Nonsense and Unmusic

Daniel Albright

First thing.

Without nonsense there is no sense. Without sense there is no nonsense. Without sense there is no sense. Without nonce there is no once. Without out end there is no begin in. Without redundancy the waves would surge in one direction only.

Second thing.

I want to play a language game with you, a game that starts with a passage from a story by Jorge Luis Borges, concerning a man with an absolutely perfect memory:

> Me dijo que hacia 1886 había discurrido un sistema original de numeración y que en muy pocos días había rebasado el veinticuatro mil. [. . .] En lugar de siete mil trece, decía (por ejemplo) Máximo Pérez; en lugar de siete mil catorce, El Ferrocarril; otros números eran Luis Melián Lafinur, Olimar, azufre, los bastos, la ballena, el gas, la caldera, Napoléon, Agustín de Vedía. En lugar de quinientos, decía nueve. [. . .] Yo traté de explicarle que esa rapsodia de voces inconexas era precisamente lo contrario de un sistema de numeración. Le dije que decir 365 era decir tres centenas, seis decenas, cinco unidades: análisis que no existe en los "números" El Negro Timoteo o manta de carne. Funes no me entendió o no quiso entenderme.

> He told me that in 1886 he had thought up his own original numbering system, and that in a very few days he had gone past the number 24,000. [. . .] Instead of 7013 he would say, for example, Máximo Pérez; instead of 7014 he would say The Railroad; other numbers were Luis Melián Lafinur, Olimar, sulfur, the saddle pads, the whale, the gas, the cooking pots, Napoleon, Agustín de Vedía. Instead of 500 he would say nine. [. . .] I tried to explain to him that this rhapsody of disconnected words was precisely the opposite of numbering system. I told him that to say 365 was to say three hundreds, six tens, five ones; an analysis that doesn't exist in the "numbers" The Negro Timoteo or meat blanket. Funes didn't understand me or didn't want to understand me.

The game is to reverse Borges's premise: to imagine a language that consists entirely of numbers, by taking the Oxford English Dictionary and assigning numbers to each of its more than 200,000 words. (171,476 words in current use, and 47,156 obsolete words, in the second edition.) So aardvark would

be word number 10; zymurgy would have a very high number. If a new word were added to the language we could place it with decimal point 1, or 2, and so forth, added to the number of the word preceding it in the alphabet. Plurals and verb tense and numbers and moods could be indicated by pronouncing a suffix such as plus or tilde or backslash after the word–number. So speech would consist of a string of numbers. It would take a long time to say a sentence, but if signifiers are perfectly arbitrary, it would be as easy to use as our normal version of the English language, for two people with a lot of time on their hands. And it would have the advantage that you write could poems with indeterminate words, such as 86,x5y, thereby creating a new form of discourse unavailable in standard English. But normal forms of nonsense, in the Jabberwocky or *Finnegans Wake* manner, would be impossible: you couldn't create a portmanteau between lithe and slimy, because you can't elide two numbers in the way that you can elide two words. And there is no reason why the phonetic aspect of the word couldn't erode away into almost nothing: as numbers became the common medium of speech, you would need no sounds except those needed to pronounce the numbers. Eventually the word aardvark wouldn't exist; there would only be 10, meaning an ant–eating snouted African beast. But ant, and eating, and snouted, and African, and beast, would also exist only as numbers. Maybe all connection between the numbers and the concepts they were designed to represent would ultimately become wispy to the verge of non–being, and language would become Jacques Derrida's dream system, self–enclosed, hermetically sealed.

But of course this number–language is ridiculous. Anyone can have a voculabury of 10,000 words or more; but no one except a few memory freaks could memorize a number corresponding to each of 10,000 different words. I suppose that if two memory freaks raised a child together, speaking only in number–language from the child's birth, the chief effect would be to impoverish the child's vocabulary utterly, to reduce it to a few hundred number–words at best.

I believe that the fairy language I've just outlined shows something about the nature of real language. Where each word is uniquely and unequivocally specified, each word lacks the play between sense and nonsense, between correctness and error, between pointed articulation and mouth–slush, the play that's necessary for language to live and be significant. A word can light up with sense only if surrounded by a penumbral region of half–sense, and an outer darkness of nonsense.

There is an old story about a comedians' convention where the jokes are so familiar that they are known by numbers, thus sparing the expense of time required to tell them. One comedian calls out 37! and everyone laughs. Then another calls out 82! and everyone laughs. Then a third calls out 59! and no one laughs. A spectator turns to another and asks why no one laughed; the other spectator says, Oh, they've all heard that joke before. A language of numbers would in fact not tend to promote much wit, or irony, or pictorial vividness, or melody, or rhythm. It would be a language perfectly intelligible to simple electronic devices, but at the same time, from a human perspective, it would unlanguage itself utterly.

A language of numbers lacks many things, but what it most lacks is a sense of the interrelatedness of the each element in the whole tissue of language. The word doubt is based on duo, the Latin word for two, and this being–of–two–minds may be only dimly felt in common speech, but duoness extends through a huge range of words, including duple, dual, duet, redouble, and through cognates from Greek such as dyad, hendiadys, and so on. Through such roots words become deeply affiliated with one another, and form a cloth—we might use a Latinate word for cloth, namely text—that extends to the limits of speech. This billow of words may in some sense have drifted off into the upper atmosphere, since there is scarcely one word secularly tethered to the earth of physical objects—if language is as arbitrary as we think it is. But the texture of language–as–a–whole is infinitely self–enfolded and black with interconnections between words, like a star–map in which lines, some thick, some thin, are drawn from each star to every other star. This texture so closely imitates the texture of the world of experience, the physical world, that language as a total system is congruent with nature, even if it nowhere impinges on nature. I'm not saying that nature has a vocabulary or a grammar; I'm only saying that the manner in which every word touches every other word imitates the manner in which every minute particular in the universe touches every other minute particular. Words also exert a gravitational force on one another, in a way impossible to a language of numbers. Sense itself might be defined as that gravity.

Next thing.

There are two ways in which a word tends to spiral out of the domain of sense. The first is phonetic: the word breath exists in the center of a nest of words that sound like it, including breast, bath, bread, bled, and of course death. The more I surround a word with its congeners, the more nonsensical it becomes. This is the secret behind that underrated form of discourse, the tongue–twister: if I say Six slick skinks slink, it's extremely hard to understand

what I'm saying: the words whirl into a kind of verbal reptile pâté, in which there's scarcely a finite lizard to be found anywhere.

The other way in which a word loses its purchase on meaning is through metaphor. If I equate a word with another, I make a muddle, sometimes a fascinating muddle, of their individual senses. I. A. Richards was especially sensitive to the blendedness of the two terms of a metaphor:

> the vehicle is not normally a mere embellishment of a tenor which is otherwise unchanged by it but that vehicle and tenor in co–operation give a meaning of more varied powers than could be ascribed to either. (I. A. Richards, *The Philosophy of Rhetoric*, vol. 1 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1936), p. 100)

This commingling can be described as a gain of power in the new bi–terminal entity, but it can also be described as a loss of power in each of the original terms, which are drained in order to energize the metaphor. If I recall Zuhair's famous metaphor, Destiny is a blind camel, the camel loses its hump, its splayed feat, its resistance to desert conditions—it is a clumsy ugly thing, and not much else; and destiny loses any positive force, force for promoting happiness, that it might, on certain occasions, possess.

These two forms of loss of meaning meet in what we call poetry. Through assonance and consonance and rhyme and direct repetition of words, the field of sound keeps shrinking. Poetry is about doing the same thing over and over—it doesn't matter if the thing is a stanza–form, or paired alliterative half–lines, or accentual feet, or quantitative feet—for every restriction of sound–range or rhythm tends to make the sense of the words more elusive. Saussure spoke of differentiation of the phonic stream as the source of language—as he put it, "A language is a system of differences with no positive terms"; "Considered in itself, the phonic sequence is nothing but a line, a continuous ribbon, in which the ear perceives no clear or precise divisions; in order to segment it, appeal must be made to meanings [*significations*]. . . . But when we know what sense and what role must be attributed to each part of the chain, then we see the parts detach themselves from each other, and the shapeless ribbon is cut up into pieces." But poetry reinstates the continuous ribbon insofar as we attend to the phonic sequence and not to the meanings. What language does, poetry undoes. Poetry restores liquidity and smoothness to the choppy phonic stream, by narrowing the span, the variedness, of the sounds produced by throat and mouth. It is not poetic to say that a rose is a large, many–petalled flower, typically red, white, or yellow, and often scented, a sentence that requires a great many phonemes; it is extremely poetic to say that rose is a rose is a rose, a sentence that requires only five phonemes.

Poetry's reliance on metaphor produces a similar effect. Yeats wrote a short story about a young king on whose head feathers grew instead of hair. This king was preternally wise, and his wisdom manifested itself, as the story says, in this way:

> . . . from being curious about all things he became busy with strange and subtle thoughts which came to him in dreams, and with distinctions between things long held the same and with the resemblance of things long held different.

When you think about it, the feather–headed king was doing what all of us do, for the whole body of speculative discourse in the humanities can be understood as saying that the similar things are different, and different things are the same. I mention this because metaphorical poetry tends to do only the second of these processes: to make likes out of unlikes. In one sense poetry narrows the semantic field by this squashing–together of disparate things—by dissolving, diffusing, and dissipating all the felt particulars of the universe, as Coleridge put it. In another sense poetry opens up new semantic horizons. In Kubrick's film *2001: A Space Odyssey*, the astronaut moves toward Jupiter at enormous speed, whizzing between two narrow planes full of nameless colors and writhing shapes. Poetry is like that: a narrowing of the domain of meaning and an entry into a vertigo of meaning, both at the same time. Poetry is language playing with unlanguage. The essential poetic act is a dispossessing of meaning that doesn't culminate in complete meaninglessness.

Third thing.

Does language have a goal? Is there a terminus to language, a conclusion of the labor of making new words? Will the dictionary expand indefinitely, or is their a limit?

Consider for a moment the whole body of nouns. Obviously if a new object comes into existence, there will have to be a new noun, or a new definition of an old noun—maybe it's even true that without that new word or new definition, we couldn't really say that a new object has come into existence. Can a tree fall in the forest in the absence of the word tree?

The parsing of existing objects into new classes is also a source of new nouns. If I notice that many worms are round, I can create the word roundworm to describe them. One new word. If I want a fancier term suitable to a worm's dignity, I can call them nematodes, that is, thread–like beings. Another new word, more or less the synonym of the first, on a higher level of diction. If

I notice that nematodes can be grouped among other animals that have a certain sort of odd body cavity, I can refer to nematodes as a member of the class of pseudocoelomates. A really big new word. I can also notice that all nematodes are not alike, and I can divide them into various subclasses. There are five clades (as these subclasses are called) among nematodes: these are the dorylaimia, the enoplia, the spirurina, the tylenchina, and the rhabditina. Five juicy and impressive new words. But of course I have scarcely tickled the exoderm of all the words that the study of nematodes can provide. Incidentally, I thought that I had just made up the word exoderm, but I just looked it up in the OED and discovered that it is a real word.

There is a limit to this process, if not exactly a telos. Over one million different species of nematodes are thought to exist, a fact that makes for a goodly number of nouns. And careful scrutiny of each nematode on the planet earth will ultimately be able to find discriminating features that set it apart from every other nematode. Then there will be an almost unthinkable number of new nouns, since 90% of the animal life on the ocean floor consists of nematodes. Of course, if a different noun is assigned to every member of a class, we usually call it not a noun but a proper name. The nematode Jim.

In the eighteenth century Giambattista Vico considered the problem of a language made up entirely of proper nouns—what I have been calling the limit of language. Vico noted that Homer spoke of a language of the gods that differs from the language of men: for example, the river near Troy is called Scamander by men, but Xanthus by the gods. Vico also says:

> . . . we cannot doubt that the Roman Varro devoted himself to studying this language of the gods, and diligently collected the names of some 30,000 gods, as Axiom 30 states. These names must have furnished a copious divine lexicon, sufficient for expressing all the needs of the people of Latium, which in that simple and frugal age must have been limited to the few necessities of life. The Greeks too reckoned 30,000 gods, as Axiom 30 states: for they saw deities in every rock, spring, brook, plant, and reef, including the nature spirits called dryads, hamadryads, oreads, and napeas. In precisely this way, the American Indians regard as gods everything that is beyond their limited grasp.

The language of the gods is unthinkably rich, and calls attention to the poverty of normal language; Vico points out that in the Odyssey there is a certain herb that has no name in human speech, but is called moly in the language of the gods. In the language of the gods, everything, everything has a name, even things that are nameless to us. We live in the tiny congested world of the namable, of the things our limited brains can grasp; the gods'

reach is infinite, and so is their vocabulary. If there is a name for every single object on earth, the set of these names is the set of all proper nouns; and since proper nouns, as we know them, often presuppose some animate or precious presence, then there is a spirit or nymph or god behind each rock, spring, brook, plant, or reef. In this way the act of carrying language to its nomenclatural extreme itself creates a fully panpsychist universe. To make up a word is to make up a deity.

But of course this sort of fairy language, a language in which there is a different word for each blade of grass, and each aphid on each blade of grass, is no language at all. Just as Funes's invention of a separate word for each number disables any possibility of mathematics, so the invention of a separate word for each discernable object disables any possibility of thought. In Swift's Lagado, the pedants converse in silence, by carrying around a big pack of various things, and taking out (say) a rock and pointing to it when they want to indicate a rock. But presumably that rock stands for the whole class of all things rocky. If the pedants of Lagado were gods speaking the language of the gods, in which each word is unique and divine, they would have to carry the whole cosmos on their backs.

A language of the gods is a sad, even a tragic idea, because it eliminates meaning. In the *Cratylus*, Socrates toys with the notion of an ideal language, a language of correct, non–arbitrary, immutable names: he decides that such a thing is impossible, because a name cannot be an inviolable aspect of a thing's reality—if a thing is to be rightly, irrefutably named, there needs to be a fundamental resemblance, indeed a perfect correspondence, between the name and what it refers to. But to Socrates the idea that a word can be equivalent to an object is ludicrous:

> . . . how ridiculous would be the effect of names on things, if they were exactly the same with them! For they would be doubles of them, and no one would be able to determine which were the names and which were the realities. (432d)

The language of the gods is a language in which names are exact doubles of things—not doubles of concepts, as Saussure would have it (since there aren't any concepts or categories or classes or generalities or Platonic ideas), but doubles of things. Or if there is a sense in which the names still refer to concepts, the physical object's concept is so inextricably one with the physical object itself that the distinction between them is trivial. The object is a reification of its name, and the name is a fluid or phlogiston circulating within the object, just as divinity saturates a fetish or totem with its presence.

But as Socrates suggests, in the perfect language either the name or the thing is redundant. One or the other could wither away without any loss. But language is what makes us human; we could dispense with the physical world, but we could never dispense with language. Ultimately language would suffice to satisfy our appetite for reality, and we could live purely in the domain of words, so adequate would language have become. In this way we would cover, obscure, and ultimately destroy the world by drawing on top of it an opaque one–to–one map (of course I'm alluding here to another Borges parable). This would be sensible, in that its infinite inflections would correspond exactly to the real world, if the real world still existed; but it would also be nonsense, since no word has any relation to any other word, and since the real world no longer exists.

I wonder if I feel a slight shiver as I write of the language of the gods because I suspect that our language, so crammed with words, rammed with words, is already something like a language of the gods. Maybe even normal speech is so adequate that we already live in a placeless place, where nothing is solid and we can walk through walls, since the word wall is soft and yielding. You and I are literary folk, and our lives may seem most real when we are lost in the world of our talking and reading, a world often quite remote from our actual circumstances—the word actual in quotation marks. But there are no more quotation marks, since the whole universe exists in a continual ache of quotedness.

Next thing.

I've been speaking of the nonsense created by carrying language too far toward the imaginary conclusion of its efforts to be a complete elucidation of the universe. But there is also an opposite sort of nonsense, derived from language's surrender, its giving up all its claims to treat what might be smilingly called reality.

Is there any condition in which human beings would have no further use for speech? I can only think of one. I will describe this condition soon.

In Plato's *Symposium*, Diotima says that Love is the child of Poverty and Plenty. Language has the same parents—maybe language is like its brother Love in many ways. Language is the child of Plenty because it endlessly exuberates, bears new children by a kind of parthenogenesis—the dictionary grows fatter and fatter every year. But language is also like its mother Poverty, because its very condition of being is absence. If there's a chicken in my front yard, and I want to refer to it, I have only to point to it and the deed

is done; I need the word chicken only if no local chicken is available to be pointed to. The word chicken is a kind of surrogate for an absent chicken.

So—if a chicken accompanied me in all my travels, my need for the word chicken would vanish. I could point to her whenever I wished, and say, She lays lots of eggs. But if I had an egg in my pocket, I could point to the chicken, and point to the egg, and just say Lots. This is the model of language that led to Swift's spoof of the pedants in the Academy of Lagado, lugging around their bags of miscellaneous objects.

Let me play a language game in which I try to take Swift's model one step further. What if chickens were so abundant that I had no need to refer to them at all? Where everyone has plenty of chickens, I'd have no use for a word for chicken, just as a fish doesn't have any use for a word for water—water is just existence itself, part of the stamina of things. The Inuit do not need 57 words for snow: they don't need a word for snow at all. So in a completely rich world, language might atrophy into something divine, a language of the gods in exactly the opposite sense from Homer's.

I've tried to express this condition by making up a parable:

The names of the gods are common nouns that have lost their referents. An Asiatic tribe sets out across the Pacific to settle on a tropical island. The word ice, which once signified a matter–of–fact desolation of river and ocean, now attenuates, grows terrifying and monstrous, signifies an unheard–of, nearly inconceivable, absence of heat and liquidity. There exists a place where water turns rigid, and shuddering to the touch, but no one has been there, it is unthinkably distant, the kingdom of the dead; in this manner the word ice becomes a divine attribute or itself a divinity. Life is so easy—the fruit so overflows with oozy ripeness that one lies underneath the tree and thick pearls drop into one's mouth—that vocabulary dwindles, grows flabby and blubbering without the pressure of survival to give point and precision to the articulation of words; why should a tongue so satisfied strain itself against palate or teeth, why should a throat greased with such unction of delight tense itself into vowels? Speech is reserved for certain ceremonious occasions only; arctic rituals, the dissection of imaginary whales, are celebrated by rites of discussion; the old formulas for sharpening harpoons are rehearsed, though no one would recognize a harpoon if it washed up on a beach. Though their condition is best denoted by the word satisfaction—if there were a gate to the island it would have that word engraved upon it—the word has grown dim, unintelligible, for lack of its opposite; beauty cannot exist where everything pleases the eye. Yet the appetite for speech is great even at the limit of

monotony: once a year they gather in temples erected for the sole purpose of pronouncing their words, words of which all but pronunciation is lost; their mouths ache with the strange effort of speech—How are you? I'm fine, how are you? It's chilly today, I think it might storm—but they believe that they are miming the roles of gods, as if words were themselves Pentecostal tongues of flame. Words are now entirely divine, set aside for sacred usage, and it is correct to regard them so, for every meaningless word is divine, every meaningful word chained to the hell to which it refers.

Enough, then, on extrapolations of language into nonsense.

Part two.

There is another way that language can turn into nonsense: by creating antidotes to meaning, procedures that cancel out a previous meaning. Oxymoron and aporia are among these procedures: one word or statement is abutted against its opposite, black against white, producing a uniform textual gray. Oxymoron is Greek for sharp–dull, and the dullness erodes the blade into nothing at all. A tissue of oxymorons becomes a piece of text–cloth consisting entirely of holes, as a passage in the first scene of *Romeo and Juliet* will illustrate:

> Misshapen chaos of well–seeming forms!
> Feather of lead, bright smoke, cold fire, sick health! (1.1.185–86)

Coleridge, the greatest theorist of the oxymoron, quotes Romeo's lines and observes that here we have

> an effort of the mind, when it would describe what it cannot satisfy itself with the description of, to reconcile opposites and qualify contradiction, leaving a middle state of mind more strictly appropriate to the imagination than any other, when it is, as it were, hovering between images. As soon as it is fixed on one image, it becomes understanding; but while it is unfixed and wavering between them, attaching itself permanently to none, it is imagination.

> Such is the fine description of Death in Milton:–
> > The other shape,
> If shape it might be call'd, that shape had none
> Distinguishable in member, joint, or limb,
> Or substance might be call'd, that shadow seem'd,
> For each seem'd either: black it stood as night;
> Fierce as ten furies, terrible as hell,
> And shook a dreadful dart: what seem'd his head
> The likeness of a kingly crown had on.
> > Paradise Lost, Book II

> The grandest efforts of poetry are where the imagination is called forth, not to produce a distinct form, but a strong working of the mind, still offering what is still repelled, and again creating what is again rejected; the result being what the poet wishes to impress, namely, the substitution of a sublime feeling of the unimaginable for a mere image.

In other words, the more abolished a text is, the more sublime: the application of violence necessary to annihilate meaning is the highest form of verbal art. Never has nonsense received a higher compliment. Not only is the unimaginable substituted for a mere image: also an unword is achieved through two words that cancel each other out.

There are other ways of self–canceling in the realm of language. In Samuel Beckett's novel *Watt*, there are passages of what is sometimes called anti–language, in which Beckett experiments with various ways of saying things backward. The culmination of this backwardness is this passage, in which Watt speculates about Mr. Knott, his mysterious benefactor:

> Dis yb dis, nem owt. Yad la, tin fo trap. Skin, skin, skin. Od su did ned taw? On. Taw ot klat tonk? On. Tonk ot klat taw? On. Taw ta kool tonk? Nilb, mun, mud. Tin fo trap, yad la. Nem owt, dis yb dis.

This paragraph was generated by shoving an intelligible sentence through the looking glass, into a mirror–world of language. If you push it through the looking glass once again, you get a fairly sensible text:

> Side by side, two men. All day, part of night. Dumb, numb, blind. Knott look for Watt? No. Watt talk to Knott? No. Knott talk to Watt. No. What then did us do? Nichts, nichts, nichts. Part of night, all day. Two men, side by side.

What interests me is the way in which the anti–language and the regular language, taken together, cancel each other out. If you take a photograph and superimpose it over its own negative, you get a blank surface—and that is what Beckett is doing in this passage.

Part 2

In an isolated diary entry, Franz Kafka wrote the enigmatic phrase, The self–canceling–out of art. We've just looked at an example from the domain of language. But there are other examples in other artistic media.

Is it possible to cancel out a bodily gesture? Beckett, the greatest of self–cancelers, had a scheme for achieving this. During the Berlin rehearsals of *Waiting for Godot*, as McMillan and Knowlson note, Beckett insisted on

"artificial movements," and had Vladimir flex his muscles as he got up after the strange collapse onto the ground of Vladimir, Estragon, Pozzo, and Lucky; Beckett explained that "the ballet–like acting style tended to cancel out the action that was being presented." It is odd to think of an action that manages to call itself into question, let alone one that cancels itself out; but Beckett tried to devise a style of movement that kept itself ironically disengaged from the very action that it sketched. Not only must words unword themselves, but actions must unenact themselves.

Fifth thing.

I've wondered whether self–cancelation is possible in the domain of music. This is difficult to imagine for several reasons: one of them is that music doesn't seem to make sense in the way that spoken language or gesture makes sense, so it's hard to see what exactly could be canceled out here. Let's first talk about the ways in which music can make sense, before talking about how that sense can be undone.

Music, like spoken language, is a tissue of changing sounds, and is articulated into phrases. So it should be possible for the mind to chop this stream into sememes of some sort, just as in spoken language. But in fact this almost never works, because too many axes of variation exist in music. In a single measure, you may well notice superpositions of pitch, and changes of pitch, and changes of note duration, and changes of timbre. Too much is going on for the listener to be able to think of any unit in music as a word. Even in monophonic music, the kinds of continuity and discontinuity you find don't lend themselves to apprehension as a collection of sememes. In general the more discontinuities you hear, the higher the potential for language to emerge; but a tissue of discontinuities is often thought of as unmusical. Still, conspicuously choppy music does exist. Composers like Beethoven who twist together extremely short phrases seem to write music with a certain linguistic charge: I can hear the first movement of the fifth symphony both as a peremptory attempt to say something and as an expression of frustration that the medium doesn't lend itself to clearer speech.

When we turn to rhythm, the problem is that musical meters tend to be far too even to promote comprehension as a system of words. It is perfectly possible to transcribe language into a pure phenomenon of rhythm: the simplest example is Morse code. But, historically speaking, musical rhythms are monotonous. It isn't until the final dance of Igor Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring* that rhythm starts to get complex enough to hover on the brink of semantics. Elliott Carter's 1942 setting of Robert Frost's "The Line–Gang"

in fact has a Morse–code joke built into the piano accompaniment. But here Carter doesn't seem interested in either reinforcing or resisting the particular meanings of the words of the poem by spelling out actual words in Morse code, as far as I can tell.

Music has several strategies for intensifying its semantic intensity: the most common is through kinesthesia, for by imitating the rhythms of the body—heart–beat, breathing, foot–tapping, maybe even blinking—music can become a kind of voodoo–doll, a simulation of physiology. But this is doing what language can do, rather than constituting a language in itself. In general I define music as a teasing of the linguistic areas of the brain that fails to terminate in real language.

But music does have procedures for self–canceling. In Beethoven's ninth symphony, the last movement begins with what the Germans call a *Schreckensfanfare*, a terror–fanfare, a loudly dissonant phrase, followed by quotations of themes from the first three movements. It is as if Beethoven were drawing a huge red diagonal bar through the previous parts of the symphonies, unmusicking his own music.

Next part.

If music's self–cancelation were taken to its limit, it would require the existence of some sort of unmusic, something that could annihilate music in the way that a positron, colliding with an electron, makes first an explosion and then nothingness.

It is possible to conceive various ways in which music can undercut itself. In certain Medieval motets, a sacred text and a bawdy text were sung at the same time, producing a sort of canceling–out of affect. In setting of an unromantical text in Brecht's *Die Dreigroschenoper*, Kurt Weill provides a swoony romantical melody, producing a similar canceling–out, but with a certain appetite for destruction probably not present in the thirteenth century.

The ultimate goal of unmusic is, of course, silence. Silence is a surprisingly tricky concept: John Cage in fact argued that it couldn't possibly exist:

> In fact, try as we may to make a silence, we cannot. [. . .] I entered [an anechoic chamber] at Harvard University several years ago and heard two sounds, one high and one low. When I described them to the engineer in charge, he informed that the high one was my nervous system in operation, the low one my blood in circulation. Until I die there will be sounds. And they will continue following my death. One need not fear about the future of music.

It is as if silence were not a familiar absence of sound, but the goal of a Zen meditative process. According to Iamblichus, among mortal men only Pythagoras could hear the music of the spheres. But could there be an anti–Pythagoras, capable of hearing the silence beyond all the crystalline spheres of the heavens?

I've wondered if I might find a way of experiencing actual total silence. In order to do this I must find not only an unmusic but an unsound, something that will remove every acoustic phenomenon, including the sound of my heartbeat and even the sound of my brain (which I'm not aware of ever having heard—you may insert your own joke here). And in fact technology has made considerable advances toward achieving this unsound, through noise cancelation technology.

You can buy headphones that will provide a sort of antidote to the noise of an airplane's engines, by creating a wave–form that exactly matches the wave–form of the plane's roar, but out of phase, so that each crest of one wave is a trough of the other. Then there's silence. But maybe a clever technician could construct headphones that would cancel out my heartbeat and my nervous system's little stridulations, so that it would be the acoustic equivalent of the darkness at the bottom of Mammoth Cave. Then I would myself be the anti–Pythagoras.

I was also curious to learn whether you could construct, say, an anti–Mozart's–fortieth–symphony, which, when played at the same time as the Mozart, would yield a perfect nothing to the ear. So I wrote to an acoustic engineer, Tom Horrall, and asked him this question. He wrote back to me as follows:

> Sound cancellation involves employing a correction signal which is out of phase with the unwanted signal or noise, leaving only the desired signal to be heard. So the unwanted sound and the correction signal are one and the same but in anti–phase or opposite polarity. The human ear is very poor at distinguishing two signals that differ only in polarity, so the correction signal and the unwanted signal to be eliminated would sound essentially the same, at least theoretically.

So, there is indeed an anti–Mozart's–fortieth–symphony, but it would sound exactly like Mozart's fortieth that everybody knows. But if the anti–symphony and the symphony were played at exactly the same time, there would be silence, no Mozart, no symphony. Unsound is just sound, but seen through the looking glass. Our whole lives are surrounded by agitations in the air that we can construe either as sound or as sound's opposite. And our texts are always sense and nonsense at the same time.