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Not Isolation, but a Fragment

Abstract

This essay is about isolation. It begins with a question: what is no one else? and with isolation as its provisional answer, asks how this state of being alone can be conceived, how it can be registered, when doing either would require others, which is exactly what isolation would not, ostensibly, be. With this complication in mind, the following four cases are considered: first, the original, perhaps apocryphal case of what has come to be called "the forbidden experiment," in which children are kept from language in order to then say something about its nature; next are Poto and Cabengo, the subjects and title of Jean-Pierre Gorin's film about these twin girls who found some fame in the 1970s for having appeared to have invented their own language; after that comes Hurbinek, a child of Auschwitz, observed by Primo Levi; and finally is Fini Straubinger, the subject and guide of Werner Herzog's *Land of Silence and Darkness.* All four cases embody isolation, each in its own way. All four present the isolated, in one guise or another. But, the essay argues, this presentation cannot be isolation itself. Because if isolation is no one else, then it cannot but vanish before another. The question for representation, then—the question asked throughout the essay—is whether and how this vanishing can be made to appear.

Where no veil of sense shuts him out from Paradise.[1]

I.

Hell may well be other people. But then so is love which, however trying, is never only trying, and so is not hell. Nor is politics hell, despite it being other people. Which is also what art (communicative), work (collaborative), and play (competitive, or at least cooperative) all are. Even dreams, silent and solitary, are other people, as censorship turns everything, including oneself, unconsciously, into another. Love, politics, art, work, play, dreams: all are other people, none are hell. Hellish, all of them, sometimes, certainly. But only on account of resembling hell, only on account of being, like hell, other people. Hellish, then, but also dreamy, also political, and for the same reason: hell, dreams, politics—these and all the rest are, again, other people. But what isn't? What isn't other people? Which is to say, isn't hell or love or politics or art or work or play or dreams; isn't, for that matter, family; isn't community; isn't even, and underneath it all, language? What isn't other people and can't be? What could never be? What is no one else? Isolation? But what is isolation? What is isolating? And isn't it hell?

II.

Maybe. But first, it is bread, which has, more than once, been a sort of byword for isolation.

1. "Bread," said the two children that the Pharaoh Psammetichus had hidden away from birth in order to deem whether Egyptians or Phrygians came first. The idea was that, so secluded, their maiden words would be those of the maiden nation. "Bread," they both said, and said repeatedly, to a shepherd who had been tasked with looking after them in sworn silence; "Bekos," actually, which is "bread" in Phrygian.[2] And so it was decided: Phrygians before Egyptians, and both before these children. Or both after, since now, their own provenance sacrificed in pursuit of the nation's, the children had in fact been thrown back before language, back before nations, back to a certain state of nature that was far from natural—that was unnatural, artificial, on account of being isolated from the natural, which is what the children were. Isolated, but not alone, not without each other. Isolated together, but isolated nonetheless. Isolated because kept from language under the false premise that language can be kept from no one. Because it is natural, and so unavoidable.

Which it is. Language is natural and unavoidable. Psammetichus was right about that. He was wrong, too, of course. But about what exactly? To begin

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with, and to begin at the end, he and his shepherd were wrong about what the children said. They did not say "bekos," properly speaking, because they couldn't have. To say "bekos" would have required speaking Phrygian, which would have required hearing Phrygian, which the children never heard, because language—any language—is what they were not allowed to hear. For them to have said "bekos," then, would have been a miracle, and yet miracles seem not to have been what the Pharaoh was after, because miracles exceed nature, and nature is what was going to give him his answer. Nature is what was going to make the children speak, unavoidably, in the language of the most natural, the oldest, the original nation. That is what the experiment was expected to bring about, and what it did bring about when "bekos" was heard, despite not being said—by the children or to them, which is why they never said it. If "bekos" was heard, it was misheard; it would have had to have been, because the children were in no position to say it, because they were isolated, and isolation is the condition of being misheard—and misunderstood.

But the Pharaoh misunderstood this. Isolation, he must have thought, could not only be rightly heard, it could be heard as truth, as origin, and could be heard as such for having been separated, isolated, from all else. This is the beginning of the misunderstanding, but not quite it. For isolation may very well speak truth. Though if it does, it speaks it in an isolated language, whatever that may mean, because an isolated language, as opposed to an extant one, is the only language accessible in isolation, or at least in the children's isolation, which was nothing but an absence of extant languages. Consequently, the misunderstanding, the Pharaoh's misunderstanding, was to expect from this isolation not only a purified and particular language—not only truth in the form of a spoken origin, or in the form of original speech—but a purified and particular language that would be understood—that would, that is, be reducible—to those languages kept out of isolation, the very languages of the "all else" that isolation, being kept from those languages, was expected to keep out in order to deliver to them a truth that they were thought to have lost. But deliver on what grounds, and by what means? If there was a truth to be found in the children's isolation, it was, by definition, an isolated one, one kept isolated by this isolation which was itself kept from whatever language would have been used to interpret whatever the children had to say. If there was a truth to be found in the children's isolation, it could only have been misunderstood, so long as it was expected to appear as—so long as it was expected to be—a language whose very absence instituted their isolation. And in this case, it was expected to be just that. Expectation made it so. Expectation turned whatever truth the children may have possessed, whatever sound they may have expressed, into "bekos," and from "bekos," into Phrygian, which is quite precisely what, among other things, these children were prevented from possessing but expected to express.

Whatever the children can be said to have said, expectation was bound to mistake it, and did. But what about the prior, heavier, perhaps more unlikely expectation that they say anything at all? How could they have been expected to? It was not, after all, only Phrygian and Egyptian that were kept from them and that kept them in isolation: it was language itself. For the children to speak, which is to say, for them to have said something and not simply made a sound, they would have had to have conjured a language from nowhere, which is where they were. They were nowhere because language is everywhere. For even the speechless are met with language, which meets everyone with the expectation of speech—everyone but these children, who were met with nothing but silence, expectant silence, silence which expected them, which forced them, perhaps, to speak, but to speak from nowhere. So the question of their speech remains, and remains before the question of what, if they spoke, they said. The latter, it is clear, was misinterpreted, or misunderstood because misinterpreted. But perhaps the more fundamental misunderstanding was in taking their speech to be speech; perhaps the more fundamental misunderstanding was, once more, in expecting their expression to be possessed of the one thing they were made sure not to have, the one thing whose absence marked their isolation and made it isolating: speech. Speech was kept from them, which means that Psammetichus, in expecting truth in the form of speech, expected that language was natural—which it is—and, accordingly, that language—speech—would come to them naturally, unavoidably, despite it being withheld from them. More than this, because he expected truth not only in the particular form of

speech, but speech—and therefore truth—in a particular language, he must also have expected language to come naturally in a very particular sense: as already spoken; as recognizable; as, again, occurring in any of the languages he had forbidden the children hear; as, finally, a natural language, a language like the languages we speak.

With this comes a crucial consolidation as the two expectations become one. Not only must the children speak, but they must speak in a particular language, which is to say a given language, a language given before this potential for speech could take place in it. That much is clear. But what this means is that, if they failed to speak in one of these particular languages, then they failed to speak at all. And they failed for the same reason that the experiment failed: both failed because both were expected to deliver languages from a place in which those languages were withheld to a place in which no other languages but those withheld were recognized; both failed because what was expected of them was and is impossible. Whether or not the children spoke, then, is neither the only nor the most significant question. Beside it is the question of whether, even if they spoke, their speech could have been recognized. The logic of the experiment says no, which is why, if the children were deemed to have spoken from isolation, if they were deemed to have fulfilled the expectation of the experiment, which they were deemed to have done, then what is certain is that this speech, this speech which was understood as speech in terms of a speech that preceded it and yet to which it had no access—what is certain is that this speech was false, counterfeit, wrongly attributed; what is certain is that the children did not speak this speech. And, therefore, did not speak.

But they did speak, sort of. They made a sound. They said—or they signaled—bread. They made a sound whose intention was bread. How could they have avoided it? They were hungry, they were lonely. How could they not have been? How could they have avoided saying "bread" or something like it? Whatever they said—if they can be said to have said anything—whatever sound they made, bread would have been a good reply, a good offering in response to what could only have been a plea. For food, at least; for bread, perhaps; for milk, maybe, milk from the shepherd's flock: in any case, for connection, for culture, for other people, which is what, among other things, bread is.[3]

And what language is, too. Language is other people, or at least another person. Language is, at bottom, two. As the children were. They were two, and so, perhaps, they were primed for language, or primed enough for language, despite language being denied them both at the point of acquisition and that of speech. But perhaps two is enough to overcome this denial, enough to deny it in turn, enough to make the Pharaoh right and wrong again. Right because, if it was speech from isolation that he sought, then isolating two instead of one was the way to get it—the one way, perhaps; the one way to overcome isolation, to overcome speechlessness and misunderstanding by allowing the isolated, somehow, to speak and to understand themselves from within isolation. Thus two, not one, is the way to disrupt isolation, the way to make isolation something else, to make isolation speak. And to make the Pharaoh wrong. Because if it was only speech from isolation that he would accept as conclusive, then the children's speech would be disqualifying, now on two counts. First, because, though this speech would be autopoietic speech, which is to say invented speech, speech from nowhere, still it would be speech. First, then, for the simple reason that this speech would be speech, which turns nowhere into somewhere and isolation into something else. So if only speech from isolation would be accepted, then this speech would be denied, because speech from isolation is impossible. The other reason why this speech would be disqualifying is what makes the Pharaoh right again, this time for being wrong about being wrong. This second reason has already been given and can now be added on to the latter one: even if the children did speak, their speech would be refused, because, 1) being speech, it would not have come from isolation, and 2) coming from isolation, it would not be recognized.

A snag. For the Pharaoh, for the children, for everyone. The snag: Isolation is enforced and called on to speak. Isolation can speak, perhaps, but in speaking, a gap opens up from within isolation, a gap in the form of speech. This speech, though, because it comes from isolation, cannot yet have been heard, which means that, if speech is expected, this speech will be missed, because expectation relies on recognition, and this speech, if it comes, will go unrecognized, because it will be unrecognizable, and so will remain isolated. But say, against these odds, it is recognized. Say this speech is perceived

as such. Now, if isolation is to make itself known, then this speech must be understood, which is to say understood as speech. And say it is. No use: its fate is still overburdened. For once the speech of isolation is understood outside of isolation's bounds—which is the same thing as saying: once it is understood—isolation is over, which means no longer capable of speaking for itself, as isolation can now only be spoken of in a language that is no longer isolated—that is no longer the speech of isolation. If isolation is the condition of being missed like this; if it is the condition of being misheard, misinterpreted, and misunderstood, this is why: only misunderstanding may thwart this deadlock; only misunderstanding may grant access to isolation, since clarity kills it. And while this may have the effect of redeeming misunderstanding, redemption is in no way guaranteed. For not only is misunderstanding multiple, but, in this case, fragile, too. Whatever its access to isolation may be—whether it be, for instance, fragmented speech[4]—that access is always waning; that access, as Red Peter reports, is only ever "a tickling at the heels."[5]

But a tickling is not nothing. It is, at the very least, an irritation, which is, to put it lightly, what Psammetichus's children must have felt—whether or not they had the language for it; that is, whether or not they had invented a language for it, which, as two, they could have conceivably done. And perhaps they did. Perhaps "bekos" was their word for it, for irritation. Or perhaps "bekos" was simply, and serendipitously, their word for bread, or something like it, which it certainly could have been if the irritation they felt was spurred by hunger. But one feels irritation too, and so could one not have said something like "bekos," could one not have said something like it without saying it, could one not have made a sound that sounded like "bekos"? Why not? Irritation can be signaled by other things than language, and other things than language can sound like language. One, like two, could have been taken to have said "bekos." And so it could be asked, accordingly, why Psammetichus decided, despite this, to isolate two rather than one. Would one not have better avoided the potential for speech, and therefore the potential disqualification of that speech on account of its possibly signaling a resistance to isolation rather than isolation itself? Would one not have been the better number of mouths in which to put a word, knowing that no other words would otherwise be coming out of it? Would one not have been, in a word, better isolated? Yes. But then again, two, despite having more potential to escape isolation from within it, were also, and for the same reason, more susceptible to being doubly isolated, since their means of escape was guaranteed to be illegible. In either case, both two and one would have been taken to have said "bekos" despite neither saying it, despite neither being able to say it. The only difference is that, whatever one might have said instead, it would not have been a word, whereas whatever two said might have been.

But still that word would not have been "bekos." Still, because it couldn't have been. But just as other things than language can sound like language, so can other languages sound like each other. Which means two things. First, that the children could very well have said "bekos" without meaning to. And second, that, whatever they said, it could only have been a homophone of "bekos", like the French preposition "*à*" and the English exclamation "ah," or the French exclamation "*aie*" and the English pronoun "I" are homophones of one another. If, indeed, it was a word they said—which it may have but doesn't have to have been—it was a word heretofore unheard, because the two children heard no words. If it was a word, it was an idioglossic one; it was one that resulted from what is otherwise known as twin speech.

Twin speech is what Poto and Cabengo spoke. Twin speech is what turned Grace and Ginny Kennedy into Poto and Cabengo, and what, accordingly, turned these identical twin girls and their private language into a public oddity. And listening to them shows why: twin speech, theirs in particular, despite being perfectly normal, sounds quite strange. It is rare, though, that anyone but parents and intimates get to hear it. The reason that theirs was widely heard, the reason for the interest in Poto and Cabengo and the strange language they spoke, was that it was unusually developed, and unusually long-lasting. It had not surrendered to language proper by the time it should have. But that was only because the girls had, by contrast, no proper language to speak of, no language proper enough for this strange one to give way.

This was less than strange. Indeed, the reason for it was eventually explained, and the key was waiting in the language itself, which was found to be a rather unsystematic hodgepodge of English and German. The key was that hodgepodge. And

in his film about the garrulous girls, Jean-Pierre Gorin shows how it came about. At the time of their birth, Grace and Ginny were said to be, in the parlance of the day, mentally retarded. Upon which their father, says Gorin, "came back home and smashed his fist in the wall. Soon after, he lost his job as an accountant, and by then, Chris's [his wife, their mother] nerves were so bad that she couldn't keep her job."[6] This all had at least two consequences. For one, it led the family to apply for welfare, which is how the children ended up in speech therapy, and how, in turn, their twin speech came to be deciphered and corrected. But it was also, and before that, what led to their twin speech developing as it did in the first place. For in response to that initial diagnosis, Grace and Ginny were made to be all but housebound. This was, ostensibly, for their own protection, but it quickly turned out to be otherwise. With little exposure to anything, let alone language, outside of the home, the girls were limited to the languages inside of it. And there were two: German, which their grandmother spoke exclusively and their mother natively, and English, which both of their parents spoke to each other and to the twins. But neither language stuck. Perhaps two were too many to be passed along without a certain deliberation that was lacking. Perhaps hearing one language cut into the time they might have otherwise been hearing the other, which led to hearing too little of both. Whatever the specific cause may have been, the general one was isolation—isolation from the world of school, playgrounds, chatter; isolation from the world of method and madness; isolation, in other words, from the world of words which invites us into language.

So, short of the requisite exposure, the two made one: out of some English, some German, the girls made both a language and a name for themselves in that language which was enough of neither language to pass for either, but enough of both to pass for language. This language of theirs sounded strange, yes, and played back, still does. But that they spoke it was normal, natural. They were of speaking age, and they spoke. They had each other to speak to, and so they spoke to each other in a language they both understood. It just so happened that this language, because of what was strange about their situation, was a strange one, one that no one but they could quite understand. The result: apparent pathology, a result all but guaranteed by the apparent pathology declared at their birth, which is what led to their isolation, which is what led, in turn, to their developing a language that isolated them not from each other, but from whoever mistook the cause of their isolation.

This seems to have been fated. Poto and Cabengo were said to be possibly abnormal, and for fear of this, were made to be so, or at least to be seen so—to be seen so, which is, effectively, to be so. They were isolated and from this isolation came a confused consolidation of two languages into one. Curiously, a similar sort of fate seems to have divided the only truly unified language there ever was. Noah's descendants built Babel to give themselves a name, a home, to keep themselves from being "scattered." They coordinated this building in the one tongue they had, and God saw what potential there was in such unfettered, uninterrupted, unconfused coordination. Too much, he thought. And so he confused their one tongue, he fractured it, and in confusing them such, scattered them.[7] He scattered them in response to their response to their fear of being scattered. They feared a form of isolation, and for that, he isolated them. Their fear was justified. But only after the fact, when they were punished for being presumptuous.[8]

And this same fate befell—or did it grace—the Pharaoh, for he, too, can be said to have brought about his own suspicion. In his case, it was that linguistic isolation would produce the pronouncement of the oldest—the first, the most natural—language in the form of one of its words. And it did: it produced "bekos," which squarely fit the bill. "Bekos" was thus the bringing about of the suspicion. But "bekos," of course, is suspicious in its own right. It is suspicious because it came from nowhere. It came from two, yes, and in that way was idioglossic like Poto and Cabengo. But Poto and Cabengo, before coming from and coming to name two children, came from two languages: English and German. "Bekos," the homophone of the Phrygian "bekos," did not. It was—wrongly—resolved into Phrygian, but did not come from it. It came from nowhere, or from hunger pangs from nowhere; it was a response from nowhere to the isolation of nowhere, an isolation from which it was at once the overcoming and the redoubling. It came from nowhere but from these children, who were condemned, artificially, unnaturally, to nowhere. It came as a plea, a prayer—no, it couldn't have. Because it came from nowhere,

naturally, as Psammetichus suspected it would.

2. "Bread" said Hurbinek, maybe. Hurbinek did not speak, properly speaking. He was, as Primo Levi describes him, "a nobody, a child of death, a child of Auschwitz. He looked about three years old, no one knew anything of him, he could not speak and had no name; that curious name, Hurbinek, had been given to him by us, perhaps by one of the women who had interpreted with those syllables one of the inarticulate sounds that the baby let out now and again."[9] Levi met Hurbinek at Auschwitz, where the author had been relocated by the Red Army after having been liberated from Buna/Monowitz. It was then, after liberation, after the crime, and there, still at the scene of it, that Hurbinek started to make a sound, one rather more articulated than those from which, Levi guesses, he was named. But still, no one could decipher it. While his situation was strange, to say the least, this was strange, too. He was, after all, in a sea of European tongues, tongues he had surely heard, and heard, too, during the years in which, under normal circumstances, one acquires language. But, like Psammetichus's children, his circumstances were abnormal. Like them, he was imprisoned, if not from birth than from close to it. And like them, he made a sound. Unlike them, however, he made a sound from within the world of language, however decimated that world was. And unlike them, he was one. But then again, like them, he wasn't: he was with other people, many people who spoke many languages. And so, in this way, he was rather like Poto and Cabengo as well. Though still, he was one; he spoke as one; and if the twins' situation was strange, his was stranger.

His was stranger, which is why, perhaps, though he heard many languages, in his attempt to speak, he spoke none of them. "*Mass-klo* or *mastiklo*" is how Levi transcribes the sound he did make, the sound he kept repeating, and to which those around him listened. They figured, fairly, that of all the languages spoken between them, his would be one of them. But it seemed not to be. If it was a language, it was a secret one, which is perhaps to say it was not one. Which is not to say it was nothing. One, I said above, can be hungry, and hunger can be signaled outside of language. This is why one would have been enough for Psammetichus's experiment, because one could have said, or could have been taken, through the limited lens of expectation, to have said "bread." And "bread" is what, among other things, Hurbinek was taken to have said: "No, it was certainly not a message, it was not a revelation; perhaps it was a name; perhaps (according to one of our hypotheses) it meant 'to eat,' or 'bread'; or perhaps 'meat' in Bohemian, as one of us who knew that language maintained."[10] In any case, and again, it was—it had to have been—a call for connection, culture, other people—a call for life, at least—that Hurbinek repeatedly incanted, all of which are what, among other things, bread is.

Both Hurbinek, one, and Psammetichus's subjects, two, said "bread" in words that, until they said them, had either never been heard, or never meant bread, or both. But all three of them—the one and the pair—repeated their words. Like Poto and Cabengo repeated theirs. All five repeated these words of theirs that came on account of the circumstances of their births which were, respectively, extermination, separation, and pathologization—which were, all of them, isolating. All five repeated their words which came from this isolation and despite it. And in repeating them, they drew attention to them, they made them meaningful, which is what repetition tends to make things. And though these meanings were missed, their sources—their words—were not ignored. Their words were taken, in every case, for something. Never quite the right thing, it is true. But interpreting whatever isolation has to say is always to miss something. Were it to be otherwise, isolation would be otherwise. But so long as isolation speaks, and so long as one hears what it says, something is misunderstood, something is misread. This misunderstanding, though, can be receptive, attentive; it can listen for that meaning which those words were meant to have. To see understanding not as barrier cordoning off isolation, but rather as a gap now growing, now shrinking, a gap whose boundaries are isolation and its opposite—to see it as a gap rather than a barrier is to see misunderstanding not as what restrains isolation, but as an uncertain vantage from which isolation's fragmented whispers can be heard without resolution. For in this gap, whatever escapes from isolation does not find itself oppositely, does not find itself suddenly metabolized by extant speech, which would be to find itself suddenly gone; rather, whatever escapes would find itself, in this gap, in a state of uncertainty. And it is there, before being

resolved, that isolation might be misunderstood productively, which is to say, as misunderstanding itself, which is what isolation so often seems to be.

"Bread," in the end: what is it but a name for this misunderstanding? What is it, that is, but a name for isolation, a name given to isolation by the isolated, a name which can be taken either for isolation's redoubling, or isolation's end. That it can be either, that it can be double, is a reminder of the doubleness of bread's own seed. Grain, historically, has had as much to do with belonging as with isolation. Grain, so ripe for taxation, was not only the seed of bread, but that of states; grain is what could fill stomachs and pockets both. With grain, then, came walls, less to keep people out than to keep them in, and to keep their rulers powerful.[11] Perhaps this is why the wild child of Aveyron first turned up his nose at bread and instead ate only potatoes, which Poto and Cabengo referred to in at least sixteen different ways.[12] Perhaps it is also why, later, he ate it.[13]

III.

"Bread" was a misunderstood word for isolation, and isolation is a misunderstanding that can be understood in multiple ways. Words are one of those ways, and "bread" is one of those words, though it, evidently, can be understood in multiple ways as well. These many ways—to understand words, or a word; to misunderstand isolation—compose the condition of isolation, for misunderstanding depends on there being multiples that are made to be irreducible, incompatible, impassable. And isolation is multiple, too: here, at least, it is these prefixes ir-, in-, im-, which are all variants of one another, all various ways to indicate "not" or "lacking"; but also, elsewhere, are these prefixes various ways to indicate inclusion, as "inclusion" itself makes clear. Isolation, then, is double, and doubly facing. Though this is imprecise. It is not isolation, but misunderstanding, which is isolation's representative—it is misunderstanding that is double, as it was double in the form of "bread." In that one word, isolation found either the source of its escape or the source of its redoubling; in "bread," isolation was, or could have been, either negated or intensified. But negation, too, is double and means at least two things for isolation. In negation, isolation is ended, but also lost. The same is true with intensification, for isolation is intensified only when it starts to stir: it was the possibility for autopoietic speech that condemned Psammetichus's children to an isolation reactive to the capacity to escape it. If this doubling seems to abound, it seems not to amount to very much, for though the two outcomes of the two sides of the representative of isolation—negation and intensification—are themselves two-sided, their two sides are nothing but one another: negation is double because it is also intensifying; intensification is double because it is also negating. And in this double movement prompted by the two-sidedness of the representative of isolation––"bread"—isolation comes only as an absence.

All of this leaves isolation where? Or: all of this leaves isolation, because none of it, as far as I can say, is isolation, because isolation, if it speaks, if it is heard, if it is understood, is understood only so long as it represents itself as something other than what it is, as something other than isolation, as something which, capable of representing itself as such, is no longer isolated, and so is no longer isolation. Is no longer isolation. This, whatever else it may be, is no longer isolation. But this is something. If it is no longer isolation, if it was never isolation, it was also never without it, because isolation is here, within it, moving it forward, animating it. If there were no isolation, if isolation were nothing, so, too, would this be. And so, too, would the language that looks for isolation be nothing, because there would have been nothing to look for, nothing to prompt it, nothing to tickle its heels—nothing for it to leave. But language that looks for isolation leaves it. It leaves it be, because, being this language, it cannot be it. It leaves it be, because isolation cannot be had without having been let be.

This language leaves isolation be, also, because it can, because there is a being to isolation. Isolation is lived, and lived often rather openly. If language can only let it be, it is because there is a being to isolation whose isolation is defined by its being missed, or misunderstood, by language. But this misunderstanding, if it misses isolation, does not miss this being, which is plain to see. This being was Psammetichus's children, it was Poto and Cabengo, it was Hurbinek. They were isolated, but they were there. What being there was for them is what language, this language, has trouble with, but their being there, the fact that they were there, is perfectly clear. Were it otherwise, they would be otherwhere than here. And their being here means that their

being isolated was something other than being absent, even if absent is what their isolation was, and is, and even if this absence is what made their isolation isolating. They were there, quite simply, in ways besides words. Poto and Cabengo were there, and were filmed, and are now here. They were seen, unequivocally, and seen through their isolation, just as Psammetichus's children and Hurbinek were once seen despite now being unseeable. In each case, the isolated were sensed from outside of isolation, which means that it could only have been here, outside of isolation, that they were isolated. Only here could they have been isolated, here, where all isolation takes place. But here is not the place of isolation, which is isolating because it has no place. Here, rather, is where isolation occurs, and where it is seen; here is where it is sensed, from within as from without. Here, finally, is the interface between the isolated and the otherwise.

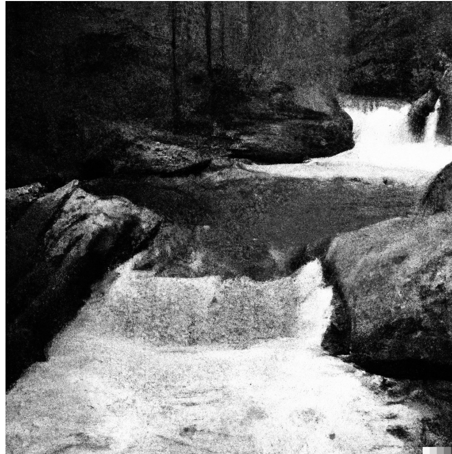
Like here, this interface can be many things without being anything other than a way of interfacing with, a way of sensing, isolation. "Bread" has been one such interface, "bread," which was misunderstood, but not absent. "Bread" was heard, like Poto and Cabengo were seen—and heard. "Bread," like them, is perceptible. This makes it something other than isolation, but not totally other, because without isolation there would not have been this "bread." Of course, the word preceded the isolation it was made to represent, but it represented something, and that something was isolation, which can only be represented so long as it is sensed.

Sensing isolation is what draws isolation near, or what shows it to be near, and what, with anything luck, makes it disappear. Sensing isolation is what, for example, Werner Herzog does when he follows the deafblind Fini Straubinger in his film *Land of Silence and Darkness*. Fini speaks, and speaks often and easily. She speaks to others in the same land as her and she speaks to the camera. She speaks, then, both to the world she occupies—the world of silence and darkness—as well as to what amounts to the opposite of that world—the world of light and sound. She speaks, that is, across a gap, but one that, in being spoken across, is bridged, which is not to say closed. For though film is, from the perspective of the senses, her negative without residue, though she and the film form, in this way, perfect complements, still this film in which she allows herself to be represented will never be able to represent itself to her in turn, and so just as something of her is committed to film, something else is lost. That something is not speech, because her speech is perfectly clear, because it is understood, because it is not isolated, and therefore not lost. Whatever is lost, whatever is isolated, comes not from her speech, but from she who speaks, she who, in this document of herself, gives herself over to that which she can know about without ever knowing. Which is how the film gives Fini to those who see her there: Fini can be known through the film, but never fully, and not in the way she knows, because whoever we are who watch the film, we are not Fini, who will never watch it as we do.

She will never watch it, because she can neither see nor hear it, and because the film lends itself to no other sense but these. But when she says how, if she were a painter, she would represent her condition, she reveals that the seeing which sees the film is only one way of seeing, and that there must be others, since she seems to see quite well. She sees:

> Blindness like a black river, flowing slowly like a melody towards great falls. On its banks, beautiful trees and flowers, and birds singing sweetly. The other river, coming from the other side, is as clear as the purest crystal. This one also flows slowly, but without any sound. Deep down, there is a very dark and deep lake where the two rivers meet. Where they join, there are rocks making the waters foam. Afterwards, to let them flow silently and slowly into that somber reservoir, which lies in a deadly calm, only troubled by an occasional ripple, representing the agony of the mind of the deaf-blind.[14]

Seen as she cannot see herself, sensed, in fact, in precisely the ways she does not sense—still, from the scene of this contact, Fini offers a way of seeing that is hers, a way of seeing which can never be seen, but of which we can have a sense.



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Notes

1 Helen Keller, *The World I Live In* (New York: New York Review Books, 2003), 116.
2 Herodotus, *History*, trans. A.D. Gotley (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1920), 275-7.
3 For an analysis of the social dimensions of wheat, see James C. Scott, *Against the Grain: A Deep History of the Earliest States* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017), 128-139.
4 As his teenage patient begins to speak for the first time after years of unresponsive silence, psychoanalyst Richard D'Ambrosio recounts the fragmentation of her first words. This fragmentation, he suggests, has several factors: beyond the trepidation of beginnings is, for example, the fact that her silence was a reaction to events which followed from a trauma inflicted on her before she could have acquired language even under welcoming conditions. So, having arrived at this imposing border between silence and speech—and, it must be added, lingering there only very briefly—she "sounded," D'Ambrosio says, "well-nigh Joycean." Her words upon entering his office: "Door? As I remember. Here before. But not sure. Must, must…know more. I can't be sure." This is speech on its way to understanding, but not yet there. This is speech misunderstanding itself, but knowingly so. A moment later: "Why do I cry? I don't know why I cry. Why do I cry? Cry…why? It's silly. I'm confused. I cry on the sly. Why? Cloudy… why? I've been here…cry…don't recognize…ever…I'm *certain.* I'm sure I've been here before…I have, haven't I?" Joycean, yes, but perhaps the more apt comparison is Beckett, specifically *Not I.* See Richard D'Ambrosio *No Language But a Cry* (New York: Doubleday, 1970) 151-3.
5 Franz Kafka, "A Report to an Academy," in *The Complete Stories*, ed. Nahum N. Glatzer (New York: Schocken, 1971), 250.
6 *Poto and Cabengo*, directed by Jean-Pierre Gorin (1980; West Germany: Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen), Criterion.
7 *Genesis*, trans. Robert Alter (New York: W.W. Norton, 1996), 46.
8 Daniel Heller-Roazen makes the point in his *Echolalias: On the Forgetting of Language* (New York: Zone Books, 2008) 220.
9 Primo Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz and The Reawakening: Two Memoirs*, trans. Stuart Woolf (New York: Summit Books, 1986), 191, quoted in Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (New York: Zone Books, 2003), 37.
10 Ibid., 38.
11 Scott, *Against the Grain*, 133-139.
12 Roger Shattuck, *The Forbidden Experiment: The Story of the Wild Boy of Aveyron* (New York: FSG, 1980), 6-7.
13 Ibid., 14.
14 *Land of Silence and Darkness*, directed by Werner Herzog (1971; West Germany: Werner Herzog Filmproduktion), Kanopy.