

*Silences*, Tillie Olsen, New York: Delacorte Press/Seymour Lawrence, 1978, 306 pp., \$14.95.

### Patricia Carey

The silences referred to in the title of this book are not 'natural silences, that necessary time for renewal, lying fallow, gestation, in the natural cycle of creation', but the 'unnatural' silences imposed on the creative imagination by circumstances and climates prohibitive of fruitful thought and creation. Olsen's ambition in naming the various forms of silence as enemy is twofold: to answer the question, 'Why are there no great women artists?' and to succour and encourage those writers thwarted by silence.

If she makes no attempt to pledge that the silences choking writers can be magically eliminated, Olsen at least tries to diminish the demoralizing impact they have on the writer in isolation. In this sense, *Silences* functions like the earliest feminist consciousness raising sessions which drew strangers together in the comfort of what came to be known as the 'You, too?' syndrome. For every reader who has seen her visions—artistic, social or intellectual—discouraged, denied or delayed, Tillie Olsen offers us the comfort of recognition, of saying 'You, too. . . ?'

*Silences* elaborates on two essays, one written in 1962, the other in 1971. Both are coloured heavily by the fact that Olsen, herself, was silenced for over twenty years. 'Having to let the writing die over and over again in me,' she did not publish her first novel until she was fifty. By referring to her own experience and to the diaries, letters and literary works of famous and little known writers, both female and male, Olsen renders fatuous any further debate over whether women are innately less creative than men.

Her method is subtle. She presents us with the broodings and despair of famous male writers who fell mute as a result of circumstances or climate—poverty, dulling workdays, censorship, a hostile public, lack of peer support. These are conditions every artist must confront. Few modern societies encourage the artist; the public shrugs and taunts: 'No one asked you to be an artist. No one owes you a living.' To which Olsen replies with painful clarity, 'What's wrong with the world then, that it doesn't ask—and make it possible—for people to raise and contribute the best that is in them?'

If Olsen mourns the great men whom climate and circumstance have stifled, she reserves and extends passionate concern for the literally countless women silenced by our oppressive history. She is relentless in her documentation of the obstacles creative women have faced. Consequently *Silences* provokes so much outrage and pain, it is *easy* to put down. Alongside the evidence of the voices of the few creative women who survived silence, the relatively straightforward creative blocks which stymied writers like Hardy and Melville seem manageable (though not minor).

Why are there no great women artists? Because from childhood women are catechized with the credo that women cannot be great:

They shut me up in Prose—  
As when a little girl  
They put me in a Closet—  
Because they liked me 'still'— (Emily Dickinson)

The school system not only reinforces this credo, it 'proves' femininity and creative genius are incompatible. Olsen demonstrates that for every twelve male writers represented in modern literature courses, anthologies, textbooks, bibliographies, book reviews, and critical works only one woman is represented. Cause and effect: without models whose vision reflects her own, the young woman writer loses confidence in the au-

thenticity of her own statement; without the confidence that her womanhood and her art are in harmony, the young woman lacks faith that she has the capacity for vision. Olsen argues:

How much it takes to become a writer. Bent . . . circumstances, time, development of craft—but beyond that: how much conviction as to the importance of what one has to say, one's right to say it. And the will, the measureless store of belief in oneself to be able to come to, cleave to, find the form for one's life comprehensions. Difficult for any male not born into a class that breeds such confidence. Almost impossible for a girl, a woman.

Even within the University the writer of promise is told that the creation of fine babies is a greater vocation than the creation of fine books. Where a creative woman doesn't wish for children, H.H. Richardson's retort is worth remembering, 'There are enough women to do the childbearing and the child-rearing. I know of none who can write my books.' And until very recently almost all of the women who have produced great literature have been childless. Not without cost:

My body knows it will never bear children.  
What can I say to my body now,  
this used violin?  
Every night it cries out desolately  
from its secret caves.

Old body, old friend,  
why are you so unforgiving? (Jane Cooper)

For the artist who chooses to raise the children only she can raise, there are other costs:

Women understand . . . what a dreary will-o'-the-wisp is this old common . . . experience, 'When the fall sewing is done,' 'When the baby can walk,' 'When the house-cleaning is over,' 'When the company has gone,' . . . then I will write the poem, or learn the language, . . . or master the symphony; then I will act, dare, dream, become. (Elizabeth S.L. Phelps)

There is a devastating sameness to these voices Olsen assembles to speak to us from different centuries, cultures and backgrounds. To counteract our impoverishment from knowing only the one in twelve of our heritage, Olsen offers us back our peers, and some of our confidence. We suffered the same silences as the Melvilles and Hardys. We also suffered the silences unique to women smothered by patriarchy. Our silences were also those of the hidden mutes, the Shakespeare's sisters whom we shall never know. To a society which deliberately attempts to preserve the creative arena for men only, Olsen throws a challenge: 'Literature is a place for generosity and affection and hunger for equals—not a prize fight ring. We are increased, confirmed in our medium, roused to do our best, by every good writer, every fine achievement. Would we want one good writer or fine book less?'

The resonance of that question provides one of the rare inspirations in a book which emphasizes all that perpetuates our inequality. If Olsen cannot promise us that we shall overcome the complex of circumstances and climates discouraging us, she has at least posed this question. Pin it over your desk as provocation, the next time silence engulfs you.