

Silences: Jacques Ellul's Lost Book

by Yannick Imbert

Abstract: In this article, I shall attempt to show how Ellul tried to go beyond the dialectical tension between his sociological and theological works. This thesis, however surprising as it may sound to many Ellulian readers, is supported by the power and importance of poetry for Ellul. To do so, this article will draw some insights from Ellul's poetical work *Silences*. We will consider a few brief examples of how Ellul integrated in a single creative movement two aspects of his works he always claimed to be separate. In this way, poetry demonstrates who Ellul really was: *un homme entier* (a complete and consistent human being)

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Introduction

Ellul often maintained that his works were to be seen as dialectically connected, each sociological work being intimately connected to, and answering to, a theological one. This procedure has led some to believe that Ellul's works could be thought of apart from one another, especially that one area could be thought of apart from the other. Ellul himself gave this impression when making his theological statements and convictions sound like merely personal convictions.[1] In doing so, he allows for the disconnection of his sociology and theology.[2] This, in part, is the result of his almost radically consistent dialectics. However, this brief study wants to challenge this assumption in looking at Ellul's poetry.[3]

This article aims to do so through the study of a book that, to the best of the author's knowledge, has never been studied before, namely, *Silences*, one of the two volumes of Ellul's poetry. *Silences* has been chosen rather than *Oratorio*, the second volume of Ellul's collected poetry, the latter being a poetical commentary of the book of Revelation, as Lynch indicated: "These poems, divided into five chapters, form a unified whole narrating Ellul's vision of the Apocalypse." [4] However, this article will focus on *Silences*, since the main thesis of this study is that all the works of Jacques Ellul are integrated in *Silences*, making this work a holistic presentation of his sociological and theological studies. In fact, *Silences* is a more integrative collection of poetry than *Oratorio*, and has a "wholeness" that more clearly takes its inspiration from all of Ellul's works.[5]

Ellul and poetry: Hidden secret of *un homme entier*

Poetry was always for Ellul an eminently mystical experience as well as, and far more profoundly, a way of discovering meaning and expressing deeper experiences of the world.[6] As he commented: “Poetry is the art form which pleases me the most and in which I find deep meaning.”[7] The meaning conveyed in poetry is therefore first and foremost a personal one expressed in symbols, and even emotions, making discovery of meaning difficult for those who are not writers of poetry. It is almost as if poetry is written by the writer and for the writer’s sake. In fact for Ellul, it is through poetical language that one discovers and explores one’s status as *subject*. In his *Humiliation of the Word*, Ellul explains that through “poetical naming,” one truly becomes a subject:

A poet is lying when he throws off language: “I said ‘Apple’ to the apple, and it answered me ‘Liar.’ And ‘Vulture’ to the vulture, who did not respond.” Human sovereignty is due more to our language than to our technique and instruments of war. One can claim or believe oneself to be free because of language. Naming something means asserting oneself as subject and designating the other as object. It is the greatest spiritual and personal venture.[8]

Indeed, the “word” was for Ellul one of the most distinctive abilities of human nature, since poetical language conveys one’s deepest identity revealed through images and metaphors. Poetry itself makes, more than any other human activity or ability, a person “subject,” or even really human. In fact, Ellul commented that the true power of poetry was to present the human mind with the necessary ambiguity that makes up our daily world. Poetry is a gift enabling us to see the world without giving away its beauty and ambiguity. No caricature, no simplifying: just poetry. Ellul writes:

The poetic contains paradox within it. You believe poetic language to be insignificant, a side issue in comparison with political and scientific talk? You are right, but poetry continually brings the uncertainty of ambiguity to our attention, along with double meanings, manifold interpretations false bottoms, and multiple facets.[9]

Thus, at the very outset of this article, we must recognize that poetry is for Ellul a holistic endeavor, one that cannot be dialectically considered, or better, poetry is the literary manifestation of dialectics. This would further entail that only in poetry is dialectical thought dissolved. Let us, by way of example, turn to poem 10 in which death is the obvious thematic center of the ten verses:[10]

Ô rigueur de la mort qui déjà nous sous-tend
arcature profonde où repose la vie
et secrète illumine, inflexive distend
le geste le plus simple et l'offrande accomplie.
Je connais mon destin mais ne l'accepte pas
s'il me reste plus dans la paralysie
que l'oeil encor ouvert pour voir venir la mort
là reste cependant la valeur de ma vie

Je vis pour te nier mais je ne te rencontre
 et ne perçois que l'acte et la main superflus

What first strikes the reader is how death is described in the first two verses of this poem. The first characteristic is the rigor of death, through and in which no incertitude or possibility for anything else is left. Death is the beginning and end of all: it encloses man in a “system” from which there is no escape. Death is a necessity, clearly expressed in the second part of verse 1, “O rigueur de la mort qui déjà nous sous-tend.” Here death is symbolically compared to something that supports the life of man; death is the foundation of life, the *only* thing which remains when the life of man has ended. Ellul thus affirms that neither technology, nor politics, nor economy can sustain man's life. Death is the core of life—without death there is no life, and life takes its meaning from the immediacy of death.[11] With this statement about death's ultimate reality over human life, Ellul summarizes both his sociological observation and his theological conviction.

We also notice two contrasts in verse 3. First, death, secretive, nonetheless illuminates every action (*geste*) and every human active meaning (*offrande*). All of man's actions, even the simplest ones, and even human secular rituals (*offrande*), are included in death's double contrast. Every action is thus both veiled and revealed by the ultimate nature of death. To begin with, death is in a way secret, for it is hidden in every action, every second. In every moment of human life, death waits for its revelation. In this sense, Ellul's presentation of “secret death” is reminiscent of the futile, ephemeral, and provisory nature of human actions. This triple reference to human actions is closely paralleled to his view of, among other things, political actions. When every human action is futile and ephemeral, only death remains.

In that, death also serves as *revelation* (illumine) of itself and of human deeds: indeed, death, at the last moment, reveals its secret, that there is nothing in human life which death cannot dissolve. Further, every human action takes its meaning when compared to death. In affirming this ultimacy of death, Ellul is most likely offering a radical negation of the myth of human progress:

Thus, according to Qohelet, the human race does not progress. . . . We remain trapped in our condition, by our time and space. People today are no more intelligent than five thousand years ago. Nor are they more just, or superior in any other way.[12]

It is not technologies, political systems nor any other human action, that can reveal the ultimate result of human action, but only death.

In poem 50, a poem dedicated to another major socio-theological theme in Ellul, the city, the same importance of the term “secret” is stressed.[13] Verses 1 and 12 are opposed in their common use of “secret.”[14] However, if both verses use the same word, their meaning is quite different. In verse 1, “secret” refers to the city and to the fact that the city itself reveals, albeit unwillingly, its own secrets (“shadows”, end of line 2) through the lights and “eyes” of its own streets (verses 1 and 2). Hence, in the first verse, “secret” is used in a negative sense, because of its relation to the city and to the subsequent estrangement of man (“opprobrium”, line 8). The “secret” is here what makes the situation of man in the city, tragic. In verse 12, by contrast, “secret” refers to the life of man—that is, to what is hidden in man,

and by extension, to what is hidden by God. Man is a stranger in his greatest work,[15] but in the middle of his loneliness, in this very city, salvation will rise again, and the city itself will one day find its redeemed place as the re-creation of the original Eden.[16] There is a grammatical difficulty in finding the relation between verse 1 and verse 2.

The second contrast, in verse 3b of poem 10, begins with the inflexible nature of death, that yet stretches (*distend*) out the meaning of all things.[17] Even though this verse establishes a second contrast, it is also likely that this second one is a parallel, a repetition of the first “illuminated secret” of verse 3a. The contrasts here are meant to stress the ultimacy of death and the order of *necessity*. The direct effect of death, then, is that through it every gesture, every ordinary action, is *illuminated*, and the true meaning and importance of ordinary things is *revealed*. But even more importantly, even the offerings brought to the modern gods are revealed by death as being vain, futile. Death brings all things to the prospect of the end of life. This no doubt has parallels in Ellul’s commentary on Ecclesiastes, *Reason for Being*. [18]

In the second stanza, man comes to the forefront with his doubts and struggles. The tragedy of human life is well expressed in verse 5: “Je connais mon destin mais ne l’accepte pas” (“I know my fate, but do not accept it”). Here Ellul expresses that man, or he himself, knows his destiny, that is, death. But if death is man’s destiny, resignation is no part of what Ellul shows human life to be. There is a deep opposition between what man knows and how he reacts to this *certainty*. Man is almost dead for sure; he is like a man, paralyzed, who can do nothing but see and wait for his fate to fall upon him. His passivity is his only possession.

But even in this paralysis, man does not fall into despair, for to be able to see death *coming* is the real value of man’s life. The point here is difficult to see, but it seems clear first that verse 8 refers to verse 7 and not to verse 9 and 10. The value of life lies then precisely in the fact that man, if he cannot do anything else, can at least see death coming; that is, he can become conscious of the value and the destiny of his life. Here it may be useful to quote what seems for Ellul an important aspect of man’s life, a sentence that Ellul himself quotes at the beginning of his study on Ecclesiastes, after his introduction: “In order to be prepared to hope in what does not deceive, we must first lose hope in everything that deceives.”[19] Thus the death of everything *human* must be affirmed, if hope is to be kindled.

In this poem, Ellul gives a view of life that integrates freedom in God within the basis of his theology. Everything in human life loses its meaning and importance in the light of death, for death is the herald of vanity, especially that of man’s life lived without God’s freedom. This contrast, the opposition of freedom and necessity, is recurrent in Ellul’s work and is present here again. That verse 5 describes the efforts of man to control his life with the term *destin* (fate) is no coincidence. *Destin* bears in its etymology the very idea of necessity imposed on man by the council of the gods, as it was in ancient Greece or Rome. This Ellul rejects, and he proclaims the freedom of man from the constraints of necessity. He always denied such a mechanical view of the relation between God and man, and rejected some traditional Reformed teaching on predestination, which he took, however wrongly, to be of the same kind of divine imposition and slavery imposed over mankind.

This “necessity,” which man considers his fate, has one consequence, that of freezing every instant, every act and every thought, not lived through God (verse 6). Necessity paralyzes man, whose actions thus have

no meaning and no importance on the course of his life. In verses 9 and 10, Ellul states that man lives to deny God, for man is estranged from God. But, in this very estrangement, the hand of God in the life of man appears, as we can see in the use of the pronoun *te*, second person of the singular, referring without much doubt to the divine other, the “you” of man’s most vital relation, i.e. with God.

God is “act and hand superfluous,” says Ellul here in verse 10, but we should not think that Ellul is saying that God is not important and can easily be ruled out of human life. Rather, we have to consider this as an example of the opposition between freedom and necessity in Ellul’s thought. It is known that one of the main features of Ellul’s thought is dialectic, and one of his favorite themes is freedom. This is expressed throughout his books on the relation between freedom and necessity. Here the key theme of freedom and necessity is to be seen again. If death encloses human life in a circle of necessity, God’s presence is freedom itself. Therefore, the superfluous aspect of the act and the hand of “you” is the act of freedom. It is “superfluous” because there is no necessity. Necessity does not lie in God, in whom and by whom is freedom alone. The act of God is a free act, a divine gift of freedom to man. As Ellul affirmed in *What I Believe*:

We must come back unceasingly to grace. Receiving grace is not a matter of good works or of being justified by one’s words. Once again we recall that Jesus did not come to seek the righteous but sinners. . . . Thus God’s grace has an unparalleled dimension and is universal as the concrete expression of his love.[20]

Conclusion: *Silences*, Jacques Ellul’s “grand narrative”

In closing this brief study, it is necessary to summarize the main point, namely that Ellul’s complete *corpus* is integrated into *Silences* and falls under one main conclusion. By this we mean that Ellul’s main point in *Silences* can be applied to his diagnosis of all previous elements, whether it be technique, propaganda, money, or even his theological writings. This assertion would need to be better supported by quotations from Ellul’s works and by a global analysis of all the poems of *Silences*. However, we can maintain this conclusion because, if we read *Silences* in the complete setting of Ellul’s writing, every aspect is considered in the light of one necessity, that is, death. Human finitude —the vanity of this life and the ultimate event of death— seems to be at the center of *Silences* and encompasses all other aspects of life. In this respect, death is indeed the “great leveler.”

With respect to technique, efficiency and usefulness are considered finally to lead to no end, for what would be the usefulness of a technique that irremediably ends in death? In a way, Poem 57 is an example of such an aim of technique. Of course, technique is not mentioned here, but industrialization is, in verse 2, in which the characteristic of the “people” is to be industrious. Industry is then the only element of human life, the all-inclusive explanation and reason of human life. If we read *Silences* with all the other works of Ellul open next to it, and here particularly *The Technological Society*, we can see that the people described here are concerned by the quest for the progress of their technology, a quest that is inextinguishable and devouring, leading man only to final exhaustion (verse 2). It is primarily, as stated in *The Technological Society*, a quest for usefulness and especially for efficiency.[21] Efficiency is then idealized as a means to produce more “free time,” more “freedom.”

But this so-called quest for freedom by way of efficiency is an illusion, because the quest for efficiency devours time itself. Man does not even have enough time for his quest for efficiency. It is to be noted that this poem contains no reference to death. However, the poem seems to call for a look to the past. We do not think this past would have been idealized by Ellul. Moreover, for him, there is no turning back on the road of history. The past cannot be regained. But this poem calls for meditation on what was at the time when the industrious land was only a solitary wasteland. This is what man has in his soul, “deep in his eyes” (verse 6). This absence of something unknown is nonetheless present in the very heart of man (verse 5). It is the absence of the conscience of what will finally happen to every man, who will return to a place of silence and solitude, when his last breath has left his body.

Poem 49 makes clear that man’s desires for power and glory (verse 1), or youth (verse 5), or wealth (or the absence of wealth, “poverty” in verse 11) are recapitulated in the “deathly secret” of man, death itself. This secret, if we consider *Silences* as a unity, is the necessity of death itself. This poem links the theme of death to the theme of time, “I’ instant.” In a short time, glory will be no more, nor youth, nor wealth, nor riches. All these will vanish because at the end, all is vanity. Here we have a precise reference to Ellul’s commentary on Ecclesiastes, a careful study of which will prove highly beneficial for the interpretation of *Silences*. But the secret of man, if it is the necessity of death, is more than death alone. If man’s ultimate secret were that death is necessary, there would be no hope, and Ellul is certainly not a proponent of such a pessimistic view of life. If death is the “ultimate leveler,” the great materialistic judge, it is because, through it, the effect of the judgment of God is dramatically symbolized and this does not condemn, but has as its only goal salvation and God’s manifestation of love. Of course, this may seem contradictory, but Ellul states in several books that God’s curse and judgment are not made against man but for him, for his salvation and his reconciliation with God’s love. Thus, if death is the most visible end, God’s love makes life with God the real ultimate end of life. We could continue this exploration throughout all Ellul’s themes, such as propaganda and revolution, youth (Poem 49 mentions this also), the word, and ethics.

Death, then, enlightens the reality of existence; it brings the lies of society—illusions of material power, eternal youth, and even political power—under the light of the necessity of death and the freedom of God. Under its light and curse, man can see what he really is—man can decipher his secret, that he is a creature of God and that God loves him. This is a radical subversion of the modern view of death, as the end of all things, but Jacques Ellul is almost a master of such subversions. Death then is the window to God. This is the story of man, the story Ellul had deeply engraved in his soul, and which came to life in his poetry. His *grand “poetical” narrative*, then, is that all of man’s desires and wishes will be judged by the curse of death, only to lead to final reconciliation with God in his love.

I have tried in this article to show how *Silences* can be seen as the “missing book” of Ellul, the one in which Ellul integrates all his work. Of course, this study is only preliminary; it is too brief and has passed over some poems that, due to their theme and their place in *Silences*, are most intriguing. But time and space do not allow for a complete study of *Silences*; they allow only for a preliminary consideration of *Silences* as encompassing all of Ellul’s thought. In that, Ellul reveals that for him, poetry functions as a fusion of sociology and theology, as the disintegration of dialectics in personal experience.

The author is well aware that this conclusion stands at odds with Ellul's claim that his work is *essentially* dialectic. Indeed, Ellul himself explained: "Dialectic is so much a part of my way of thinking and being that I am talking about myself and my studies rather than about an academic mode of exposition or a philosophy outside myself." [22] This would argue for the necessity of dialectics in *Silences* as with any other work by Ellul. However, given Ellul's conviction about the poetic nature of man, and given the nature of poetry itself, this appears difficult. Indeed, *Silences* is neither a sociological nor a theological work. It is broader and deeper than any other part of Ellul's work because it unifies it all. In fact, Didier Schillinger, director of Opales (the publisher of *Silences*), remembers: "[Ellul] told me that it was, for him, the most important part of his work." [23]

We do not, however, pretend to have given the right explanation of Ellul's *Silences*. It is merely an exploration of a land nobody to my knowledge has yet entered. This is, then, a preliminary study in two respects, first because of its brevity, and secondly because further study of Ellul's poetry should be undertaken. In *Silences*, Ellul tells us that the relation between man and God is the place in which the recapitulation and unity of man's wholeness are found, after death has revealed the secret of man's life, his finitude and the value of his life by God's love and freedom. This poetry is also a "silence," an expression of the silence that is before God. For Ellul, the absence of words is a mystery that leads to God: "The Word is a mystery. Silence, the absence of the word, is also a mystery." [24]

Thus the title of his book: the poetry of Ellul is *Silences*, in the plural, because it reveals the mystery of the relations of men with each other, and of man with God. It is "silent poetry," because when confronted with death, man awaits God in faith, for nothing remains as his security—no wealth or power, no vanity of human realization. In *Silences*, we see the mystery of man before God and in the world. The mystery of all-terminating death, and the mystery of God's freedom in bringing all men back to him. This is man's true relationship with the Creator: all of man's works being one under God's freedom.

Endnotes

[1] Ellul explained: "I have thus been led to work in two spheres, the one historical and sociological, the other, theological. This does not represent a dispersing of interest nor does it express a twofold curiosity. It is the fruit of what is essentially rigorous reflection. Each part of my work is of equal importance and each is as free as possible from contamination by the other. As a sociologist, I have to be realistic and scientific, using exact methods, though in this regard I have fought methodological battles and had to contest certain methods. As a theologian, I have to be equally intransigent, presenting an interpretation of revelation which is as strict as possible, and making no concession to the spirit of the age." Jacques Ellul, *What I Believe* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 44. Cf. Also Darrell Fasching, *The Thought of Jacques Ellul* (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1942), 9.

[2] Throughout his writings, readers become aware of the structural importance of what may be properly called "dialectical hermeneutics," which is the ground for the distinction of sociology and theology. Regarding dialectics, Fasching explains: "This biblical dialectic pronounces both the NO and the YES of God's word over the world. It brings both God's judgment and his grace into a dialectic which finds its fullest expression in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ." Darrell Fasching, *The Thought of Jacques Ellul* (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1942), 7.

[3] There has been not yet been any significant study of Ellul's poetry apart from a partial translation of poems taken from *Oratorio* published in *The Ellul Forum* [James Lynch, "The Poetry of Jacques Ellul: An Essay-Review & Translation", *The Ellul Forum* 22 (January 1999), 11-14].

[4] Lynch, "The Poetry of Jacques Ellul," 11.

[5] *Contra* Lynch, "The Poetry of Jacques Ellul," 12.

[6] Ellul's poetry contains many historical (Chagall, poem 8; Belgian painter James Ensor, poem 47), mythological and literary references, rendering the reading/interpretation rather difficult. At times, the reference is more obscure as with the "rêve de Clarisse" of poem 8. The "dream of Clarisse" is most likely a reference to the *Geste de Doon de Mayence* ou *Geste des barons révoltés*, an Old French romance [Cf. E. M. Wilmot-Buxton, ed., *Stories from Old French Romance* (New York: Stokes, s. d.), 100-119]. At other times the reference is left unclear as with the reference to Medea, the famous mythological figure taken from classical Greek tragedy, but possibly taken from Jean Giraudoux's adaptation of the same play.

[7] Patrick Troude-Chastenet, *Jacques Ellul on Religion, Technology and Politics* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1998), 49. Some of Ellul's comments are reminiscent of Owen Barfield's study of metaphor in *Poetic Diction* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1984), a work that had a profound influence on J.R.R. Tolkien.

[8] Jacques Ellul, *The Humiliation of the Word* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 52.

[9] *Idem.*, 25.

[10] Since Ellul's poems have no titles, we have to refer to their page number.

[11] One might be tempted to argue on the basis of God's sovereignty over human history, thus saying that providence, and not death, is ultimate in human actions. However, for Ellul, there is no such thing as divine direction of human actions: "History is not a product of God's actions. . . . Praying for God's kingdom and will shows that there is no such thing as providence." [Jacques Ellul, *What I Believe* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 155-156] This points to the notion of Christian responsibility and action in Ellul's thought, as well as his conception of morality and moral action. Ellul continues saying: "In other words, death comes according to natural laws, but God lets nothing in his creation die without being there, without being the comfort and strength and hope and support of that which dies. *At issue is the presence of God, not his will.*" Italics ours.

[12] *Reason for Being*, 64.

[13] Jacques Ellul, *The Meaning of the City*, especially chapter 5

[14] Verse 1: "Secrètes, repliées, lampes, incognitos"

Verse 2: "pendant que se discourt le secret de ma vie."

[15] Ellul, *The Meaning of the City*, 154.

[16] See Ellul, *The Meaning of the City*, chapter 5.iii.

[17] One could even argue that death is a giver of meaning for Ellul, even in the social sphere. In fact, he went as far as to argue that “the greatest good that could happen to society today is an increasing disorder.” Jacques Ellul, *In Season, Out of Season: An Introduction to the Thought of Jacques Ellul* (New York: Harper & Row, 1982), 195.

[18] Jacques Ellul, *Reason for Being: A Meditation on Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 1990).

[19] Ellul, *Reason for Being*, 46 f.

[20] Ellul, *What I Believe*, 198-199.

[21] Ellul, *Reason for Being*, op. cit.

[22] Ellul, *What I Believe*, 29.

[23] Didier Schillinger, personal correspondence with Yannick Imbert, 16 March 2006.

[24] *The Humiliation of the Word*, end of chapter 2.