

## "ENOUGH SAID" - CHRIS MANN AND THE KABBALAH

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Representation is the basic artistic dilemma. How can ideas be expressed? How can you say what it is you are trying to say? In his notebooks Jasper Johns reveals his attitude by commenting, "I have tried to mean what I am doing". A similar frustration is expressed in Schoenberg's opera, *Moses and Aaron*, when Moses complains to God, "Thought is easy, speech is laborious".<sup>1</sup>

I have called this paper "enough said" because it is the kind of remark which characterises the failure of language. Although whatever has already been said is unsatisfactory, "enough said" admits that more words will not make things clearer. In spite of this "enough said" is never the final word. Confronting this dilemma is inescapable for contemporary artists, and yet the problem of using language to communicate ideas is as old as time itself. The conflict between language and art, between reality and representation, between ideas and words is fundamental. As Schoenberg's Moses says, "No image can give you an image of the unimaginable". Is it any wonder that Moses had a stutter.

One answer seems to suggest that language communicates best when it can't be formulated, when it remains unsayable. This is how the Hebraic tradition deals with the name of God and how Harold Bloom comes to suggest that the Hebrew Bible is actually a theory of language. In his book entitled *Kabbalah and Criticism*, Bloom supports this statement by examining the work of Rabbi Isaac Luria.<sup>2</sup> Luria, who was writing in the 16th century, based his work on a reading of the *Zohar*, which is the central text of Jewish Kabbalism. Luria concludes that God is always and forever lacking in the world and it is this lack which enables dialogue to occur. The line of argument goes: not-knowing is essential for dialogue, and dialogue is essential for language, and language is creation.

This lack, this space to where God withdraws, is called the *zimzum*. The *zimzum* is the first stage of the triple process by which God creates the world. *Zimzum*, literally means a holding in of breath. God begins by being omnipotent and without end, *Ein-Sof*. Therefore God must withdraw in order to create something that can exist as a separate entity. The second stage of the process is called *shevirah ha-kelim*, which means the breaking of the vessels, and the third stage is the *tikkun*, which is the restitution. The creative process must begin with withdrawal and end with restitution, the smashing of the form is the connecting concept.

These three stages of God's creation of the world can be used to describe any creative process. Any artist engaged in a creative act goes through a similar process. These stages seem to constitute the necessary elements of all acts of representation. For example, God's creation of the world has all the necessary ingredients for the creation of a piece of contemporary experimental music.

God's first act of creation is an act of withdrawal, which is also an act of representation, as it involves God teaching himself his own name. Even though this name is unutterable and therefore without end, it is a limitation of God's being. It is an act of definition, of writing. No word can contain the power of God's name and the letters themselves shatter. This is how creativity takes place. According to traditional mythology God exists alone with his name and consults the *Torah* as if it were a set of instructions, in order to know how to create the world. God then, creates the world by sending the first letter of his name into the place where he is not. The letter is the letter **YOD** the first letter of the *Tetragrammaton*. It is the arrival of the letters and the words which follow that enables confusion to take place. This confusion, or misreading, as Bloom calls it, is the restitution, the *tikkun*. Without the audience's response the act of creation is incomplete.

The connection between the Kabbalah and contemporary experimental music is made by the composer Herbert Brun. Brun stresses that in order to be experimental, music must be an act of not-knowing. This not-knowing is akin to an act of withdrawal, it is a withdrawal from established meanings and codes of understanding. It is a step towards the *zimzum*. It acknowledges the importance of silence and the idea that enough has already been said. It tries to move away from recognised distinctions, grammar and representation. In the *zimzum* there can be no

representation because there is nothing to represent. Experimental music heads for this place but can never reach it. In his book entitled *My words and where I want them*, (London: Princelet Editions, 1986) Brun writes:

To want to know it, may mean two distinct wants: I want to know whether a known "it" is in evidence here, there or anywhere. I want to know whether there is evidence for a not yet known "it". (173)

Brun's music is a search for the evidence of a not yet known "it". It's a search for a space between life and art, for the middle ground, or the middle void between language and representation. It is a struggle to carve out new space between not-knowing and not-yet.

Artists can be judged by their resistance to symbols, by their ability not be assimilated into language, because language only obscures what it seeks to reveal. It is in the midst of the treachery of language that the artist must seek to find a form of representation which outwits the system. Again Brun writes; "Language is not to be understood, but to make understood that which is neither language nor understood".(36) This is an argument in favour of confusion, minimal intelligibility and the quest for the ever elusive "it". That which is neither language nor understood sounds like it lives in that middle void.

Experimental composers must withdraw from the prevailing conceptual systems and be critical of them. They must attempt to propose new ways of thinking about things, they must represent a reality which hasn't happened yet. They need to express dissatisfaction with the way things are and a belief that things could be better. In this way fulfilment is continuously postponed. Their work is always expressing an absence, it is always incomplete and uncertain. Meaning is in perpetual exile and certainty on hold. This music is a pure science.

The particular area of experimental music which I'm focussing on is *compositional linguistics*. This is a term coined by Kenneth Gaburo. Roughly speaking, it refers to the use of language as if it were music. It is by doing this that composers can question the assumptions we have in regard to words and their meanings. It is a genre that, in the words of Herbert Brun, favours "*anti-communication*", which is defined as the "attempt to teach

language to behave differently".<sup>3</sup> It seeks to take language and make something else out of it.

Chris Mann, who is the Australian chapter of *compositional linguistics*, defines his work as a public experiment where the proposition and the results are published at the same time. His piece "On second thoughts"<sup>4</sup> is one such experiment. It is a CD produced with the *Machine for Making Sense*, a group of musicians consisting of Chris Mann, Jim Denley, Rik Rue, Amanda Stewart and Stevie Wishart.

The music is structured around a text which is written and performed by Mann. The other members of the group improvise around his reading, Wishart on the hurdy-gurdy and violin, Denley on the flute and saxophone, Rue with tape manipulations and Stewart with text and voice. They have also sampled fragmented sound-grabs of themselves and these digital recordings occur randomly during the performance. The whole piece relinquishes the traditional role of the composer as the central authorising identity. The performers interact with the technology and with each other, the artistic decisions being as much a part of aesthetic result as the chance occurrences.

The CD divides the piece into 26 tracks, one to coincide with each letter of the alphabet. The CD cover indicates that these tracks can be played in any order by instructing the listener to use "shuffle play". This introduces yet another indeterminate element. It is also an acknowledgment of the audience's role in the act of composition. The process of listening changes the structure of the music. The composition is a dialogue.

The first sentence of Mann's text reads:

On that which is required for definition: Price (an example) is structural violence where a system in a state of self-replacement (knowledge) is equivalent to one.<sup>5</sup>

"On second thoughts" is about defining definition. It demonstrates the way definitions and systems fail. It is a piece which approaches reality as if it were a language problem. How we distinguish one thing from another is being interrogated. By attacking the basic method of making definitions (that is giving things the property of "one"), Mann shows our whole perception of reality is a word game. "On second thoughts" includes lines such as;

"words are a relative interval", "one is a suffixed prick" and "truth a plastic fractal tax". Mann demonstrates that words are tautologies and that definitions are self-perpetuating contradictions. All of which is a way of not-knowing. It is a way of using words to mark an absence, highlighting the edges of the void and showing the point at which meaning fails.

The final paragraph is about lovers. Mann writes; "Eye t eye a lie n bed, go on lovee come". Lovers are an example of collapsed distinctions. Lovers do not need the kind of definition between selves that society would have us believe is necessary. They share a bed. Mann uses lovers to show that it is only grammar which makes distinctions. Minds and bodies do not. He writes; "a dildo collapses the distinction between doing and having". Mann's conclusion is; "be ell you ess aich um bang", which spells blush. It is an embarrassed ending, one which is almost a babble. Finally, this *Machine for Making Sense* makes no sense at all, it creates confusion. It is a journey away from conventional meanings, towards the *zimzum*. This is a piece of music which does not-yet make sense. It's a representation of a reality which has not-yet occurred.

The idea of the "not-yet" is from the German philosopher, Ernst Bloch. Mann is intrigued with the idea of the not yet, he writes "logic — prosthetic action, a formal not-yet" and "the example and the not-yet express a musty co-dependence". It is also an idea which has some similarities with Herbert Brun's theory of anticommunication and the aesthetic of not-knowing. Bloch's "not-yet" is drawn from his philosophy of hope<sup>6</sup>. Hope is the not-yet conscious. Hope means that we start out empty and go searching. Hope enables us to be continually unfulfilled. It means that meaning is always elusive. Hope is the opposite of memory.

In order to represent the "not-yet conscious" it is necessary for composers of *compositional linguistics* to destroy language. As Herbert Brun writes in the libretto to his piece *Futility 1964*, "a language lost is a language found".<sup>7</sup> *Compositional linguistics* uses words as impediments to understanding. Impediments are useful in the business of fracturing meaning, they help to make language a problem for people. Pieces of music such as Stockhausen's *Gesang der Junglinge*, Boulez's *Pli Selon Pli* and Berio's *Sequenza 3* are examples of compositions which strive to go beyond the limitation of words and sense, in order to explore the texture of language in a disruptive way. It is necessary to smash the form.

It is not, however, the unutterability of language which makes a language lost into a language found. The power of the creative discovery is in the subsequent confusion, the *tikkun*.

In *The Ear of the Other*, Derrida argues that he does not believe in the secret power of the proper name, he believes instead in untranslatibility<sup>8</sup>. It is as if God gives the world his name with the command to translate it, but makes sure that translation is impossible. The strength of this gesture is the eternal confusion into which all language is plunged. The power of words lies not in their unspeakability but in the confusion that unspeakability creates. According to the rites of Babel, language must have the right to be confusing, so that understanding can be continually postponed. Derrida points out that the word Babel can confusedly be understood as confusion, as babble. Babel is a babble which is divinely imposed. It's the challenge to have faith in incoherence.

In a lecture to his students, Schoenberg once said, "My goal, the goal of my teaching is to make it impossible for you to write music". It was in this moment that John Cage began a fantastic devotion to Schoenberg and swore to spend the rest of his life writing music. It's the self imposed impossibility of the task which makes it interesting.

Confusion can be compared to the desert experience, it's another form of the "not-yet conscious". Confusion is representative of meaning always being postponed and can be connected to the idea of the wandering Jew, the archetype of the alienated mind. The search for the name of God is necessary because God is absent, yet the search is doomed. The first commandment forbids its success, God cannot be represented by any word or symbol. Moses never makes it to the promised land, he is the wandering Jew whose ideas cannot reach an appropriate form of representation. Moses remains in the desert, in the space between art and life, the space of confusion.

Confusion means that words cannot be used to prove reality, just as addition cannot be used as proof of numbers. A thing cannot be true or false, only sentences can be true or false. It is because words commit semantic perjury that definitions are a problem: they presume that language reflects a transparent view of reality. Words cannot be a window onto the world. The world is more likely to be a window onto words. God had to consult the *Torah* before creation could begin.

The story of the Tower of Babel shows that when language is allowed to be thought of as transparent it becomes a substitute for God. Transparent meanings must be continuously attacked. Derrida tells us that language is like the tower after God's intervention, a half completed and misguided edifice whose visible structures are flawed. Only words which fail to have transparent meanings can hold together the idea of an absent God. When God condemns humanity to the multiplicity of languages confusion becomes inevitable because of the now necessary, but impossible, task of translation. This confusion is symbolised by God's imposition of an unutterable name, which is an impediment to representation. It is a name which is designed to prevent understanding, so that the search can go on.

Babel means that communication is saved through confusion. Confusion is the essence of Brun's aesthetic of *anticommunication*. *Anticommunication* exists along side communication, it does not cancel out communication. *Anticommunication* is a way of representing non-representation, which paradoxically seems to be the only thing left to represent. It is an exploration of the unsayable. And in the momentary silence that this generates, we can feel the tension between not-knowing and not-yet, between the *zimzum* and the *tikkun*. Being at this point of tension is significant. It involves more than being an ironist or a critic. It is about the discovery of new ground using available definitions to hold in place that which is unknown. It's art as a public science.

Just as the search for silence forces speech to continue, it is the search for meaning which forces confusion to continue. And that confusion, so necessary for renewal, is art's offering to life.

## REFERENCES

- 1 An English translation of the libretto is printed in full with the CD — Arnold Schoenberg, *Moses Und Aron*. Germany: Philips Classics, 1974 — 4386672.
- 2 Bloom, Harold, *Kabbalah and Criticism*. New York: The Seabury Press, 1975.
- 3 Herbert Brun, *Compositions*. Illinois: Non Sequitur Records, 1983. This publication includes a booklet of Brun's philosophy of anticommunication.
- 4 *On second thoughts* toured nationally and internationally in 1993. It has now been released on CD by Tall Poppies, TP034, and is due to be broadcast on ABCFM, Bob Maynard's *New Release* program on January 24th.
- 5 The CD cover reproduces Mann's text in full.
- 6 Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, (English translation) Great Britain: Basil Blackwell, 1986.
- 7 *Futility 1964*, is included in Herbert Brun, *Compositions*.
- 8 Jacques Derrida, *The Ear of the Other*, (English translation) New York: Schocken Books, 1985. It is interesting to note how shifty Derrida is in regard to the signing of his own name, a theme which runs through works such as *Postcards* and *Limited Inc.*