

# Mosaic

a journal for the interdisciplinary study of literature



FIG. 42. SECTIONS OF THE RIGHT EAR.

- A. The Cochlea.
- B. Auditory Canal.
- C. Membrane of the Drum,  
(the lower half.)
- D. A small muscle.
- E. Incus, or Anvil.
- M. Malleus, or Mallet.
- I. Eustachian Tube.
- G. Semicircular Canals.
- H. Cochlea, or snail's shell.

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a special issue  
**SOUND, PART I**

The artist James Turrell's installations appear, at first glance, the ideal setting for what Turrell himself describes as a "wordless experience." The light or darkness encountered within them is often so sensual, or severe, as to leave one silenced and speechless. Yet sounds (and words), sounds that speak of language's enduring narrations, nonetheless often arise within such installations.

## Soliloquies of Silence: James Turrell's Theatre of Installation

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*One of the most urgent tasks for contemporary thought is, without doubt, to redefine the concept of the transcendental in terms of its relation with language. For if it is true that Kant was able to articulate his concept of the transcendental only by omitting the question of language, here "transcendental" must instead indicate an experience which is undergone only within language, an experimentum linguae [ . . . ] in which what is experienced is language itself. —Giorgio Agamben, *Infancy and History**

**T**he *experimentum linguae* that Agamben so vividly describes as one of the most "urgent tasks" now required for redefining the concept of the transcendental had, two decades before, been similarly conveyed by Martin Heidegger when he wrote, "To undergo an experience with language [ . . . ] means to let ourselves be properly concerned by the claim of language by entering into and submitting to it. If it is true that man finds the proper abode of his existence in language—whether he is aware of it or not—then an experience we undergo with language will touch the innermost nexus of our existence" (57). Both men, it would seem, were quite urgently reminding us

(and perhaps themselves) that, redefined and reconceived, any roads to the “transcendental” must pass through language, not around it, with the worded experience “undergone,” not overlooked.

Agamben’s and Heidegger’s converging claims have unexpectedly shadowed the opening of an essay that was intended to focus upon the contemporary artist James Turrell and his various light-filled installations. Interrupted, I have tried numerous times to begin otherwise, getting rid of the philosophers’ bold assertions, feeling that they were finally too obscuring of my primary topic, James Turrell. After all, evoking the *experimentum linguae* could only delay my entry into the artist’s work (as if actually delaying my entry into one of Turrell’s own luminous rooms). The dense language seemed too inelegant, too wordy a way to start an investigation of Turrell’s always elegant, wordless work. But, repressed, Agamben and Heidegger’s provocative words—about words—have always returned, reclaiming their initiating position (while, through their return, perhaps manifesting something of the very concerns about language that their related statements were raising all along).

For both Heidegger and Agamben were, as their illuminating insights reveal, seeking a “way to language,” an awareness of the “claim of language,” while navigating the often treacherous “linguistic turn” where words are no longer engaged as a transparent and ignorable (even ignoble) medium of thought, but are seen instead as a kind of visible veil, a fog on the darkened road. Encountered there, head-on, is “the *thing* of language” (Agamben 4) irrevocably eclipsing the unmediated “experience.” In the resulting experiential “destruction,” as Agamben characterizes it, “we never find man separated from language, and we never see him in the act of inventing it. . . . It is through language, then, that the individual as known to us is constituted as an individual, and linguistics, however far back it goes in time, never arrives at a chronological beginning of language, an ‘anterior’ of language” (56). From this newly worded vantage (or veiled anti-vantage), Heidegger and Agamben’s shared insistence upon the need to “undergo an experience with language,” and upon the belief or suspicion that it is “only within language” that the “transcendental” is to be conceived—as opposed to the more Kantian image of the transcendental that *transcends* language, or for which language is seen as an obstacle to transcendence—struck a chord, cast a shadow upon my experiences within several of Turrell’s transcendent installations.

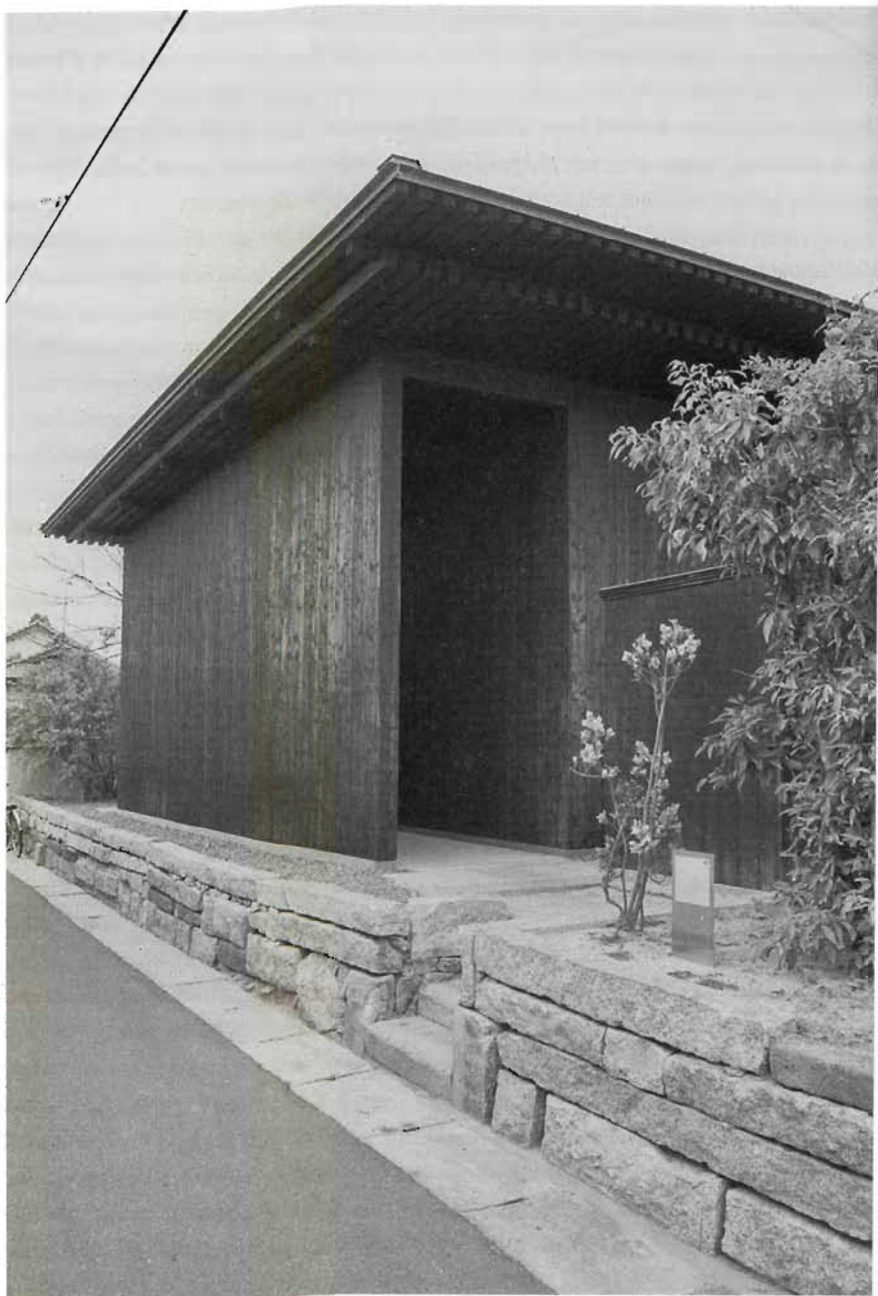
In fact, with these two irrepressible claims about language very much in mind, I wonder now if Turrell’s installations might actually be reconceived as inadvertent spaces for the kind of “experience with language” that both Heidegger and Agamben were seeking. Or might his installations even be seen as unintended theatrical stages upon which a dramatic linguistic encounter “befalls us, strikes us, comes over us, overwhelms and transforms us” (Heidegger 57)? I say “inadvertent” or “unintended”

because the particular kind of “experience” that I was frequently having inside of Turrell’s many luminous rooms was perhaps not *really* the one he intended or the one for which the rooms were designed. For, as I now suspect, the artist may very well have desired the contrary kind of encounter, offering *not* an “experience of language,” but an experience of the *absence* of language, its sounded cessation, or what Turrell describes as “an experience of wordless thought” (qtd. in Brown 43).

Nonetheless, might Turrell’s installations, in spite of his specific silencing intentions, now be imagined as built “abodes” of language, within which what is “experienced is language itself,” abodes where we enter in and submit to a discretely *housed* language that, as such, “touch[es]”—as Heidegger sensually, even erotically, writes—“the innermost nexus of our existence”? Could it be that Turrell’s tranquil spaces, with their calculated (almost quarantined) deprivations, may have made room for—indeed, “a clean, well-lighted” room for—language’s most telling and transcendent engagement?

Let me explain further by speaking of, and by remembering, a recent experience of my own inside an installation by James Turrell entitled *Minami-dera*, on the isolated island of Naoshima in Japan’s Inland Sea, forty-five minutes by ferry from the port city of Okayama. This extraordinary installation was completed in 1999, in collaboration with the Japanese architect Tadao Ando, and was built on the site of a four-hundred-year-old temple and shrine that had long ago burned to the ground. The exterior of the windowless building of uniformly darkened wood is simple and unspectacular, but alluring nonetheless in its restrained elegance; one might, however, easily walk or drive by the building without realizing that anything of note is located on the site.

What is contained within Turrell’s and Ando’s dark container must, therefore, be knowingly approached and navigated, with the visitor crossing a shadowy threshold that separates—as if dialectically designed—light and darkness, darkness and light. At the entrance, which you come to by walking in a roundabout way to what seems like the back of the building (by the way, *Minami-dera* translates from the Japanese as “backside of the moon”), there is a guard, or host, who politely alerts you to the fact that, inside, the room is “*very, very dark*” and your eyes will require considerable time to adjust. And, as one quickly realizes upon entering, this person is certainly correct. Walking around the last wall and finally entering into Turrell’s room is to enter into a pitch blackness that instantly smothers the eyes, blinding you with a shroud of darkness that is (and remains for a very long time) profoundly disorienting. Hesitantly, you shuffle forward nonetheless, arms outstretched in order to avoid collision with whatever might be in front of you (there’s no telling). And then you stand staring, point-blank, at nothing at all, at a darkness of such intensity that it would seem to have attached itself, like barnacles, to the very surface of your eyes. The space within



1. Shot of *Minami-dera's* exterior, taken from the street. Photograph by Clark Lunberry.

the room contracts itself and is now physically pressed right up against the flesh of your face in a kind of perceptual suffocation.

However, within ten to fifteen minutes of standing in total darkness, the irises of the eye, like a stage curtain slowly opening, very gradually begin to dilate, slowly enabling the eye to focus on the defining dimensions of the room. Colours congeal and spread, shapes form and connect, distances and proximities adjust and settle, and—like ghostly apparitions arising from the dense particles of air (or perhaps, like a developing photograph emerging, within a darkroom, from its chemical emulsion)—the shadowy presence of others, and ourselves, begins to come into focus. In the slowest of slow-motions, a scene *being seen* has dramatically unfolded upon this built site of an indeterminate beholding, upon this *de facto* stage in which something of perception itself has been positioned to perform itself, caught in the act of perceiving.

Towards what is now understood to be the front of a fairly large room, a broad, rectangular shape (perhaps 5 feet by 12 feet) begins to suggest itself upon the wall. Gaining confidence, you venture forward, toward the light of that arising form. As you approach the vague shape, the illuminated air in front of you is filled with small particles of moving light, like the miniscule strings of string theory dancing chaotically before your eyes. Finally, you find yourself at the very edge of that increasingly defined space at the front of the room that, one now sees, opens onto a separate, shallow chamber all of its own. Looking intently within that framed enclosure—as if through a kind of cosmic picture window, or a three-dimensional film screen—is like staring into a pulsating abyss that suddenly reveals, almost miraculously, transcendently, something of nothing in itself staring right back at you (or rather, like Nietzsche's self-reflecting abyss, right back *into* you).

Seeing into and through that cut-out opening at the front of the room is indeed a remarkable experience, and it remains so even at the point when, leaning a little into the illuminated space, you locate the hidden incandescent lights tucked within their discrete fixtures inside the frame of the interior wall. You see, though you are probably not supposed to, the mechanical source of the room's mystic radiance. Like stage lights carefully concealed in a theatre behind curtains, these lights reveal something of *this* stage as suddenly a bit less cosmic and bit more constructed, a space of calculated illusion the light of which you have nonetheless willingly, happily, allowed yourself to bathe warmly within. Seeing those concealed light fixtures proves, however, to be an unexpected part of the unfolding perceptual process, illuminating further what is finally there to be seen in that luminous room: the hidden mechanisms of its transcendental offerings.

Roughly and retrospectively, this is my now-recounted memory of James Turrell's extraordinary installation on the Japanese island of Naoshima. Or, this is the story that I presently tell myself and others based upon my fragmented and fanciful recollections



of it. For my story is, no doubt, largely determined by the limits of my own narrative abilities to amply describe with the language at hand a disorientation and a darkness so deep, an aesthetic event so slow and subtle, and a site of seeing that was dramatically to expose (or *over-expose*) a picture of the one seeing, through what Turrell himself describes as “the penetration of vision . . . the entry of self into that which is seen” (qtd. in Brown 38). As I look back many months later, I now voluntarily recall, as if recalling a penetrating dream, my brief time within this beautiful and memorable room.

There was, however, more to my experience in Turrell’s *Minami-dera* than the purely perceptual one described above. For such a sublime sight, moving and lovely as it certainly was, does not arise without also inciting a familiar and enduring conflict or antagonism with language itself, with memory and the storytelling of memory, the narration of a day’s dream into composite, compelling form. This is a conflict that is both personal and, I daresay, epistemological in nature. (And, if examined further, it might now unexpectedly move us toward a greater understanding of Heidegger and Agamben’s desired “experience with language,” with which I began my investigations.) Indeed, this conflict has to do in large part with the apparent and seemingly irresolvable antagonism between language and the visual arts, between the visceral experience of sensual, lyrical, and aesthetic sensations and the cerebral interventions, narrations, and simultaneous translations (that, as we know, are never *quite* simultaneous) of those sensations into words either spoken, written or—perhaps most tenaciously and intrusively—involverarily thought. In particular, this conflict (a not entirely unpleasant one, by the way, for reasons soon to be described) arises with unique power and poignancy in Turrell’s work precisely because of the stillness otherwise invested in his spaces, the perceptual deprivations encountered within them. There, the conflict between sensation and the worded *narration* of sensation comes vividly to the fore, rendering in its wake a degree of doubling self-consciousness that would seem to split the singular experience (and the one experiencing it) in two—or, as Turrell has richly suggested of his installations, to offer an “entry of self into that which is seen.”

**F**irst, before going any further, some more background on the artist: James Turrell was born in 1943 in Los Angeles and raised as a Quaker; he later lapsed and eventually became an artist. From the mid-1960s onward, he began building a large, diverse, and very impressive body of work, constructing spaces in which light itself—like paint for a painter, sound for a composer, or words for a poet—was his primary working substance. Turrell, speaking of his work, vividly describes his use of a colour-filled “light [to] activate the space and make it alive . . . a structuring of reality by building [. . .] a building with light” (qtd. in Noever 195). One type of installation includes rooms that



2. *Roden Crater*. Photograph by Agostino De Rosa.

are in varying degrees of darkness (from slight to nearly total, as in the Japanese piece) and in which wide openings have been installed—cut from out of a museum or gallery wall, and then colourfully, incandescently lit from within. In another type of installation, called “Sky Spaces,” sections of ceiling have been cut away from rooms to reveal the naturally changing light above. And, no doubt most ambitiously, there is the installation *Roden Crater*, with its vast and intricately linked chambers (aligned, in part, according to the movements of celestial events) that have been excavated and carved with heavy machinery from the interior of an extinct volcano in Arizona’s Painted Desert. Turrell has been working on the *Roden Crater* for more than thirty years, on and off, and, though reports suggest that he is nearing completion, it is still not open to the public. From the monumental to the intimate, from modest rooms in museums to an entire mountain in the desert, the common denominator among such installations is Turrell’s careful crafting of specific spaces in which light as a real-time, dimensional substance is made to fill a particular site, in which the air itself is atmospherically enlivened by the calculated and colourful illuminations, and in which the viewer-as-occupant is positioned, as Turrell describes it, to “feel the physical presence of that light” (qtd. in Brown 31).

However, lest we see Turrell as a mere sensualist, in whose work feeling alone is fetishized as the “be all and end all” of his installations (though the rhetoric of “feeling” is certainly abundant in his own descriptions of his work; the word itself recurs almost mantra-like in interviews and essays), we should note that Turrell has also made clear that his “work has to do with perception—how we see and how we perceive” and that his sites are “really only inhabited by consciousness,” with the viewers thus oriented to



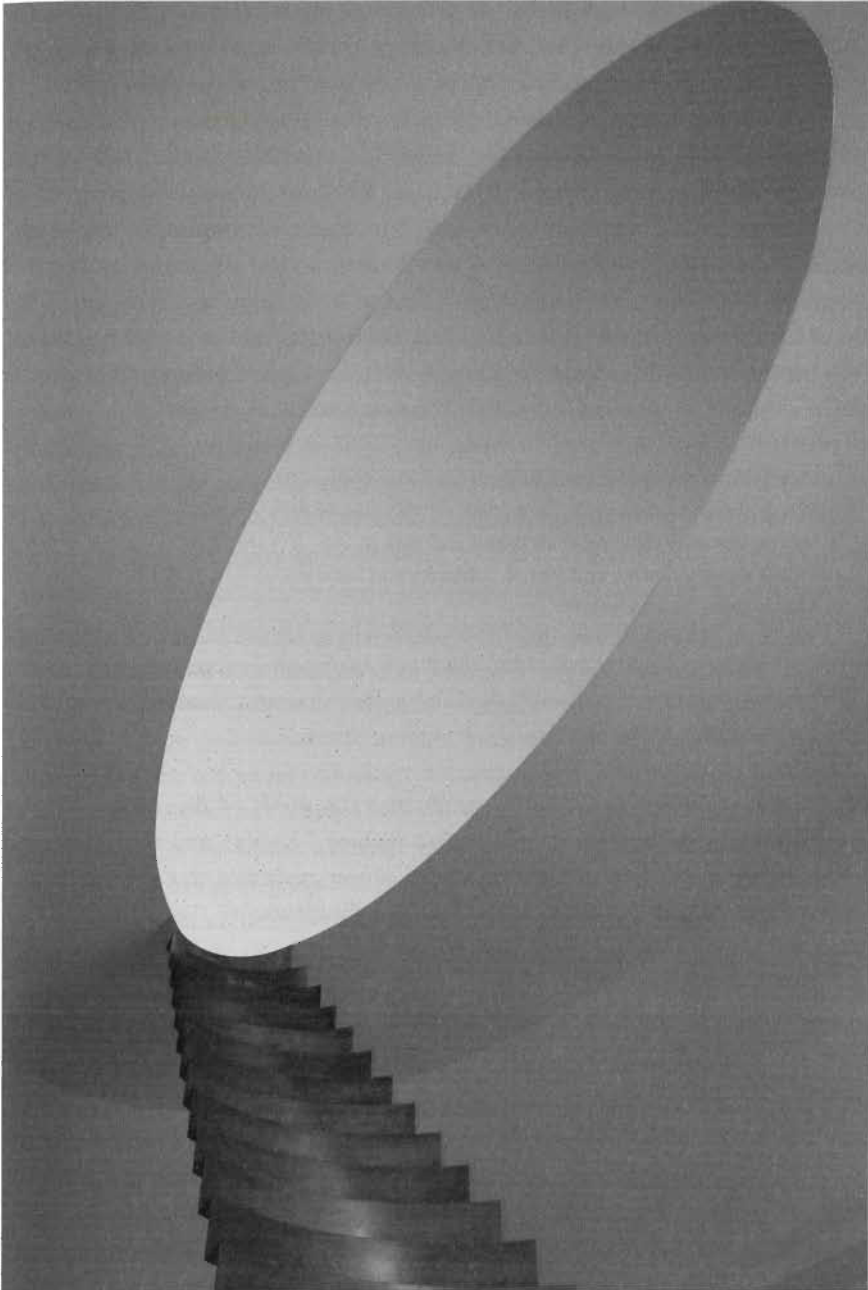


3. *Eye of Roden Crater*. Photograph by Agostino De Rosa.

“see [themselves] see” (qtd. in Brown 42). Indeed, the light of Turrell’s built spaces functions in part as a kind of interior mirror, in which viewers, moving through the varied sites, are made reflectively self-conscious of the spatial and temporal dimensions of their own seeing, their own experiential presence (and perhaps absence) within the spaces. Once there, while not seeing anything in particular, the viewers are placed in a position to see *nothing* (or next to nothing) in all its luminously particulate matter.

Within Turrell’s *Minami-dera*, the cut-out opening at the front of the darkened room appeared as a kind of flat film screen that, in spite of its flatness, nonetheless seemed to project three-dimensionally. The luminous projection, however, projected not only into the physical space of the constructed room itself, but also, and even more vividly, *on to* the corneal film of the viewer’s actual eyes. Indeed, as a viewer that day I found myself suddenly cast as a shadowy character of my own “inhabited [. . .] consciousness,” filmically forming from out of the projected particles of light.

In writing about Turrell’s work, my desire is to describe as best I can the nearly always pleasurable experience of “feel[ing] the physical presence of [. . .] light,” and the often uncanny sensation of being positioned, indeed, to “see myself see.” However, I also want to acknowledge and think about something that I suspect is integrally linked to the mirroring self-perceptions outlined above: the adjacent narrative and linguistic event of that otherwise singularly sensual experience—those immediate word-filled interventions, or interruptions, that are an often repressed or ignored dimension of one’s time within these installations. The insistence upon silence within these stilled spaces, as perhaps within a Quaker chapel, is such as to impose (self-



4. *Alpha Skyspace* (inside *Roden Crater*). Photograph by Agostino De Rosa.

policing) its own unexamined enforcement. For, as much as I wish to enter Turrell's always beautiful installations and wholly absorb myself—as if I were slipping into a warm bath (and then seeing myself slipping into a warm bath)—in the immediate sensation of their delicate and tactile light, as much as I want to silence myself within the silence of these sensual spaces, I frequently find instead a more ambivalently felt experience that inevitably includes the language heard within my own head.

In fact, what I so often hear there (in my head, that is), accompanying any immediately felt sensation within Turrell's installations, is my seemingly unstoppable engagement with a mediating language, a kind of “voice-over” to my own viewing. Received, like the erratic reception of a weak radio signal, is a narrative engagement with the room itself that sounds for all the world like a logorrheic flow of fragmented phrases and staccato words that loosely fall into the following categories:

Words about the emerging visibility of the room itself  
 Words about the delicate textures of air, the densities of darkness and light  
 Words about the coalescence of colour and pattern  
 Words about sensation and silence, sublimity and beauty  
 Words about art and history  
 Words about words, and words about words forming themselves always and already into a story, before the story has even concluded, with the present tense instantly, or instamatically, photographed into an intelligibly worded past (but one that would seem to interrupt an intelligibly wordless present)

But, within the room there are frequently also the words of those other visitors around me. I hear *their* words (while often wishing I hadn't), and even hear their words as *my* words, hear the shared shapes of our replicated thought within the shared (discourse of) darkness. Among the words heard are:

Words about the unseen time of day  
 Words arising from memory and tomorrow  
 Words about the body, its assorted needs, demands, desires—about lunch, lust, and appetite  
 Words, banal words, about the banality of being there, being anywhere

As if installed within the installation itself, the words heard in my head, whether I like it or not, are irrepressibly sounding as a kind of (double) agent of distracted, often inane interrogation, like a half-demented Cartesian demon conducting a mediating commentary upon the very experience that I am desiring to unmediatedly experience. I think, therefore I see myself thinking; I see myself, in floating quotation marks, *performing* thought—like Beckett's Lucky on a leash in *Waiting for Godot*, ordered by Pozzo

to “Think! [. . .] Think pig!”—to the captive audience of no one in particular, performing a performance that, in the dark, cannot be seen (but that cannot *not* be heard).

What happens, though, when such performative dimensions of Turrell’s thoughtful installations would appear to have taken centre stage, its promiscuous chatter overtaking the stillness within? And what happens when this kind of theatrical self-representation enters into that which might initially have seemed so instantaneous, so transcendently primal, so linked to the immediacy of sight and sensation as to have preceded—*transcended*—any theatricalizing self-reflection upon it? And what happens when language—as a performative tool of self-narration, a representational agent of perception itself—irrepressibly arises within such a room? Indeed, what happens when words begin internally to narrate the very experience that one is presently experiencing (or *almost* presently, for the two never quite coincide), casting the shadow of theatre onto this shadowy installation? Or, in other words, what happens when, as Heidegger pointedly inquires, we are “asked head-on: In what relation do you live to the language you speak? We should not be embarrassed for an answer” (58)?

At such a now noisy and conflicted (but not “embarrassed”) moment, those desired—and, in a sense, advertised—silent sensations that were certainly sought and partially produced in the designed light of Turrell’s room cannot *quite* be sustained in the uncorrupted and numinous manner that I (and others) may have initially wished, in large part because of the murmurings of language both within and without that will not seem to cease their incessant soundings. For what I cannot help but hear, as I stand there seeing (the two senses colluding toward their own richly collaged confusion), is a side of me that will not simply *shut up*, like an annoying companion whispering in my ear (or, as in the theatre, a hidden prompter at the edge of the stage, feeding me forgotten lines of lost language) when all I want, *I think*, is to be left alone to luxuriate in the lovely light of Turrell’s installation: to feel it, to touch it, to have it *touch me*, silently to my heart’s content—unnarrated, unmediated, sensation pure and simple. Or so I believe; or so I tell myself.

Might it be, however, that the conflict created by simultaneously feeling the light and seeing myself see myself feel the light is perhaps precisely where language finds, in the dark, its narrow opening, creeping in and demanding finally to be heard? Might it even be that this annoying companion, chattering away—this whispering prompter who goes on prompting whether I like it or not, violating my desired sovereignties of silence—is only too firmly lodged within my own narrowly enclosed skull ever to be entirely extracted? For how can I ask my prompting companion to leave me alone, to separate itself from me, especially when the unnerving suspicion arises that it is this very prompter, unseen in the darkened wings, who is in part responsible for prompting me to seek even the silenced sensation that it is now imagined to be violating? For,

as Michel Foucault similarly diagnosed the dilemma, or disease, of such thoughtful conflict, of a consciousness caught in its own eclipsing self-regard, “What must I be, I who think and who am my thought, in order to be what I do not think, in order for my thought to be what I am not?” (325).

**O**n the subject of seeing light and feeling its rich and storied sensation (and knowing that you have seen it because you *saw* yourself see it, and then said so), I am reminded of another story, involving the French painter Paul Cézanne. As is well known, Cézanne was an artist obsessed—as is Turrell—by a volcanic mountain, in his case Mt. Ste. Victoire in the south of France. As the story goes, Cézanne was standing with the poet Joachim Gasquet in the Louvre before Paulo Véronèse’s very noisy-looking masterpiece *Les Noces de Cana*—with all that murmur and chatter depicted in paint—and whispering in his young friend’s ear: “Listen, it is breathtaking! What are we? Close your eyes, wait, don’t think about anything. Open them. . . . All you see is the great colored wave, hmm?—an iridescence, colors, a richness of colors. That is what painting should give us, a harmonious warmth, an abyss into which the eye can sink, a silent germination. A state of grace in colors. . . . You have to know how to see, to feel, especially in front of a great machine such as the one Véronèse built” (qtd. in Doran 132–33). It is instructive to note that Cézanne begins by insisting that his companion “listen!” not *look* at Véronèse’s busy (buzzing) painting, to close his eyes—as if any seeing of the painting is to begin by hearing it—and by first expansively wondering (in the “breathtaking” darkness), “What are we?”

But how is Cézanne’s companion ever to respond to such a weighty and unexpected question (coming, as it does, as if from “out of the blue”)? For would not his words only—gracelessly—get in the way of the painter’s described “state of grace,” a state arising from the warm and harmonious condition induced by this “great machine”? And, even more noisily, would not his words only muck up the machinery of this “built” painting, grinding that grace to a screechy halt? Indeed, as Cézanne elsewhere makes clear, in order to enter such an iridescent and silently germinating abyss, “the artist must never have an idea, a word in mind when he needs a sensation. Great words are thoughts that don’t belong to you” (qtd. in Doran 116).

However, of this moving story in the museum, one should perhaps acknowledge that the precision and beauty of Cézanne’s own quoted words are, in fact, somewhat dubiously attributed to the painter by his friend, the poet Gasquet, who, in a time prior to the existence of recording equipment, was obliged to write from recollection (as I was in describing Turrell’s *Minami-dera*) what the painter had earlier said in the museum, and to place into narrative form the remembered engagement in the gallery. Considering the event shaped as such into a more coherent story, one might reasonably



5. Paolo Veronese, *Les Noces de Cana*, 1562–63 (Réunion des Musées Nationaux / Art Resource, NY).

suspect that Gasquet was partially prompting the painter, after the fact, to a command of language, a “literary” eloquence that, by most accounts, Cézanne did not possess and of which he was quite suspicious and dismissive. Indeed, describing his desire as a painter (and sounding here much like Turrell) to “make one feel the air” (Doran 29), Cézanne spoke (or, again, is *said* to have spoken) of the need to “think without words” (Doran 124)—anticipating Turrell’s later claim for an experience of “wordless thought”—and stated that “conversations about art are almost always useless” (Doran 30). Consequently, one might imagine that if, in the Louvre, Cézanne was, in real time, prompting the eyes of the poet Gasquet to *see* (via language) in a particular manner and to *hear* (in the darkness) the painting before him, it was Gasquet who was then prompting the prompter, Cézanne, to *speak*, via the poet’s voluntary recollection and embellished reconstruction, “thoughts that [may have not quite] belong[ed] to [him].”

Of his installations (which I often feel are the “great machine[s]” that *he* has “built”) Turrell has ambitiously and explicitly stated—echoing Cézanne—that he is interested in “imbuing space with consciousness” and, as repeatedly quoted earlier, that “what is important to me is to create an experience of wordless thought” (qtd. in Brown 43). However, as narrated at length above, *my* experience within a variety of Turrell’s installations over the years has always fallen somewhat short of that seemingly desirable “wordless” condition of strict sensation, of a “consciousness” silently “imbued.” Instead, the “thought” engaged and encountered within his rooms has been quite thoroughly word-*filled*, exhibiting a relentlessly murmuring consciousness “inhabited” by a language that, as Cézanne suspected of his narrating words, may not even “belong to me.”



Sometime in the late 1940s, the American composer John Cage spent time at Harvard University in an anechoic chamber—a room that is carefully constructed, for scientific purposes, to eliminate all echo and that, if thought about, is in many ways reminiscent of Turrell’s own aesthetically constructed spaces of deprivation and calculated light. Once inside, Cage—expecting to hear nothing, expecting to encounter silence in itself—was instead startled by the mysterious and unexpected continuation of sounds, the absence of absence and what, he later realized, were the internal coursings and rumblings of the blood of his own body, the incessant whirring and ringings of his nervous system—ghosts in the corporeal machine. As Cage later frequently told the story of this important recollected event, his subsequent apotheosis was that “there is no silence,” but instead, inescapably, the constant, polymorphous variations of noise always already filling the ear or preceding even the ear’s finest receptions, hearing before the ear has even heard. Cage, of course, emerged from his now-legendary anechoic experience having learned to embrace and work directly with the inevitable and indeterminate noises that surrounded him, to make music from the mayhem, song from a silence that is not silent.

Emerging from Turrell’s similarly reduced spaces of deprivation, perhaps a related (if unexpected) lesson might now be learned. Indeed, as I suggested at the beginning of my investigation, it would seem that Turrell’s installations have, through the very deprivations designed into them, allowed for an experience of language normally overlooked, repressed, or undervalued, aspects of which both Agamben and Heidegger may have been indirectly pointing to in their shared search for a desired “experience with language” as the now-necessary conduit for a reconceiving of the “transcendental.” For, as Heidegger elsewhere describes language’s overlooked but almost architecturally constructed condition, “language itself never has the floor.” And, as such, the words can rarely be experienced—distracted as we are by the seeming banality of their own substance and storytelling—as “language bringing itself to language” (59). However, like the banal coursings of the body’s own blood, or the buzz of the nervous system anechoically revealed to Cage, the inevitable and indeterminate presence of language within Turrell’s rooms might now be similarly engaged and reconceived—just as Cage reconceived the absence of silence as a new way of imagining music. Like the unstoppable noise of the body (which is, after all, evidence of life itself), the words heard in the head (which are, after all, evidence of consciousness itself) may now be embraced as constituting an integral part of the felt sensation that was so earnestly, so silently, sought inside Turrell’s installations. As if inscribed on consciousness itself (or indeed, as if *inscribing* that consciousness), these words heard, or *over*-heard, mixing in the mind like paint on a pallet, need not be construed as an interruption of consciousness. Instead, the incessant murmurings of language—as if



6. Anechoic chamber. Photograph by Steve Orfield.

arising from the structurings of our own Lacanian unconscious—may now be attentively engaged as a concretely poetic (and prophetic) component of that constructed space. Indeed, the room itself, and our conflicted consciousness of it, may finally be entered into as a kind of three-dimensional concrete poem. There before us is a felt “floor” of words (like water) to walk upon, offered within a theatrically doubled dimension of self-reflecting self-effacement—like illicitly inscribed graffiti written in the dark of the night, within the head itself, by who knows who.

**W**ith this almost viral image of an illicit language in mind (the once-quarantined space now irremediably infected), I’m reminded of the artist Robert Smithson, his own very material approach to language, and its dialectical engagement with his work.<sup>1</sup> It was often through his own large-scale installations (most notably his *Spiral Jetty*) that Smithson was to “advance” into—rather than move *away from*—the incessant murmur of words, in a manner perhaps instructional for us with regards to Turrell’s installations: “In the illusory babels of language, [one] might advance specifically to get lost, and to intoxicate [oneself] in dizzying syntaxes seeking odd intersections of meaning, strange corridors of history, unexpected echoes, unknown humors, or voids of knowledge . . . but this quest is risky, full of bottomless fictions and endless architectures and counter-architectures . . . at the end, if there is an end, are perhaps only meaningless reverberations” (78). With such “babels of language” neither repressed nor neglected, might the “reverberations” encountered in Turrell’s

installations be understood, if listened for, to offer (as if resonating from the very particles of its own sensual light) a Cagean form of musicated meaningfulness? Might the words even be heard as a welcome and necessary dialectical component of the installation's dark architecture, or perhaps as a measured sounding of its "counter-architecture"? Unexpectedly, it appears that the "experience of language" that both Heidegger and Agamben were describing and seeking—in which one is "entering into and submitting to [the language]"—can indeed be experienced within the architecture of Turrell's built installations. Encountered within these spaces of light and language, the reverberating sensations—which are "always vibrat[ing]," as Heidegger says of the "poetic experience," "within a realm of thinking" (69)—are no longer to be heard as an insidious interloper of transcendence, but rather as a vital dimension of this theatre of thought that must be submitted to, undergone, to give language "the floor," so that it might "bring itself to [itself]" (60).

As we now willingly position ourselves within Turrell's installations to eavesdrop on our own ephemeral chatter (if we even dare call this chatter "our own," unlike Cézanne, who would perhaps have disavowed the words attributed to him), what is revealed is the rich and indeterminate manner in which our consciousness is, not corrupted or violated by language, but instead seen as inevitably entangled *in* language, or even perhaps constituted by it. Once more, Robert Smithson's own writing and work are instructive. He noted the necessary loss of such illusions towards language and the dead-end futility of "treat[ing] language as a secondary thing, a kind of thing that will disappear when it doesn't disappear. Language is as primary as steel. And there's no point in trying to wish it away" (214). Wishing the words away, seeking an impossible silence, is likely to only reinvigorate the language's insurgent, subterranean (and "primary") presence. As Agamben wrote elsewhere of language's tenacious refusal to disperse, disappear, and silence itself wordlessly within the head of the one hearing it, "the constitution of the subject in and through language is precisely the expropriation of [a] 'wordless' experience; from the outset, it is always speech" (54).

"What are we?" Cézanne had mysteriously asked as he stood before Veronèse's grace-filled painting *Les Noces de Cana*. Perhaps now, and only now, a delayed response is finally possible for the painter, as we end where we conceptually began, with Heidegger's longing for a sensual experience with language that "touch[es] the innermost nexus of our existence" (57) and with Agamben's injunction to reconceive the "transcendental" as an "experience which is undergone only within language" (5). For the illuminating story may at last be more fully told of how Turrell's installations offer us room (and light) for such an unexpectedly sensual, transcendental engagement with words. Even though Turrell's luminous and always lovely spaces point us towards an experience of "wordless thought," inciting the desire for silence and uncorrupted sensation, a part



7. Fra Angelico, *Annunciation*, c.1438–45 (Reproduced with permission of the Museo Diocesano, Cortona, Italy).

of that pointing seems always constituted by the very words that the unruly, reverberating experience itself is hoping to escape, to transcend. "Listen, it is breathtaking!" Cézanne had proclaimed of Véronèse's great painting; but might it be that the irrepressible, iridescent words are—if listened for—the very breathtaking stuff of *what we are*?

Such a transcendent experience can be seen allegorically illustrated, for instance, in so many medieval paintings of the story of the Annunciation, such as Fra Angelico's *Annunciation*, another—as Cézanne might have called it—beautifully built "machine" intended for transcendence, "an abyss into which the eye can sink . . . a state of grace in colors." Within the elegant archings of Fra Angelico's architectural space, the story unfolds, and the shadows and light make room for the two numinous figures contained so separately therein. Meanwhile, the painted rays between them of the Annunciation's illuminating light are, on closer inspection, indeed lined with language, spelling out the very experience, the transcendental encounter, that is being heralded and undergone. We see Mary there within her vaulted chamber, visited by the angel, touched, as if by the light, by the language.

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#### NOTES

1/ I discuss Robert Smithson's various applications of language and their relation to his own art objects in an article entitled "So Much Depends: Printed Matter, Dying Words and the Entropic Poem." *Critical Inquiry* 30 (2004): 627–53.

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