, sweet, and, as it were, natural melody, worth importing into the wilderness. At a sufficient distance over the woods this sound acquires a certain vibratory hum, as if the pine needles in the horizon were the strings of a harp which it swept. All sound heard at the greatest possible distance produces one and the same effect, a vibration of the universal lyre, just as the intervening atmosphere makes a distant ridge of earth interesting to our eyes by the azure tint it imparts to it. There came to me in this case a melody which the air had strained, and which had conversed with every leaf and needle of the wood, that portion of the sound which the elements had taken up and modulated and echoed from vale to vale. The echo is, to some extent, an original sound, and therein is the magic and charm of it. It is not merely a repetition of what was worth repeating in the bell, but partly the voice of the wood; the same trivial words and notes sung by a wood-nymph. (80)

Even the distant lowing of the cows sounds "sweet and melodious," he says in the following paragraph. And, perhaps as a joke on the Romantics (though he claims he is not being "satirical") he compares the cows' lowing to certain "minstrels," a group of youths that sometimes serenade (80). He is also serenaded by owls, whippoorwills, frogs, the occasional fox, geese, and loons.

For Thoreau, quiet, stillness, or peacableness are inclusive of natural sounds. Interestingly, Thoreau prefers even these sounds at a distance. At the beginning of the chapter on sounds (and silence) he says, "I love a broad margin in life" (72). For example, in the long section on the Sunday bells, Thoreau says that "at a sufficient distance" the bells sound as if they are pine needles that hum like harp strings. At the "greatest possible distance" all sound is heard as the "universal lyre," and it's an "original sound," a sound that is "strained," "taken up and modulated and echoed" (Thoreau 80). But the echo is an original sound, something new, an amalgamation of the domestic and the wild, the voice of the "wood-nymph" (Thoreau 80). At a distance the cows' voices are similarly transformed. And later, in the section called "Visitors," he advocates a "sufficient distance" from his guests when they visit inside his small house so they can utter "the big thoughts in big words" (91). And "[i]f we would enjoy the most intimate society with that in each of us which is without, or above, being spoken to, we must not only be silent, but commonly so far apart bodily that we cannot possibly hear each other's voice in any case" (Thoreau 91). Elsewhere in *Walden* he hears distant military shooting and band music as puff balls bursting and as bees humming, respectively (104). Byrd too begins to doubt the necessity of language as he "lives more deeply within" himself (140).

In these and some other passages, Thoreau very skillfully uses one of the Romantics' favorite literary devices, evanescence, in order to utterly transform or to "disappear" an object or a sound. This device was most famously used by Shelley in "To a Skylark." Again and again in Walden sound, usually human noise, is filtered until it is as sweet as the Aeolian. Byrd has a similar experience on May 11 while listening to Beethoven's Fifth Symphony:

> Presently I began to have the illusion that what I was seeing was also what I was hearing, so perfectly did the music seem to blend with what was happening in the sky. As the notes swelled, the dull aurora on the horizon pulsed and quickened and draped itself into arches and fanning beams which reached its crescendo. The music and the night become one; and I told myself that all beauty was akin and sprang from the same substance. I recalled a gallant, unselfish act that was of the same essence as the music and the aurora. (139)

The symphony is commingled with the sky dance. The "dull aurora" pulses, quickens, and fans as the notes swell. The music and the sky "become one." And then Byrd has a metaphysical epiphany—all beauty is akin and springs from the same substance—and then a moral epiphany—the memory of a gallant and unselfish act. And he seems to conclude that the act too was beautiful and of the same "essence" as the display. In both Thoreau's and Byrd's cases, they have left the human world that is choked full of its own images and sounds and found places—literally and psychically—in which something kindred to yet ultimately much bigger than the human world is allowed room. And Byrd achieves a kind of metaphysical crescendo along with the music, a recognition and feeling of oneness with something larger. On May 25 he describes this "something" as a "cosmic scheme" and uses a famous (and flawed) philosophic metaphor of the watch to prove that our lives and human history are like the hands of the watch, which move with order and precision, move "according to some plan and not at random" (160). "This whole concept is summed up in the word harmony. For those who seek it, there is inexhaustible evidence of an all-pervading intelligence" (Byrd 161). He also concludes that the laws of nature, of justice, of human psychology, and of conscience are all part of this cosmic scheme of harmony and peace, which, in a Hegelian-sounding passage, he believes we are moving toward (161).

Thoreau finds a similar feeling of kinship and belonging, though he expresses this in more Romantic and less metaphysical terms, first by studying the microcosm and then by attending to the bigger picture:

> I have never felt lonesome, or in the least oppressed by a sense of solitude, but once, and that was a few weeks after I came to the woods, when, for an hour, I doubted if the neighborhood of man was not essential to a serene and healthy life. To be alone was something unpleasant. But I was at the same time conscious of a slight insanity in my mood, and seemed to foresee my recovery. In the midst of a gentle rain while these thoughts prevailed, I was suddenly sensible of such sweet and beneficent society in Nature, in the very patterning of the drops, and in every sound and sight around my house, an infinite and unaccountable friendliness all at once like an atmosphere sustaining me, as made the fancied advantages of human neighborhood insignificant, and I have never thought of them since. (85-6)

Silence is not merely the negative, the absence of sound, a sort of empty space or backdrop for sound, as any poet or musician will tell you. Philosopher Max Picard says "[w]hen language ceases, silence begins. But it does not begin *because* language ceases. The absence of language simply makes the presence of Silence more apparent. Silence is an autonomous phenomenon" (15).

> The silence of this place is as real and solid as sound. More real, in fact, than the occasional creaks of the Barrier and the heavier concussions of snow quakes.
>
> [...] It seems to merge in and become part of the indescribable *evenness*, as do the cold and the dark and the relentless ticking of the clocks. This evenness fills the air with its mood of unchangeableness; it sits across from me at the table, and gets into the bunk with me at night. And no thought will wander so far as not eventually to be brought up hard by it. (Byrd 141-42)

Picard's phenomenology of silence ultimately associates silence with the divine and he calls it a "basic phenomenon" (21). He says silence may well be the last "useless" thing, a thing that "does not fit into the world of profit and utility"; "it simply *is*" (18).

> Yet there is more help and healing in silence than in all the "useful things." Purposeless, unexploitable silence suddenly appears at the side of the all-too-purposeful, and frightens us by its purposelessness. It interferes with the regular flow of the purposeful. It strengthens the untouchable, it lessens the damage inflicted by exploitation. It makes things whole again, by taking them back from the world of dissipation into the world of wholeness. It gives things something of its own holy uselessness, for that is what silence itself is: holy uselessness. (Picard 19)

Byrd gestures at these ideas when he says silence is "real and solid," even more so than sound, and when he says that language, thought, is "brought up hard by silence," that it won't allow the mind to wander like a loose balloon but tethers it (141-42). And Thoreau personifies silence, along with a great many entities in nature, when he writes about his utterly silent fishing companions, one, "some impatient companion," who had been floating as "silent and motionless as a duck or a floating leaf," and the other who was deaf, hums occasionally (like the Aeolian harp) and whose philosophy happened to harmonize perfectly with Thoreau's (113). Silence is real; it sits in the boat and floats the pond with him, and it's one of his most cherished and revered companions. And Thoreau, of all people, would be glad for its "uselessness," in Picard's sense.

Quiet—Please

Quiet is a moral good, an inherent value, not merely an instrumental good that is a means for animals or human beings to achieve some inherently good ends, spiritual ones, for example. Organizations such as the NPC that advocate for the commons seem to take the instrumentalist position. Some environmental philosophers have argued that such things as clean air and water, wilderness, healthy ecosystems, and individual plants and animals have inherent worth, value in and of themselves (see Taylor, Rolston, and

Leopold, for example). These are not tidy arguments, and many of the arguments work significantly by default: anthropocentric views are exposed as untenable for various reasons, leaving nonanthropocentrism as the default/fallback worldview and moral attitude. Paul Taylor admits, admirably I think, that we cannot prove, using a strict deduction, that a worldview or value system is the right one (154, 167). Aldo Leopold's treatment of nonanthropocentrism is couched in a narrative woven out of first-person stories, science, and poetry rather than analytic argument and is more convincing, on my view. The cumulative effect of it is supposed to motivate us, both intellectually and emotionally, to become better stewards.

Someone could take a nonanthropocentric position on what Americans call "wilderness," our last remaining roadless areas, for example, and say that quiet, the absence of such unwanted human sound as airplanes and cell phone rings, is an integral part of wilderness and that it has inherent worth by virtue of its being a feature of wilderness. And one can in fact extrapolate from the Wilderness Act's characterization of wilderness—a place "untrammeled by man," a place having a "primeval character and influence…where man's work is substantially unnoticeable," having outstanding opportunities for solitude" ("Wilderness" 128)—that quiet is a necessary feature of it. While to my ear the Act is largely anthropocentric, others, such as Mark Woods, argue that it has nonanthropocentric implications (148). And Michael Nelson summarizes a number of nonanthropocentric positions on wilderness (191).

My own feeling is that quiet is a non-anthropocentric good regardless of where it shows up—whether it's in wilderness or in the New York City Public Library—and I am much more sympathetic with the narrative, versus analytic, approach to making a case for the inherent worth of quiet. Significant gross contact with quiet (as with wilderness) is probably also a condition for recognizing the value of it. In the 1960s and '70s when I was young and living on the family farm in northeastern Pennsylvania, almost daily someone in my extended family would stop work in a field or simply step out of the house or barn to listen to and comment on the quiet. I have a very vivid memory of one summer evening listening to a team of horses pull a mower across a valley some two miles as the crow flies, of the horses' snorts and occasional whinnies and of the men's voices calling to the horses or to each other, of the whole family, some twelve of us at the time, listening intently and feeling deeply moved by the stillness and the long distances those sounds traveled through it. The noise of an airplane flying over or even a car coming up the dirt road in front of the house were rare and cause to look up from whatever you were doing and gawk. This was only forty years ago, and I was fortunate. Now such contact with quiet is very exceptional,

even for the rich who can afford to live in seclusion from cities and near-by neighbors but may well still endure heavy air traffic. Even designated wilderness in the United States is not protected from jet noise, as is the case in St Mary's Wilderness in Virginia, where a jet interstate that funnels traffic from Washington and Chicago and other large air centers cuts directly overhead. Many people rightly object to the loss of our visual environment—to strip malls where fields were once or to clear cuts in national forests—some may well object to foul odors—from pulp mills or factory farms. But fewer people seem to notice and object to the loss of the pristine auditory environment. What, more exactly, are we losing?

Quiet is something more than an absence of noise, as I said before. It sits at table with Byrd and climbs into the bunk with him at night; it is a cherished companion that rides the pond and spends an unstructured, unhurried morning sitting on the doorstep with Thoreau. Silence is a substantial and active, often interactive, presence in these characterizations. Thoreau, the poet, is especially attuned to silence as presence. Picard notes that "[t]he great poet does not completely fill out the space of his theme with his words. He leaves a space clear, into which another and higher poet can speak. He allows another to take part in the subject; he makes the subject his own but does not keep it entirely for himself" (145). And later he comments that "[i]t could happen in earlier times that the poet was different from his work, but his *person* was not so dependent on it, since the work belonged more to the cosmic order of the universe than to the person of the poet" (148).

Rilke's *Book of Hours: Love Poems to God* is both about and conjures up in the reader this presence that is silence. It is not always clear whether the silence is actually the cosmic order/God or God's mind as we encounter it or a condition for encountering God. Rilke may even be testing all of these and other roles for silence. The poems certainly invite the reader to take part and do not belong to Rilke's person, his own ego. They characterize quiet, are themselves quiet, and almost inevitably evoke a stillness in the reader. Picard says, "[a] word that participates in the world of silence expresses something quite different from the same word that is far removed from silence" (149). Rilke's poems in the *Book of Hours* are sparse, have a summer sky-like clarity, which is not to say they are transparent, and it's as though the words were breaths blown into snow, blown with some real urgency and labor, and received quietly and just perceptibly. Most of these poems were written while Rilke was in seclusion in Berlin, Worpswede, and by the sea in Viareggio, Italy. In "Ich bin auf der Welt zu allein und doch nicht allein genug" he says to God "I'm too alone in the world, yet not alone enough / [...] / to be simply in your presence, like a thing—/ just as it is" (1-5).1 Still, it's clear that this is what the poet is trying to achieve: humility and

unpretentiousness, a dampening of the ego. This series of prayers/poems is too long, nuanced, and theologically challenging to adequately treat in this paper. But since Rilke's treatment of and reverence for silence so much resonates with my own thinking and feelings about it, I want to offer up a few of his images, albeit crudely and rudely acontextual, in order to be a bit clearer about why I think silence has a moral value that prompts philosophers like Picard and prophets like Thoreau (or Ed Chaberek from Superior, Montana) to rage their own eloquence about it.

First, I cite a complete poem in order to give a sense of the images, sounds, and tone inside this collection.

Ich habe viele Bruder in Sutanen

I have many brothers in the South
who move, handsome in their vestments,
through cloister gardens.
The Madonnas they make are so human,
and I dream often of their Titians,
where God become an ardent flame.

But when I lean over the chasm of myself —
it seems
my God is dark
and like a web: a hundred roots
silently drinking.

This is the ferment I grow out of.

More I don't know, because my branches
rest in deep silence, stirred only by the wind. (49)

The speaker's God is still, dark, and silent, drinking silence, emitting silence, unlike the Gods that flare up in ardent flame, or that are raging, human-esque Titians, unlike Gods who are worshiped by priests in fancy vestments, moving busily here and there in their gardens. His God, which he finds in the quiet chasm of himself, is more like a tree in a garden or maybe a forest, or like the hundred roots of the tree, silently drinking the speaker's silent ferment. And there's "more," a mystery, that the speaker doesn't know about God, only more silence, a silence that he becomes and can rest inside of, silence that only the wind, nearly silent itself, stirs. The tone of this poem, like most of the others, is hushed, given the abundance of white space, and there is an abundance of soft vowels and consonants (even in the translation) and quiet images of darkness, silent drinking, and of the soft wind that merely stirs, but does not blow, branches. Yet this si-

lent God is immense—a web of a hundred roots, active—it's drinking and nourishing itself and the speaker—and it can be acted on—by the wind, for example. It is very much a presence, not merely an absence or negation. It either is God or is the predominate quality of God. Picard says the "quality of infinity, which can never be completely expressed or exhausted by words, is present in silence" (174).

In "Du kommst und gehst. Die Türen fallen" the speaker addresses God in the first stanza:

> You come and go. The doors swing closed
> ever more gently, almost without a shudder.
> Of all who move through the quiet houses,
> you are the quietest. (1-4)

And later we see images of God as a shadow, as a "herd of luminous deer" running inside him, and as a dark forest (13). In "Dein allererstes Wort war: *Licht*" he prays:

> Please don't talk.
> Let all your doing be by gesture only.
> Go on writing in faces and stone
> what your silence means. (7-10)

He prays thus because God's first two words, "light" and then "man," and any words that portend humankind's future, are frightening. In "Wir dürfen dich nicht eigenmächtig malen" he cautions "[w]e must not portray you in king's robes, / you drifting mist that brought forth the morning" (1-2).

These word images of a silent divinity—luminous deer, mist, shadows, evidence of divinity on stone and silent faces—are different in kind from "verbal noise," "words that arise from other words, from the noise of other words" (Picard 170). "The noise of words makes us forget that there was ever any such thing as silence at all. It is not even an acoustical phenomenon; the acoustic element, the continual buzzing of verbal noise, is merely a sign that all space and time have been filled by it" (Picard 172-73). And who really listens to verbal noise? Is listening even relevant?

> Nobody listens to [humankind] as he speaks, for listening is only possible when there is silence in man: listening and silence belong together. Instead of truly speaking to others today we are all waiting merely to unload on to others words that collected inside us. Speech has become a purely animal function. (Picard 177)

Rilke spent a great deal of time in relative seclusion in order to "lean over the chasm of myself" (49.7) as he put it, in order to learn to listen, truly, as did Thoreau and Byrd and the monks of various faiths that Alan Altany

writes about. But is it necessary to become a monk or hermit or, like Rilke, leave cities, domesticity, and intimate relations?

In Practice

My strong sense is that at this point in time it wouldn't help very much to live in a hut in the woods, or in a castle tower, or perhaps even in a shack under the ice in Antarctica (though this would be your best bet) in order to find the sort of quiet solitude that the writers of even the late 19th and early- to mid-20th century sought and largely found. Today living in even a remote hut in the woods or in a castle tower wouldn't insulate you from propeller plane and jet noise. Enormous population surges and a gobbling global economy have significantly altered our perceptions of time, space, human nature, and quality of life. And of course not just our perceptions of things have changed; some things themselves have changed thanks to global warming, deforestation, and other large-scale, impending environmental disasters. One hundred and fifty years ago, Thoreau, I believe, realized he was on the cusp of this paradigm shift and tried to articulate it and perhaps hoped to stop it. By the mid-twentieth century, Byrd had to go to extraordinary lengths to escape it. Picard's second to last chapter called "The Hope," written in 1952, is more despairing and at best fantastic than hopeful. He says "[i]t seems sometimes as though it might come to a fight between silence and noise; as if silence were secretly preparing for an invasion… Perhaps this enormous mechanism of noise will explode by its own violence, and the report will be a call to the silence telling it that its time has come" (226). And in the last chapter on "Silence and Faith" he advocates prayer as a means of coming into relation with the "higher silence of God" (230).

I agree with antinoise activists that noise is poison, something as toxic to the earth and to overall human wellbeing as DDT, carbon emissions, cigarette smoke, or any other major toxin that we have recently banned or significantly curtailed. I also largely agree with Byrd when he claims that our need for quiet is instinctual, though that doesn't necessarily mean we will do anything much about noise. Picard says there are still little reserves of silence in the "sanatoria between two and three in the afternoon" or "in the two minutes of silence in remembrance" of some loss, that silence, "like American Indians, is still allowed a little living space inside miserable reservations" (223).

People do, instinctively, I believe, seek out little moments of quiet in the coffee shop early in the morning, or in the house late at night, or in their

cars on the way to and from work. That's hardly adequate, though it is an indication that quiet isn't just a state of mind but also a valued state of the environment, one instrumental to peace of mind. I've indicated here that quiet is a reminder of our existence as "*fura-fura*" (Altany 80), of depths.

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NOTES

1. All citations of Rilke's poems refer to line numbers. When I have cited a whole poem, I give only the page number; when a poem is cited without direct reference to its title, the citation's first number indicates page number, and the second line numbers.

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