Meher Baba's Silent Semiotic Output

José Sanjinés, *Coastal Carolina University*

ABSTRACT

Much has been written about the life and work of Meher Baba (1894–1969), a spiritual master who gave up speaking at age thirty-one. Despite observing silence for the rest of his life, about forty-four years, Meher Baba remained highly eloquent and prolific. He continued to communicate both colloquially and metaphysically, which included giving detailed explanations on the origin and nature of existence. During most of his life he used a series of nonverbal systems that culminated in a sui generis gestural language. This progression of semiotic modalities is inseparable from the meaning of Meher Baba's message. We look at this unfolding semiosis from the angle of a transcendental experience—the state of awakened deep sleep, *turiya*, that Heinrich Zimmer calls simply the SILENCE.

The recently discovered pamphlet *On the New Utoppia* describes how social life in the Insula Perdita was reduced to the exchange of a few monosyllables; given that "silence is golden," it often "speaks louder than words, one word is enough to the wise, a closed mouth catches no flies, give every man your ear but few your voice," and "man is weakened by the words he speaks and strengthened by those he doesn't (better safe than sorry)." Such, writes an ancient anonymous author, would be the fate of language and social life in the "Insula Perdita wherein a Most Ingenious Legislatore had created the Republic of Happiness following the Principle by which Proverbes are the Wisdom of Mankind, 8vo (2) 33; 45 (6)" (Eco [2007] 2012, 162).[1]

Eco's bogus review of a book about a nation ruled by proverbs makes fun of what would happen if we followed the ancient wisdom of being silent. He

My gratitude to James Everett and to my colleagues in Coastal Carolina University's new Department of Communication, Languages, and Cultures. And to Aleksandra, always.

1. From "Living by Proverbs" ([2007] 2012), a spurious review that appeared in *Almanacco del bibliofilo—viaggi nel tempo: Alla ricerca di nuove isole dell'utopia*, ed. Mario Scognamiglio (Milan: Rovello, 2007).

Signs and Society, vol. 2, no. S1 (Supplement 2014). © 2014 Semiosis Research Center at Hankuk University of Foreign Studies. All rights reserved. 2326-4489/2014/02S1-0005$10.00

https://doi.org/10.1086/674313 Published online by Cambridge University Press

is referring to verbal silence, not to the silence of other semiotic languages, such as presound cinema, which Leo Tolstoy called "the great mute." Jurij Lotman uses this quotation to advance a semiotic notion of language, since it shows that "sound and language are not the same thing" ([1973] 1976, 1). Silent cinema was never really silent—it is, in fact, still talking quite loudly, as the movie *The Artist* (2011) has recently shown.

But Eco's professional opinion—as a semiotician rather than as a creative writer—about the place of verbal language in relation to other systems of communication is quite different. In *The Search for the Perfect Language* he compares language's effability with that of the language of (sound) film:

> One could say that there is only a single system which can claim the widest range of diffusion and comprehensibility: the images of cinema and television. One is tempted to say that this is certainly a universal "language" understood by people around the globe. Nevertheless, even such a language displays certain disadvantages: it has difficulties in presenting mathematical abstractions and philosophical arguments; its alleged universal comprehensibility is problematic, at least as far as its editing syntax is concerned; finally, if there is no difficulty involved in receiving cinematic or televised images, it is extremely difficult to produce them. Ease of execution is a notable argument in favour of verbal languages. ([1993] 1995, 175–76)

In some ways verbal language is the winner in Eco's quest for a perfect language. This is an assessment he reaffirms in other places, but with strong caveats. In *Experiences in Translation*, for instance, Eco places this question in the context of Louis Hjelmslev's distinctions between form, substance, and purport (or continuum), and warns us about "the diatribe on the *omnipotence* or the *omnieffability* of verbal language. And while we tend to accept verbal language as the most powerful system of all (according to Lotman, it is the *primary modeling system*), we are nonetheless aware that it is not wholly omnipotent" (Eco 2001, 96).

At the outset of *The Search for the Perfect Language*, Eco limits his study of the quest for an ideal language to the history of European culture—in fact, the original title stresses the limits of his field of research: *La ricerca della lingua perfetta nella cultura europea* ([1993] 1995). *The Search* begins with a discussion of the biblical story of the Tower of Babel. Referring to the work of Arno Borst, Eco adds that the theme of the confusion of languages, Babel's *confusio linguarum*, "can be found in every culture" (1).

https://doi.org/10.1086/674313 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Eco points out the large number of studies in the seventeenth century dedicated to "gesture as a vehicle of interaction with exotic people" (172) and to "the education of deaf-mutes" (173). "In 1620," he observes, "Juan Pablo Bonet wrote a *Reducción de las letras y arte para enseñar a hablar a los mudos.* Fifteen years later, Mersenne (*Harmonie*, 2) connected this question to that of a universal language. John Bulwer suggested (*Chirologia* [1644]) that only by a gestural language can one scape from the confusion of Babel" ([1993] 1995, 173).

Reflecting on the communicative properties of gestures, he concludes that attempts to create comprehensive gestural systems in the West encountered similar limitations to those met by visual languages; namely, that they ended serving as supplementary codes to accompany or replace the sounds of speech. "The gestural languages of Trappist monks, Indian merchants, gypsies or thieves, as well as the drummed and whistled languages of certain tribes . . . are equally dependent on the model of natural languages," he writes (169).

Eastern cultures allow us to look at this question from another perspective. In what follows we would like to consider the extraordinary case of Meher Baba (February 25, 1894–January 31, 1969) (see fig. 1). On July 10, 1925, at age thirty-one, Meher Baba stopped talking and began observing a silence that would last the rest of his life. For the next forty-three years he would communicate by a series of nonverbal (in the sense of speechless) means. For the last fifteen years of his life, he would neither speak nor spell out messages, communicating mainly by means of a unique gestural language.

We can distinguish four major phases, or stages, in Meher Baba's communicative output, each marked by different expressive modalities. We consider these phases at greater length in the second half of this essay:

1. Talking phase (1894–July 9, 1925).—For approximately thirty-one years of his life, Meher Baba, like most people, used speech to communicate. Paraphonology, the various forms of nonverbal communication that accompany speech, is an often overlooked yet important part of this communication system. During this time he developed refined writing skills and become a published poet. In his adolescence he also wrote some fiction.

2. Writing phase (July 10, 1925–January 1, 1927).—This phase, which lasts less than two years, is the shortest of the four. Meher Baba now observes silence but still writes, and does so prolifically. Besides writing on paper, during this period he also communicates by writing abbreviated messages with chalk on slate. We begin to notice the first elements of the gestural language that will become fully developed in phase 4. In this period Meher Baba produces ex-

https://doi.org/10.1086/674313 Published online by Cambridge University Press

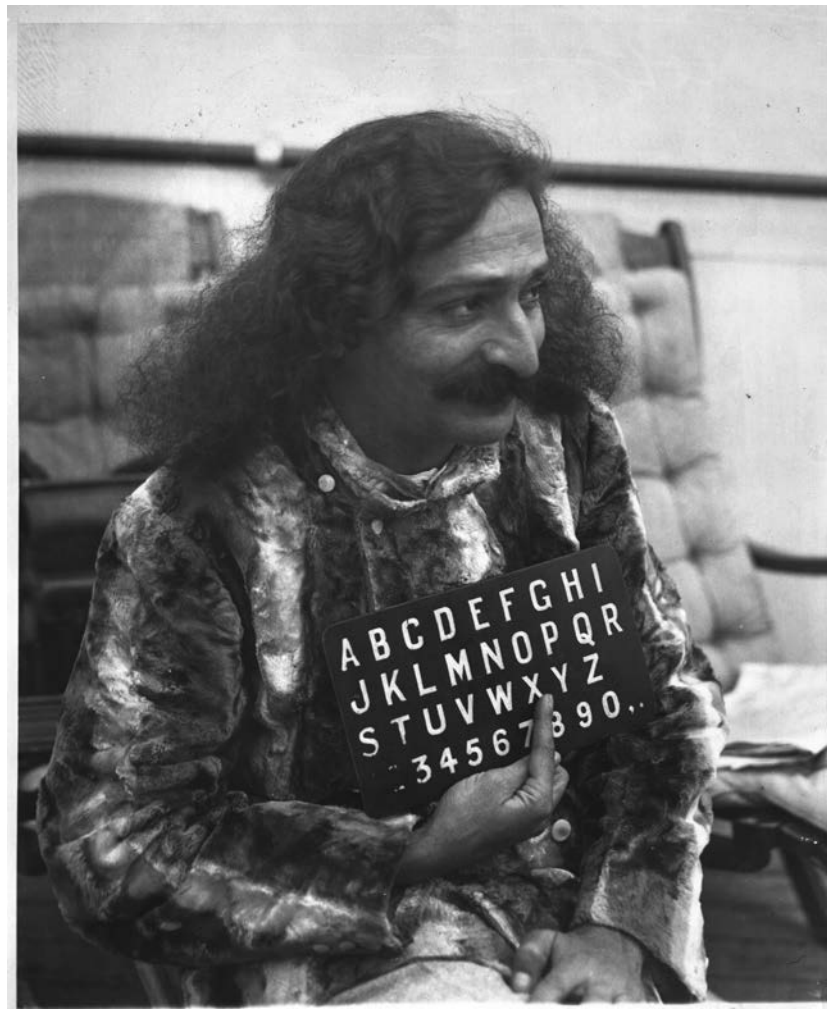


Figure 1. Meher Baba sailing on the SS *Bremen* from New York to Le Havre in 1932. © Meher Nazar Publications; used with permission.

tensive metaphysical information. From this phase we have the only book written by his hand. He also writes "The Book," the mysterious lost manuscript that Meher Baba said would "be the universal Scripture for the world in the future" ([ca. 1926] 2005, 604).[2]

3. Alphabet board phase (January 2, 1927–October 6, 1954).—He gives up all writing except for his signature. For approximately twenty-seven years,

2. In the second part of this essay I provide a chronology of his major works.

https://doi.org/10.1086/674313 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Meher Baba often communicates with the aid of an alphabet board. He goes through a number of boards. They depict twenty-six alphabetic letters plus numerals from 0 to 9 (the period and comma are present in some but not in all of the boards he used). This phase coincides with the writing and publication of many of his central works, which he approves.

4. Gestural phase (October 7, 1954–1969).—This phase lasts for about fifteen years. Meher Baba would stop using the alphabet board. "The time has now come," he spelled out as part of the last message in the board, "for being bound in the chain of internal connections" (Grant 1987, 216). This is a highly creative phase in which Baba develops a unique gestural language.

The System and the Messenger

The kinds and interaction of the systems Meher Baba used to communicate his message are no less extraordinary than the content of message itself. The two are as inseparable as the shape of the wine is from the glass. The progression of Meher Baba's communicative modalities forces us to think, as Roman Jakobson phrased it, of "language in relation to other communication systems" ([1968] 1971), that is, semiotically.

These pages are concerned primarily with some of the semiotic and intersemiotic aspects of Meher Baba's modes of communication and with their function in the transmission of a metaphysical and teleological message: whence we came and whither we go—and why, what for? Perhaps no modern thinker has explained more thoroughly, and without speaking or writing, such abstract subjects as the Beyond-Beyond—the state of God in its transcendent Reality, unidentified with finite form, beyond the illusory universe of time and space.[3] We will consider Meher Baba's silence from the perspective of a state of consciousness known as *turiya*, the state of awakened dreamless sleep.

At the outset, it is necessary to give a brief introduction about the messenger who chose such curious methods to communicate this information. In 1954 Meher Baba publically declared that he was the Avatar of this Age, that is, the current manifestation of five previous major Avataric Advents—Ram, Krishna, Buddha, Jesus, and Mohammed—who are one and the same. He explained that the Avatar comes to Earth every 700 to 1,400 years and that five perfect masters, who are present at all times on Earth, aid his successive manifestations. Meher Baba was aware that his claim would trouble some. In *Listen Humanity*, one of the works where he discusses Avatarhood at length,

3. See, e.g., Meher Baba ([1955] 1973).

https://doi.org/10.1086/674313 Published online by Cambridge University Press

he explains: "In the long run the man himself must say what he is. If he is Persian, he says so. If he is Catholic, he says so. If he is allergic to onions, he says so. At least he says so when it is important that the characteristic shall be known. If it is important that the characteristic be unknown, then he will deliberately suppress the fact" (1957, 221). Elsewhere he offers the following explanation: "I am that Ancient One whose past is worshipped and remembered, whose present is ignored and forgotten, and whose future (Advent) is anticipated with great fervour and longing" ([1964] 1982, 76). When his biographer, the British historian C. B. Purdom, after researching the existing literature on the subject became troubled by this claim, Meher Baba said to him "quite unexpectedly, 'You are bothered by the idea of *Avatar*. There is no need to be, for we are all *Avatars*'" (Purdom [1964] 1971, 391).[4]

Meher Baba stated the purpose of his current manifestation: "I am not come to establish any cult, society or organization; nor even to establish a new religion. The religion that I shall give teaches the Knowledge of the One behind the many. The book that I shall make people read is the book of the heart that holds the key to the mystery of life. I shall bring about a happy blending of the head and the heart. I shall revitalize all religions and cults, and bring them together like beads on one string" ([1955] 1973, xxxvi).

Meher Baba stressed that he had come not to teach but to awaken humanity to the unifying message of love. Spiritual understanding, he said, is born of harmony between mind and heart. He marked the importance of critical thought: "If allegiance to creeds and dogmas has sometimes done good to the individual or the community to which he belongs, it has more often done harm . . . because in them the guiding vision is clouded owing to degeneration or suspension of critical thinking" ([1967] 2007, 3:118–19).

He elaborated on the ancient doctrines of karma and *sanskaras*, the binding impressions created by our past and present experiences. *Sanskaras* need to be eliminated in order for the individual to realize his or her true self, something that is almost impossible without the final help of a conscious realized master or guru. In lectures given during the second phase, Meher Baba outlined the four main paths, laid down by the masters of the past, which lead to the destruction of the *sanskaras*. These are *karma yoga* (the path of detached ac-

4. Ten days later he declared publically: "When I say I am the *Avatar*, there are few who feel happy, some who feel shocked, and many more who take me for a hypocrite, a fraud, a supreme egoist, or just mad. If I were to say every one of you is an *Avatar*, a few would be tickled and many would consider it a blasphemy or a joke. The fact that God being One, indivisible and equally in all of us, we can be naught else but one, is too much for the duality-conscious mind" (Purdom [1964] 1971, 392).

https://doi.org/10.1086/674313 Published online by Cambridge University Press

tion), *dnyan yoga* (the path of knowledge), *bhakti yoga* (the path of devotion), and *raj yoga* (the royal, or highest, path).[5] "With love," Meher Baba added later, "one can follow any of the Yogas most suitable to his or her temperament" ([1934] 1978, 79).

Meher Baba led an exemplary life of service to humanity. Some of his early acts were to open a shelter for the poor, a free school, a hospital, and a dispensary. He humbly bowed down to and bathed lepers, giving them new clothes and new hope. "They are like beautiful birds caught in an ugly cage. . . . Of all the tasks I have to perform, this touches me most deeply," he said ([1967] 2007, 1:xv–xvi).

He traveled long distances to gather, assist, and bathe *masts*—"God-intoxicated" souls commonly regarded as mad. As his British disciple William Donkin explains in *The Wayfarers*, in his contacts with *masts* Meher Baba made almost no use "of conventional channels of communication," and among these channels Donkin included the "use of gesture" ([1948] 1988, v). His communication with them was internal, silent. "The average man dresses more or less like others; and he sits, talks, and walks like others . . . they change *within the range of normality*," explains Meher Baba in the Foreword to Donkin's book (1). The masts are seen as mad when "measured by standards of 'normality' . . . of the person who has adopted the normal, often unjust and violent, ways of his or her contemporaries, but "when measured by the standard of realization and expression of truth, they will inevitably be interpreted as having *increasing* degrees of sanity" (5).

There are many accounts of the various aspects of Meher Baba's remarkable life, of his journeys through Asia, Europe, North America, and Australia. He was accessible; he met with and touched the hearts of thousands of people. But he also spent long periods of time fasting in solitary seclusion, often confined to small spaces, conducting, as he explained, his universal work. In fact, Meher Baba's activities cover a wide field. *Lord Meher*, Bhau Kalchuri's twenty-volume biography of Meher Baba,[6] written in a simple and engaging way, documents many other aspects of a life that inspired many other works.[7]

5. This path avails itself of the technical know-how that the great teachers have left for us. I proposed a model (2005) to describe the communication process during a Kundalini Yoga meditation that enables the mind to achieve a deep state of quietude.

6. The twenty volumes of *Lord Meher* (1988) are approximately 7,000 pages long. There is a printed version and a revised online version at http://www.lordmeher.org/index.jsp. The printed version contains numerous photographs that are currently in the process of being incorporated into the site. All citations refer to the online edition.

7. Bal Natu's revised and extended Avatar Meher Baba bibliography, which lists works (books, essays, films, etc.) published in English and other European languages from 1928 to 1995, is 222 pages long. This and other

https://doi.org/10.1086/674313 Published online by Cambridge University Press

And still, perhaps no single characteristic of Baba's multifaceted personality has attracted more attention than his silence.

The Awakened Sound Sleep

Despite the apparent limitations of not speaking and, eventually, of not using any words at all, either spoken or written, Meher Baba was highly eloquent. Without speaking a word he was able to instruct and delight with intelligent humor and to discuss a wide spectrum of practical and philosophical topics. Among them, as we mentioned, are complex explanations of the origin and purpose of creation. SILENCE, as we shall see, is the self-reflexive act that links the beyond-beyond state with the highest experience of the human form. It is also the reason for its being, that is, for the eternal one to know itself.

Silence has been the object of reflection in various traditions from both East and West. In "The Power of Silence" (2001, 4), Christian theologian Raimon Panikkar considers the presence of silence in the word:

> If we do not perceive the sound of the word, then we hear only part of the word. A word without sound, a word that only says what can be recorded by a machine, is not a word. The word is more that a sound wave and the word is more than meaning. In the sound of the word we find our way to the core of life and we become aware that the inexpressible exists although it is inexpressible. According to Plotinus, the logos—the word—of the soul is a silent logos. The word of the spirit, the word of Man is a silent word. And precisely listening for that which the word pours out is part of the participation in the word.

At the beginning of the chapter on the *Upanisad* in the *Philosophies of India* ([1951] 1989, 355–56), Heinrich Zimmer writes, "The creative philosophers of the period of the Upanisads, examining the problem of the atman, were the pioneer intellectuals and freethinkers of their age. . . . They turned their backs on the external universe—the realm interpreted in the myths and controlled by the complicated rituals of the sacrifice—because they were discovering something more interesting. They had found the interior world, the inward universe of man himself, and with that the mystery of the Self."

One of the most interesting aspects of their discoveries was their description of *turiya* 'the fourth'—the state of awakened sleep. The typical Upani-

books to which I refer are available at the online library of the Avatar Meher Baba Trust, http://www.ambppct.org/library.php.

https://doi.org/10.1086/674313 Published online by Cambridge University Press

sadic doctrine refers to the three stages of waking, dream, and sleep (deep, dreamless sleep). Zimmer considers the meaning of the Sanskrit syllable *om* as explained in the short *Mandukya Upanisad*, which consists of only twelve verses and which "has come to be regarded as the concentrated extract and epitome of the teaching of the entire corpus of the 108 Upanisads. *Om* is the theme of this Upanisad, which Zimmer quotes in its entirety.[8] The text starts with an explanation: "OM!—This imperishable sound is the whole of this visible universe. Its explanation is as follows. What has become, what is becoming, what will become—verily, all of this is the sound OM. And what is beyond these three states of the world of time—that too, verily, is the sound OM" (372). Referring to the five final verses of this *Upanisad*, Zimmer points out the relation of "the four portions, feet, or states of the Self" to "the syllable OM, which, as made known at the beginning, is identical with the Self. In Sanskrit the vowel *o* is constitutionally a diphthong, compounded of *a* + *u*; hence OM can also be written AUM." This syllable, in the realm of sounds, we read in the *Upanisad*, is equivalent to "Atman, or Self," and the "four portions of the Self being identical with the components of the syllable" ([1951] 1989, 376).

Thus, the letter *A*, the first letter of the Sanskrit alphabet, is equivalent to "Vaisvanara, The Common-to-all-men, whose field is the waking state." The second sound, the *U*, corresponds to "Taijasa, 'The Shining One,' whose field is the dream state . . . and contains the qualities of the other two" (Zimmer [1951] 1989, 377). Zimmer notes that "the open mouth of *A* moves towards the closure of *M*. Between is *U*, formed of the openness of *A* but shaped by the closing lips. So dream is compounded of the consciousness of waking life shaped by the unconsciousness of sleep" (377 n 54). We always go through the state of dreams, subtle as they may be, before going in and out of the state of deep, dreamless sleep, Meher Baba adds.

The eleventh and penultimate verse of the *Mandukya Upanisad* discusses the sound of the letter *M*. It is "Prajña, 'The Knower,' whose field is deep sleep . . . because this is the measure, and that into which all enters." Zimmer notes, "It is from the position of the closed mouth that all begins; the mouth is open to produce *A*, and in another way to produce *U*, the closed mouth is thus the fundament from which all sound of speech takes its mea-

8. The mantra *om* has enjoyed universal prestige in the East. It is, almost "from the time of the *Yajur-Veda*, the *mantra* par excellence" (Eliade [1954] 1969, 212).

https://doi.org/10.1086/674313 Published online by Cambridge University Press

sure, as well as the end to which it devolves" ([1951] 1989, 377).[9] Zimmer makes the following comment:

> Deep sleep [*susupti*] when regarded from the point of view of either of waking consciousness [*vaisvanara*] or of consciousness in the web of dream [*taijasa*], would be a state of sheer non-being [*a-sat*]. . . . It is back into this emptiness that the little cosmos of man's waking consciousness dissolves and disappears into sleep. Thus it can be said that the emanation of dreams and the passage of consciousness from sleep to waking are two stages, or varieties, of a constantly recurring, daily repeated little cosmogony, or process of world-creation, within the microcosm.[10]

The Voice of Silence

"The fourth is soundless," we read in the final verse of the *Mandukya Upanisad*, "unutterable, a quieting down of all the differentiated manifestations, blissful-peaceful, nondual. Thus OM is Atman, verily. He who knows thus merges his self in the Self—yea, he who knows thus" (Zimmer [1951] 1989, 377). Ancient texts describe it as the fourth level or leg, or simply "the fourth," *turiya*, the state of awakened sleep, the voice of silence. Zimmer calls it, quite fittingly, the "SILENCE." The fourth is beyond and within the three stages of waking consciousness (the *A*), dream consciousness (the *U*), and deep sleep (the *M*). Zimmer explains: "The A and U are as essential to the sound as M, or as the SILENCE against which the sound appears. Moreover, it would be a mistake to say that A U M did not exist while the SILENCE reigned; for it would still be potential. The actual manifestation of the syllable, on the other hand, is fleeting and evanescent, whereas the SILENCE, indeed, is present elsewhere during a local pronunciation of AUM—that is to say (by analogy), transcendentally during the creation, manifestation, and dissolution of the universe" ([1951] 1989, 378).

The end of the evolutionary process—from atom, to stone, to metal, to vegetable, to animal, and culminating in the human body—marks the beginning of what Meher Baba calls the process of involution, a spiritual ascent

9. Meher Baba adds the following: "When one closes one's lips and expresses sound a 'm-m-m' is produced. This 'm-m-m' is the foundation or ground of all spoken words and contains all feelings as when it expresses pain and anguish or joy and happiness, or all thought when expressed during thought and is capable of containing the whole of a question and its answer" (Brabazon [1959] 1990, 65).

10. Zimmer [1951] 1989, 353–54. The unconsciousness of deep or sound sleep, Meher Baba adds, is a temporary return to the original, self-forgetful beyond-beyond state of God before the beginning of all beginnings ([1968] 1983, 10–18).

https://doi.org/10.1086/674313 Published online by Cambridge University Press

leading to the realization "I am God." There are innumerable realized persons in this last cycle. The drop, though individual, realizes that it is the ocean itself. "Thus Buddha is the Ocean and realizes himself as such. So too Jesus, Zoroaster, Krishna, Muhammad, Sai Baba, etc." ([ca. 1926] 2005, 219).

All duality leading to this realization is illusory. This is how Meher Baba explains it: "This is Reality . . . all other intermediary states of God are *illusory states* where the same eternal, infinite, all-pervading, one, indivisible, formless Existence, as God, though not realized as the eternal Reality, asserts through its very being, in assuming forms of infinitely innumerable inanimate and animate things and creatures, as lifeless and living states of God, while in the process of gaining full consciousness of the eternal reality of infinite existence ([1955] 1973, 153)."

In the work titled *In God's Hand* ([ca. 1925] 2000), the only extant book written directly by him and perhaps his earliest major philosophical treatise, Meher Baba explains how this process culminates with the stoppage of the mind "(as in the sound sleep state) in the awake state, i.e. the experience of Sound Sleep in the Awake State. . . . So the mind, to realize the infinite Self, must stop in the awake state" (20–21).[11] The mind must be stopped for the limited mind to realize the Self" (Nirvikalpa Samadhi). "As long as mind is working there is this body & the universe: once the mind is stopped, no body & no universe. Thus in the dream & awake state there is mind, body, universe etc. But in the sound sleep state no mind no body no universe. Thus mind, body, universe all nothing, all false all *bhaas* 'appearance'" (6–7).

In *God Speaks* ([1955] 1973) Meher Baba explains more thoroughly and in a new systematic way the cosmogony described variously in the *Upanisads*. In the beginning the soul (the Over-Soul, *Paramatma*) "had no impressions (*sanskaras*) and no consciousness. . . . This infinite, impressionless, unconscious tranquil state of the soul reverberated with an impulse which we call THE FIRST URGE (the first urge to know itself)." To help understand this notion, Meher Baba uses the analogy of the ocean and the drop: "the infinite, unlimited ocean got the first urge or THE WHIM," and an infinite number of individual drops came into being. "This most finite point of the first urge is called the *'Om' Point* or *Creation Point* and this point is unlimited" (9–10).

In the Vedic myth of Prajapati, the initial whim is caused by loneliness. The *Paramatma*, God in its supratranscendental form, being one and everything,

11. Page numbers correspond to the handwritten numbered pages in the original manuscript. The edition cited in the references contains a facsimile of Meher Baba's 39-page manuscript that probably dates to 1925, the year when he started to observe silence.

https://doi.org/10.1086/674313 Published online by Cambridge University Press

feels lonely. So he decides to sacrifice himself. But seeing that the other half resembles him, he begins to mask himself as not to recognize himself in the other half. Thus he becomes male and female, bull and cow, man and woman, and all the other forms of duality. This separation also brings forth love, the longing to regain that original unity which calls forth the other. Such are the dialectics of love.

All the forms originate from this most finite point of contact between the known and the unknown (*bindu*). This is also the source of the *Aadi Naad* (the Original Sound) and the start of the evolution of consciousness leading to the human form. During this evolution, which starts from God's original desire to know himself and herself, the individual soul accumulates impressions (*sanskaras*) that bind it to a cycle of reincarnation. In *Infinite Intelligence* Baba explains that the creating, preserving, and destroying aspects of the Infinite Intelligence—"which correspond to the states of awakening, abiding in dream and wakefulness, and going-to-sound-sleep—go on in all forms, from stone to human" ([ca. 1926] 2005, 167).

This is how H. P. Blavatsky puts it. "The monad, [the individual soul], can be traced through the course of its pilgrimage and its changes of transitory vehicles only from the incipient stage of the manifested Universe. In Pralaya, or the intermediate period between two manvantaras, it loses its name, as it loses it when the real ONE self of man merges *into Brahm* in cases of high Samadhi (the *Turiya* state) or final Nirvana; 'when the disciple' in the words of Sankara, 'having attained that primeval consciousness, absolute bliss, of which the nature is truth, which is without form and action, abandons this illusive body that has been assumed by the *atma* just as an actor (abandons) the dress (put on)'" (1888, 570).

Meher Baba uses the analogy of music to describe the power and beauty of the Sound that set forth all individual journeys. "If you were to receive through your hearing just a wave, a single vibration of that *Aadi Naad* (Original Sound) you would lose bodily consciousness. I am that Original Sound. The best and highest of music that you hear and enjoy is but the seventh shadow (shadow of a shadow, of a shadow, etc.) of that *Aadi Naad*. But while I am with you on your level, I am pleased with the seventh shadow (or vibration) of It" ([1961] 1962, 9–10).

Silence Broken and Not

Technically speaking, silence in Meher Baba is a minus device, a significant absence of words in anticipation of the Word of Words. In a passage of

https://doi.org/10.1086/674313 Published online by Cambridge University Press

"Linguistics and Poetics," Roman Jakobson points out that "quite naturally it was Edgar Allen Poe, the poet and theoretician of defeated anticipation, who metrically and psychologically appraised the human sense of gratification from the unexpected which arises from expectedness, each unthinkable without its opposite" ([1958] 2009, 77). Just "as evil cannot exist without good,"[12] the Word cannot exist without Silence. Meher Baba "said" many times that he would break his silence, and stated different specific times when this would happen, but it remained. In fact, he never publically broke his silence, which lead to conflicting interpretations.[13] One thing is clear, however: the frustrated expectations that he would break his silence magnified its significance.

One of the keys to humor is the recognition of hidden, unexpected codes. By all accounts Meher Baba had a delightful and engaging sense of humor. He was able to switch and twist codes even when he expressed himself with gestures. Charles "Tex" Hightower was a young dancer when he came into close association with Meher Baba during his visits to the Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, in the 1950s. Answering the predictable set of questions about someone of Meher Baba's stature, he remarked recently: "You ask these questions but what I remember most fondly are the hours we used to spend with Baba rolling in laughter not far from where this auditorium is now."[14]

I would like to put the debate surrounding the breaking of Meher Baba's silence in the general context inspired by Zimmer's reading of the *Mandukya Upanisad*. In *Stay with God: A Statement in Illusion on Reality*, a book revised, approved, and praised by Meher Baba, he is quoted as "saying" the following by the Australian poet Francis Brabazon:

> In this present age when words, through accumulation and accretion, have become meaningless and all My previous words in the form of Precepts are neglected and distorted, I maintain Silence.
>
> When I break My silence and speak, it will be this Primal Oceanic "M-m-m" which I will utter through My human mouth.
>
> And because all forms and words are from this Primal Sound or Original Word and are continuously connected with It and have their life from It, when It is uttered by Me It will reverberate in all people

12. Edgar Allen Poe, quoted by Jakobson ([1958] 2009), 77.

13. See, e.g., Purdom [1964] 1971, 412ff.

14. I am paraphrasing from memory the gist of Mr. Hightower's account in a talk he gave in Myrtle Beach on May 18, 2012.

https://doi.org/10.1086/674313 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> and creatures and all will know that I have broken My silence and have uttered that Sound or Word.
>
> The effective force of this Word in individuals and their reaction to It will be in accordance with the magnitude and receptivity of each individual mind. (66)

On many occasions Meher Baba expressed variously that he would speak a single word, and that it would have a great impact on humanity. "My Silence must break. There is no escape from it. I shall not lay down My body until I have given the WORD to the world" ([1960] 1961, 2). Whether or not Meher Baba broke his silence remains a contested question. The historical record and Baba's numerous statements on the subject leave room for a variety of interpretations, including the possibility of understanding the mystery in a nondual way.

We are not concerned here with this debate. Rather we would like to call attention to the meanings generated by the interplay of semiotic systems that intervene in the main accounts of the breaking of Meher Baba's silence. The fact is that after July 10, 1925, Meher Baba did not speak publically a single word. Many years after he passed away, two accounts surfaced of him breaking his silence. In one, Meher Baba speaks words. In the other he is heard making a sound resembling *om*. A single person witnessed the first event; two, perhaps three people witnessed the other. Both describe Baba as using a combination of verbal and nonverbal signs.

The most contentious is said to have happened on the eve of Meher Baba's death, on the night of January 30, 1969. It was "revealed" in 2001, more than thirty years after the fact, by the poet Bhau Kalchuri, his night watchman, and one of his *mandali* (disciples). According to Kalchuri, the night before he passed away Meher Baba unexpectedly uttered the Hindi words "*Yad Rakh*" (Remember this) finishing "the sentence in signs, pointing to Himself, meaning, 'I am not this body.'"[15]

Meher Baba's reported message "*Yad Rakh*," followed by the gesture "I am not this body," expresses a metaphysical message by means of two semiotic languages: natural language and gestures. Let us consider some of the elements in the first part of the message, the two spoken words. Bhau was able to un-

15. Kalchuri added that Meher Baba explained to him that the utterance "was not the breaking of My silence. I did not speak the Word-of-Words. It was simply a sign that I could still speak." See "Bhau's Awakenings": http://www.jaibaba.com/mandali/bhau/bhau–6–10.html. For an account of the controversy that followed see Kendra Crossen's recently updated "Yad Rakh Never Happened?" http://www.meherbabamanifesting.com/did-he-speak/yad-rakh-never-happened.

https://doi.org/10.1086/674313 Published online by Cambridge University Press

derstand the Hindi words because he had learned the language.[16] Independent of its meaning in Hindi, the *Yad Rakh* generates a sound current that has an effect on any listener, indistinctive of the language he or she might speak.

In Indian philosophy, this vibratory effect is most recognizable in mantra, powerful sounds that are efficient, as Mircea Eliade writes, "owing to the fact that they *are* (or at least, if correctly recited, *can become*) the 'objects' they represent." He observes that "sometimes an entire metaphysics is concentrated in a *mantra*. The 8,000 stanzas of a voluminous Majayana treatise, the *Astasahasrika-prajna-paramita* could be gradually reduced to its 'seed,' *bija-mantra: pram*" ([1954] 1969, 215).

This is also the subject of the millenary art and science of *Naad Yoga.* The *naad* is "the inner sound that is subtle and all-present. It is the direct expression of the Absolute. Meditated upon, it leads into a sound current that pulls the consciousness into expansion" (Bhajan 1998, 197). *Naad Yoga* distinguishes between two different kinds of sounds: *ahad* and *anahad.* "*Ahad* sounds," writes Mata Mandir Singh in "The Unstruck Melody" (2008), are sounds created by something striking something else. . . . The wind blowing through the trees, the breath striking the vocal cords and mouth—these are *Ahad* sounds." And there is also *Anahad* sound, literally, the un-struck melody, the sound that permeates everything in the universe. "All matter is vibrating at certain frequencies. Rocks and stones have a very low frequency. Color and light have a very high frequency and can travel through the vacuum of space" (4).

The art and science of the *naad* informs classical Indian music as well as the spoken and written word. In this context, musicality is sometimes more than just a supplementary code to the verbal aspect of an elocution or text, particularly a religious text. It is often the case in the articulation of sacred texts that a correct enunciation of the sound pattern is more important for the communicative effect than knowing the meaning of the words.

In the West the question of whether the meaning of linguistic signs is derived "by nature" (*physei*) or "by convention" (*thesei*) can be traced back to Plato's *Cratylus.* In this dialogic treatise on the origin of words, Cratylus says that all things have a correct name that is given by nature. Words resemble what they say. Hermogenes sustains that the meaning of words is formed by agreement, by social convention. Socrates, who is the moderator in this dialogue, as Roman Jakobson writes, "is prone to agree that representation by

16. It is customary to refer to Meher Baba's close disciples by their first names.

https://doi.org/10.1086/674313 Published online by Cambridge University Press

likeness is superior to the use of arbitrary signs, but despite the attractive force of likeness he feels obliged to accept a complementary factor—conventionality, custom, habit" ([1965] 2009, 416).

It is the *thesei* aspect of Meher Baba's message to Bhau Kalchuri (*Yad Rakh*) that is almost exclusively considered by commentators of the account because without the conventional meaning of this part of the message the rest would make no sense. The second part of Meher Baba's message used a more universal language. The nonverbal signs that he used to express "I am not this body" did not have to be learned in the way we learn a linguistic code, but they nonetheless required interpretation. We shall have more to say about Meher Baba's gestural language in what follows.

The second account of the breaking of Meher Baba's silence was told by another of his *mandali*, Eruch Jessawala, who was the primary interpreter of Baba's abbreviated messages in the alphabet board as well as of his gestural language. Like Kalchuri's, this account also came as a years-after-the-fact revelation. On February 6, 1992, Jessawala was prompted by a question from his brother Merwan, who made reference to something Eruch had said in a letter written during the last days of Meher Baba's life. "Tell them about Baba clearing his throat," Merwan asked in a recorded conversation that was transcribed by Anthony Paterniti. Eruch tried to avoid the question but eventually responded to his brother's question.

It happened about three days before Meher Baba dropped his body. Eruch, who was sitting with Baba, "was startled to hear Meher Baba make a very dramatic sound." The following is the account of what Eruch said:

> The tape begins with Eruch imitating the sound he heard Baba make. In effect, Meher Baba had covered his mouth with his hand and shouted with great intensity:
>
> Eruch: "Mmmmmmmm!" And I said, "What's the matter. (At this point, Baba made a gesture assuring him that everything was all right.) That's all—finished! That's the thing that I reported over to [Merwan]. . . . The Original Word. Om.[17]

The obvious question is why would Meher Baba cover his mouth as he "shouted the original word with great intensity"? Why would he cover his mouth to shout? Did the gesture have a physical function in relation to the

17. Jessawala 1992, 13. This is a verbatim record of a tape-recorded talk edited by Tony Paterniti.

https://doi.org/10.1086/674313 Published online by Cambridge University Press

sound current, or was he creating a supplementary message by combining a vocal and a gestural sign?

Another account of the sound Eruch made, places the emphasis on the silence that followed. The artist Nadia Woliska, the person who recorded the interview and was present at the event, wrote the following alternative account: "the sound was not impressive. The shock coming from the revelation at that moment was impressive. The silence of Eruch just after he said it was most impressive. The sound itself was like a suppressed moan as Eruch made a gesture to his mouth when making the sound."[18]

Let us remember Zimmer's discussion of the elements of the sound AUM in the verses of the *Mandukya Upanisad*. The "moan" remembered by Nadia Woliska could have been nasal, and the gesture indicating "the closed mouth . . . the fundament from which all sound of speech takes its measure, as well as the end to which it devolves" (Zimmer [1951] 1989, 377). The silence that followed is what impressed Ms. Woliska most in Eruch's representation of Baba's vocalization. Zimmer describes the fourth component of the Sanskrit syllable *om* as "the silence that follows and surrounds" it (376n).[19]

In any case, all accounts of the possible breaking of Meher Baba's silence invite semiotic reflection. Two sets of signs intervene in the reports of both Bhau Kalchuri and Eruch Jessawala. One set belongs to an audible system (*Yad Rakh* and *om*), the other to a visual system (the gesture "I am not this body" and the sign of Meher Baba covering his mouth). This intersemiotic mode of communication calls for a metasystemic approach.

Meher Baba used various semiotic systems to express himself at different times of his life. He gradually displaced verbal signs as he transitioned to corporal and intuitive modes of communication. He made use and left behind one communication system after another, like an actor who discards parts of his costume as he comes out of character.

Four Semiotic Phases

1. Talking Phase (1894–July 9, 1925)

The study of the development of language in humans often disregards the fact that even before humans can form words, babies have an expressive language

18. E-mail correspondence with Nadia Woliska, August 3, 2013.

19. Ma Jaya Sati Bhagavati explained tantric transmission as something that takes place not as much in the words as "in the space between the words." "It's not the words but the astonishment of the gods between the words," she said (personal notes, 2011–12).

https://doi.org/10.1086/674313 Published online by Cambridge University Press

of their own. Calling it babble, that is, associating it with the meaninglessness of confused sounds, is only a prejudice (a vocal expression of delight or need is not meaningless). Baby "words" and baby "expressions" send a message of innocence—they are signs in a pure form. Baby talk is often spontaneous and melodious. And it is audiovisual; baby talk is accompanied by bodily gestures and facial expressions. In fact, body language precedes all others, since it is an in utero form of expression.

As humans learn to speak, their language is accompanied by other modes of signification. Although nonverbal communication by means of our body has been going on since the beginning of humanity, it has only "been scientifically studied to any extent since the end of the twentieth century" (Pease and Pease 2004, 365). It turns out that the functions of body language and paraphonology[20] are immensely important. Katz and Katz (1983) cite "estimates ranging from a low 65% nonverbal and 35% verbal content in an average message to a high of more than 90% nonverbal content." Meher Baba's gestural language, which we discuss below, adds a new angle to the study of the expressive possibilities of the human body.

Meher Baba was born Merwan Sheriar Irani on February 25, 1894, to a Persian Zoroastrian family living in Poona (Pune), India. As far as we know, his expressive and linguistic development followed a rather normal course. His mother Shireen remembers that "Merwan was very active and mischievous from the time he was able to toddle, and would walk out of the house when my attention was distracted" (Baba 1957, 245). And outside of Merwan's house were the streets of an important multicultural center under British rule.[21] He would learn to speak Gujarati, Persian (Dari), Urdu, Hindi, and English, among other languages.

He had an early gift for poetry and a singing heart. As a boy he wrote refined metaphysical poetry. Bhau Kalchuri (1988, 1:160) quotes an example:

> This world is ephemeral, the soul is eternal,
> That world is everlasting, the soul is immortal.
> Its motion is indestructible, its love incomparable,

20. Irmengard Rauch offers the following definition of paraphonology: "The pause, silence, gesture or kinesics [body motion], proxemics [the use of space to communicate], and haptics [tactile communication] are non-sound accompaniment or substitutes for speech sound" (2008, 2).

21. Poona would become associated with the fight for Indian independence, the abolition of the caste system, and equal rights for women. Tarabai Shinde (1850–1910), one of the first modern women activists in India, published *Stree-Purush Tulana* (1882) in Poona, and Mohandas Gandhi spent several years the Central Jail of Yerwada, which today is a city neighborhood of larger Pune.

https://doi.org/10.1086/674313 Published online by Cambridge University Press

O pilgrim stretch your feet on this holy path!
Do your utmost to realize Eternity,
Then only will you be happy in both worlds.

In his adolescence Merwan was an avid conversationalist with an active social life. He formed and presided over the Cosmopolitan Club, a club for boys, which rented the first floor of a building in Poona. Its members came from different cultures and religions. Various games such as chess, checkers, and cards were available for them. But besides play and fun, their goal was "to love all and maintain unity and brotherhood." Two days a week were reserved for members to deliver short lectures on open topics; new members had to deliver a speech extemporaneously. Merwan was a particularly gifted speaker. "When it was Merwan's turn to give an address, the boys would listen even more attentively" (Kalchuri 1988, 1:185).

One of the members, a Buddhist friend named Ramnath showed Merwan a new book on the life of Buddha entitled *Buddha Bhagwan—Lord Buddha*. Thumbing through the pages of the book, "Merwan came to a passage where Buddha said: 'When I return to earth, I will be called *Maitreya*—the Merciful One.' Instantly, Merwan felt that he was the very same Merciful One to which the passage referred! He looked at Buddha's picture and felt within: 'I am the Buddha!' But he asked himself, 'Am I really the Buddha?' and his inner voice assured him: 'Yes, Merwan, you are!'" (1988, 1:186).

The feeling Merwan felt anticipates a profound transformation that would happen a few years latter. In 1911 he passed the matriculation exam given by Bombay University and entered Deccan College, an old and distinguished center of higher education in India.[22] Among the illustrious professors that taught at Deccan were F. W. Bain (1863–1940), author of fantastic literature he claimed to have translated from Sanskrit, and Sir Edwin Arnold (1832–1904), best known as the author of *The Light of Asia* ([1879] 1881), a long narrative poem depicting the life, character, and philosophy of Prince Gautama of India, the founder of Buddhism.

Coincidentally, this book, which contains an analogy frequently used by Meher Baba, had a profound effect on Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges. When Borges was seven he picked it out from his father's library and, as Amelia Barili (2009, 51) recounts, Borges would remember one of its meta-

22. Deccan College Post-Graduate and Research Institute today specializes in archeology and linguistics.

https://doi.org/10.1086/674313 Published online by Cambridge University Press

phors throughout his life: "the dew-drop slips into the shining sea."[23] Meher Baba would use the same analogy of the ocean and the drop at different times to explain various aspects of the central questions concerning existence.

In *Infinite Intelligence* he extends the analogy to the discussion of sleep revealed by the writers of the Upanisads. In the sound sleep state the drops are part of the motionless ocean, and since they are not in motion they realize neither the finite bubble that confines them nor the infinite ocean. In the intermediary dream-and-awake state the ocean is in motion and the finite drops realize "the gross bubble" (awake state) and "subtle bubble" (dreaming) "instead of realizing the Ocean" ([ca. 1926] 2005, 219). The section ends with an Urdu poetic line: "From the Ocean came a voice proclaiming to the drop: You are not different from Me, I am not different from you" (221).

But during his studies at Deccan, Merwan had yet to merge with the ocean of his Self. He excelled at games and sports. He was an exceptional cricket keeper and a member of the college boat club. His passion, however, was in language, poetry in particular. Among his favorite Western writers were Blake, Shakespeare, and Shelly, and among the Eastern, the Persian mystics Hafiz and Rumi. He could memorize and recite poetry with ease. He wrote poems in Gujarati, Urdu, Persian, Hindi, and English. He published some of them, under the Persian pen name "Huma" (a phoenix-like bird), in *Sanj Vartman*, a popular Gujarati newspaper in Bombay (Purdom [1964] 1971, 18). In the years that followed he would compose many other poems and songs, some of which have been published in recent years.

The kiss and the rock.—A kiss would transform his life. During his bike rides to college, Merwan was drawn to the great Sufi saint Hazrat Babajan (ca. 1790/1800–1931), who had been sitting for years under an old bayan tree. At that time Babajan was well over one hundred years old, a majestic "emperor in a fakir's rags," as Baba would describe her years later (Donkin [1948] 1988, 293).

One day in May 1913, Babajan beckoned Merwan and kissed him on the forehead. Meher Baba recounts:

> With just a kiss in the forehead, between the eyebrows, Babajan made me experience thrills of indescribable bliss which continued for about nine months. Then one night (January 1914) she made me realize in a flash the infinite bliss of self-realization (God-realization).

23. This is the context in one of the refrains of Arnold's poem: "OM, MANI PADME, OM! the Dewdrop slips / Into the shining sea! / This is the doctrine of the KARMA. Learn! . . . Only when life dies like a white flame spent / Death dies along with it" ([1879] 1881, 221).

https://doi.org/10.1086/674313 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> At the time Babajan gave me the *nirvikalp* (inconceptual) experience of my own reality, the illusory physical, subtle and mental bodies—mind, worlds, and one and all created things—ceased to exist for me even as illusion. Then I began to see that only I, and nothing else existed. (1957, 245–46)

Thus began an inner quest that would take Merwan to meet four other Perfect Masters: Sai Baba of Shirdi (c. 1840–1918), Tajuddin Baba (1861–1925), Narayan Majaraj (1885–1945) and, finally, Upasni Maharaj (ca. 1870–1941), who, in December 1915, greeted him in a manner quite different from Babajan:

> When I came near enough to him, Maharaj greeted me, so to speak, with a stone which he threw at me with great force. It struck me on my forehead exactly where Babajan had kissed me, hitting me with such force that it drew blood. The mark of that injury is still in my forehead. But that blow from Maharaj was the stroke of *dnyan* (*Marefat* of *Haqiqat*, or divine knowledge).
>
> Figuratively, Maharaj had started to rouse me from "sound sleep." But in sound sleep man is unconscious, while I, being superconscious, was wide awake in sound sleep. With that stroke, Maharaj had begun to help me return to ordinary consciousness of the realm of illusion . . . of duality, while yet experiencing continuously my superconsciousness. (Meher Baba 1957, 249)

For ten years after this experience Meher Baba would continue to talk. He enjoyed singing and playing the *vina* (a stringed instrument) and the drum. His closest female disciple, Mehera J. Irani, wrote in a letter to Kitty Davy, that Gershwin's "Swanee" (1919) was one of his favorite songs and that "Baba used to sing it alone very beautifully as He has a very lovely singing voice. He said it was the first English song He had sung, and from then on He had a flair for good English songs, because Baba likes only the mystical songs (Qawali), many of which are from Hafiz and Jigar" (Davy 1981, 552).

The first group of people who surrounded him after his experience with Maharaj started calling him Meher Baba, which means Compassionate Father.[24] Adi K. Irani, one of his first *mandali*, recounted that in the years before his silence, "Baba used to rise very early in the morning and sing. 'He had a

24. In a discourse on "The Circles," Meher Baba would later explain how "fourteen different individualities, *in the shape of different personalities*, always occupy their respective offices, whenever the Avatar manifests on

https://doi.org/10.1086/674313 Published online by Cambridge University Press

rich, juicy voice,' he said" (Kalchuri 1988, 14:5074). But during this time Meher Baba would sometime also express his "*jalali*—divinely glorious and awe-inspiring" characteristic, and when his "voice would roar" his *mandali* would literally run away from him (2:393).

2. Writing Phase (July 10, 1925–January 1, 1927)

This phase begins with the start of Meher Baba's silence. Baba stopped using his vocal chords as a channel of communication, but his semiotizing would not end or be diminished. On the morning he woke up keeping silence he continued to communicate by writing notes and gesturing with the many people that surrounded him. "From that day on for several months, Baba had a new companion; constantly with him was a young boy named Bal to whom he had taken a liking. Bal, an Arangaon village boy, would accompany the Master around Meherabad with a pencil and paper, or chalk and slate so that Baba could convey whatever he wished" (Kalchuri 1988, 3:738).

Meher Baba's main communication aid during this phase was a small slate where he would write with chalk (a small chalkboard). He conducted interviews in this manner. After the evening *Bhajans* 'devotional songs' he would give out "very interesting explanations on Divine subjects. . . . Patiently but calmly continued taking recourse to signs and writing without uttering the slightest of sound, or giving up the unfinished points."[25] The reference to the "recourse of signs" here most likely alludes to Meher Baba's gestural language, which started to develop along with his silence.

The fact that Meher Baba used a combination of different systems of communication at different stages of his life, and that he intentionally and gradually discarded some in favor of others, calls for a semiotic approach—semiotics studies the properties and modes of interaction of different systems of signification. "All semiotic systems," writes Eco, "can be described from a unified point of view if they are considered as systems of rules (codes) allowing the generation of messages" (1977, 48). But although Meher Baba's life coincides with the development of contemporary semiotic research, which "found its definitive statue at the beginning of the sixties" (44), little has been said until now about the intersemiotic nature of his message.

---

earth. . . . Therefore it would *not* be wrong to say that with Christ's coming again, come Peter, Judas, and all His apostles" ([1967] 2007, 4:87).

25. Entry from July 16, 1925, in *The Combined Diary*, a set of notebooks containing the reminiscences of five of Baba's disciples from July 1924 through the end of August 1927, part 19, http://www.avatarmeherbaba.org/arch/sadhus/book.html.

https://doi.org/10.1086/674313 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Commentators and editors have had a difficult time discussing the variety of interacting systems that intervene in Meher Baba's communication, primarily because they belong to critical and literary traditions that gave primacy to the spoken or written word, that is, for whom language implies words.[26] This is also in part because one of the modes of communication that Baba used, which is particularly hard to distinguish from gestural and body language, was a subtle one that had to be seen and listened to—and I am using Panikkar's description—by "something that the ancients of East and West have called the third eye or the third ear" (4).

Meher Baba continued to communicate without speaking words or using the vocal cords in any way other than, say, clearing his throat. But these sounds, too, are significant. Sneezing or coughing, for instance, could be an indexical sign for having a cold, an unintended metonymy. Symptomatology, the science of medical diagnosis that the Greeks called *semeiosis*, was one of the first expressions of the field of semiotics. Meher Baba would intentionally use other corporal sounds to produce meaning, such as snapping his fingers. But most of his communication remained visual: in a gestural communication system the sender uses his or her body to send a message in a visual code. When somebody—say, a mime—starts "telling" us something, we must pay close attention with our eyes if we are to receive and understand the message.

Meher Baba was well aware of the overlooked communicative power of nonverbal systems even before he started his silence, and he made a point about it. The following incident happened when he was still talking. On October 10, 1922, Baba asked one of his students, "Doctor," to remind him to explain to the group "the exciting game he had once said would begin in September, at supper time":

> Just at the moment Doctor was about to carry out the order of reminding Baba about his promised explanation at supper, he was suddenly asked [by Baba] not to speak or utter any sound until he finished the food which was already served just then. After the meal Baba said, "Doctor has failed to carry out the order of reminding me about the explanation at 7 o'clock as instructed and hence it is posted *sine die*."

26. This is how the editors of *Infinite Intelligence*, for instance, describe Meher Baba's production of meaning during this phase: "the medium of communication that Baba used was live, interactional, and (in a sense) oral. As 'The Combined Diary' implies, Baba was not just dictating a text but communicating to the mandali as well. This interpersonal environment vanishes when a live communication is transcribed; for this reason a communication which succeeded admirably in its live setting often seems deficient in its transcribed form" ([ca. 1926] 2005, 533).

https://doi.org/10.1086/674313 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> Doctor put in that he did not forget the order: "On the contrary, I was eager enough to remind Baba at the right moment, but I was gagged for the time being, under a fresh order." Baba said, "The latest order simply made you observe silence. You could still have reminded me with or through signs." (Abdulla [1922–29] 1979, 98–99)

The amount of information shared by Meher Baba actually increased after he gave up speaking. This is how Chanji, one of his disciples, describes it in his diary:

> But Baba's silence is unique from many viewpoints. When He did not labor under the restriction of self-imposed silence, Baba used to give the mandali occasional lectures and explanations. But after beginning to observe the silence, Baba has been very regular in explaining deep divine subjects. So much so that [in] the last four months the silent lectures were given so frequently that if put together they would make a big volume in itself! The few stray remarks given in this diary are merely off-hand remarks; the real series of the deeper explanations that Baba has given during this period are contained in separate notes taken by Dadachanji. And these deeper explanations were never scribbled out [nor] conveyed by a few signs in a general way! In spite of the silence Baba never looked non-plussed, *ill at ease*, or hesitating. Every member of the mandali ([who were] fond of the explanations) were made to grasp fully the complicated significance with repetitions and many side explanations and examples. In this way, really speaking, a page of the explanation-diary of Chanji's [is] the result of many fully written slates and a long time of signaling on the part of Baba. ([ca. 1926] 2005, 601)

During this phase Meher Baba would diligently write by hand, reserving morning hours for writing, much like a disciplined, professional writer. "At times during this period Baba was observed sitting writing in the school at night when all the rest were sleeping. The change of different seats at secluded spots, particularly in the 'tank' over the hill, and Baba's remaining aloof for days together, were largely due to this work. His general method was to take a bath early, and then to write from six o'clock in the morning behind closed doors" (Purdom [1964] 1971, 53).

It was probably in 1925 that Meher Baba composed the only extant book written directly by him; an elegant facsimile of the thirty-nine-page, handwritten manuscript was published under the title *In God's Hand* ([ca. 1925]

https://doi.org/10.1086/674313 Published online by Cambridge University Press

2000). The book explains the origin of the universe and the nature of reality with at times algebraic succinctness and precision. The emphasis placed on some subjects is registered in the size and intensity of his penciled script. A typewritten account of a handwritten document, in this sense, loses information. This manuscript contains the seed of what we may call, for lack of better terms, Meher Baba's cosmogony and metaphysics.

All other extant works by Meher Baba are edited transcriptions of messages that he dictated or otherwise expressed to other scribes. Besides *In God's Hand*, the main corpus of his work is composed of a substantial number of books that were personally approved and published during his life, many of which were published under his name.[27] None of those works belong to this phase, although there are a number of published and unpublished accounts from this period in the form of diaries and lecture notes transcribed by his disciples.

Two handwritten notebooks, known as the "Intelligence Notebooks," were found shortly after Meher Baba's death in 1969. They appear to be either a careful transcription of dictations by Meher Baba or a fair copy of a missing manuscript he wrote by hand around 1926. The text is written in two standard composition books from the 1920s. The refined handwriting is similar to Meher Baba's in some ways, but it has been determined not to be his. These multiple framings could be the opening pages of a postmodern novel à la Eco. An extensively edited, annotated, interpreted, and illustrated version of the notebooks was published in a 746-page book titled *Infinite Intelligence* ([ca. 1926] 2005). Reading this version without referring to the original it is sometimes hard to distinguish the frame separating what the notebooks say from the way the editors have understood it.[28]

What is most interesting about this stage of intense writing productivity, curiously, is that a missing 300-page manuscript, "The Book" that Meher Baba wrote in 1925–26 and said would become "the universal Scripture," ends up containing more information, in the context of information theory, than all of Meher Baba's discourses and metaphysical explanations put together. This missing book acts as another minus device in his message; the first, as we shall recall, is the long-anticipated Word of Words that will "fill all cups with love."

27. I am thinking primarily *God Speaks* ([1955] 1973), *Listen Humanity* (1957), *The Everything and the Nothing* (1963), and the *Discourses* ([1967] 2007). These and various other works can be read at the Online Library of the Avatar Meher Baba Trust, http://www.ambppct.org/library.php

28. Christopher Ott's site provides access to the scans of the original notebooks as well as to a number of other helpful materials, https://sites.google.com/site/intelligencematerials/

https://doi.org/10.1086/674313 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Both significant absences are surrounded by mystery, and mystery is the possibility of endless information.

Shortly after starting his silence Meher Baba began working assiduously on this secret book, the whereabouts of which are today unknown. Bhau Kalchuri recounts that Meher Baba commenced "the mysterious work of writing a book" by hand on July 13, 1925, three days after his silence began (1988, 3:41). Baba ordered the construction of a table-like cabin—a cross between a large table and a tiny cabin, four feet wide, seven feet long, and about five feet high—in which he might continue his work on "The Book." On October 11, he moved into this table-house and finished "The Book" a year later. He did not reveal the contents of the manuscript and would not allow anybody to see it.

"The big book I have written will be the future Bible, Koran, Avesta and Veda, as it will be universally accepted by all castes and creeds. I have stopped writing anything after finishing this great work and hence it has force" (Kalchuri 1988, 3:954). After he finished it, "The Book" was placed in a black metal briefcase that Meher Baba took along during his travels. Baba gave Mahatma Gandhi some chapters of this book to read, telling him that it contained "all the secrets of the path" (Anzar 1991, 9). After Gandhi had read and returned "certain chapters of the 'Creation' series," written in English, he commented, "I suggest that such work ought to be written in Sanskrit or Gurujati because of the abundant and appropriate terminology available, and which is hopelessly lacking in all of English for it has not the fullness and force of the original word" (10).[29]

For long periods of time, "The Book" was kept in safe deposit boxes in banks in America and India. After Meher Baba's return to India in 1931, it was placed in the safe deposit box of a Bombay bank under the names of three of his disciples (Ramjoo Abdulla, Sarosh Irani, and Kaka Baria). According to Bhau Kalchuri, "The Book" remained there until 1959 when Ramjoo brought it back to Meher Baba. "What Baba did with it or what happened to it afterwards is not in fact known. Eruch was the last person to observe the transaction between Baba and Ramjoo" (Kalchuri 1988, 16:5544).

In the last days of Baba's life, writes Bhau Kalchuri, Eruch asked him, "'What about your book?' Baba assured him, 'It is in good hands.'" But he did not convey in whose. (Eruch was referring to papers originally written in 1925–26 that were missing, having not been seen since 1958; 1988, 20:6704).

29. The encounter happened aboard the S.S. Rajputana in 1931, during Baba's first of nine trips to the West. Gandhi and Baba would later maintain an interesting correspondence during the struggle for India's independence.

https://doi.org/10.1086/674313 Published online by Cambridge University Press

This missing book of spiritual secrets together with the defeated expectation of Baba's spoken Word of Words, are the two great signifying absences in his message.

3. Alphabet Board Phase (January 2, 1927–October 6, 1954)

In 1927 Meher Baba gave up writing by hand, with the single exception of his signature, "M.S.Irani," his birth name. At first he "began conveying his thoughts and feelings through hand gestures or by pointing to different English alphabet letters in the newspaper." Kalchuri adds, "up to this time, because of Baba's animated nature, the mandali had almost forgotten that he was silent, but when Baba stopped writing, they became keenly aware of it once again" (1988, 3:894).

One of the ways in which Meher Baba would communicate for the next twenty-seven years was by pointing to letters on an alphabet board, spelling words that an interpreter would then read out. "If you were to ask me why I do not speak," he said, "I would say I am not silent, and that I speak more eloquently through gestures and the alphabet board" (Kalchuri 1988, 13:4424). The alphabet board was, in effect, a portable communication aid. Meher Baba took it with him on his first trip to the West. A short 1932 film shows him swiftly pointing out letters with one finger to Charles Purdom in London. Despite Purdom's unfamiliarity with "reading" in this manner, Meher Baba was able to communicate effortlessly and without interruption.

It may seem strange that Meher Baba would chose this medium of communication, but what could call more attention to the alphabetic code than an alphabet board? Seen from the outside, say, from the point of view of creatures who use the sense of smell to communicate,[30] the amount of time that modern humans spend selecting alphabetic characters to communicate—typing, texting, sending e-mails—would also seem strange. There is a curious similarity between Meher Baba's act of "writing" by selecting alphabetic characters with a finger or fingers and writing on the small keyboard that appears on the screen of tablet computers such as the iPad. And we know that these ways of exchanging information will also be a phase in the evolution of human communication. The progression of Baba's signifying modes perhaps points to the next.

30. I am thinking about one of Lotman's examples from Gogol's "Diary of a Madman." In this story a dog tells another dog how strangely her owner acted before receiving a military medal. When he finally gets the medal, the general tells her: "'Look, Medzi, what do you suppose this is?' I saw some sort of ribbon. I sniffed it, but couldn't discover any smell at all. Finally I gave it a little lick. It was slightly salty" ([1973] 1976, 2).

https://doi.org/10.1086/674313 Published online by Cambridge University Press

His usual interpreter, Eruch Jessawala, explained the importance of context in Meher Baba's way generating messages with the aid of the alphabet board. Baba would point to one or two letters, and by reference to context, the rest of the message would follow. We should keep in mind, however, that a much more complex process of "intersemiosis"[31] was developing, one that involved subsystems and subcodes. Baba's use of the alphabet board was accompanied by a gestural language that would develop into a complex system that included signaling by hand, body gestures, nonvocal sounds, facial expressions, and eye contact.

4. Gestural Phase (October 7, 1954–1969)

Communication would only temporarily became more difficult when Meher Baba gave up his alphabet board. For the last fifteen years of his life, from October 7, 1954, until his death, Meher Baba expressed himself through his own gestural system. What took place is a lesson on how to create, rather playfully, an elementary gestural language based on the alphabetic code, that is, based on the correlation of a given *signans* 'signifier' to a *signatum* 'signified'.[32] Bhau Kalchuri offers us a description of the birth of Meher Baba's gestural language:

> One of the mandali would repeat the English alphabet, and Baba would stop him at a particular letter. A tedious ordeal, it took a lot of time to grasp what he meant. Sometime later, Baba began writing in the air with his fingers, but this, also, was difficult to follow. At times, he would write on the floor, which was also not easily deciphered.
>
> Gradually, after some months, Baba began making signs with his fingers, and a new language of gestures was created. He would form English letters with his fingers, occasionally using his ear for "E," and pointing to his eye for "I." The language, though, had no sign for the letters "J" and "F." When baba wanted to use these letters, one had to repeat the alphabet and Baba would nod his head when one came to "F" or "J." Baba was quite fast and adept in using this new finger-language,

31. Notoriously protean, the term *intersemiosis* has been used to describe a wide variety of different phenomena, loosing significance when it is stretched to such a point that it becomes a tautology for *semiosis*. We used it here to describe the interaction of particular *kinds* of semiosis, such as the production of meaning by means of alphabetic and nonalphabetic codes.

32. Over two thousand years ago the Stoics devised a threefold model to describe the sign: *signum, signans, signatum.* In the Latinized version of this tripartite division the verbal sign (*signum*) consists of a learned, conventional connection between a perceptible *signans* and an apprehensible *signatum.* This distinction is the source of Ferdinand de Saussure's division of the sign into *signifiant* (*signans*) and *signifié* (*signatum*).

https://doi.org/10.1086/674313 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> and some . . . mandali could read his gestures. In the men, Eurch was the quickest to recognize his signs, and among the women, Mani. (1988, 13:4564)

At the base of Meher Baba's gestural language, then, we find a series of associations; meaning is formed by the correlation between sets of elements in two series. This new gestural code was independent from any existing formalized gestural language (such as the sign languages of the deaf).

This elementary code would develop into a highly more complex and subtle system of signs. A swift gesture reproducing the habit someone may have acquired, say, a manner of walking, could become associated metonymically with a person and the name of that person, for instance. With these supplementary codes, the "alphabet" became broad, creative, and dynamic. Simplified signs for the letters of the alphabet were still used, but it took only one or two for the rest of the message to come through with the aid of supplementary gestures and reference to context.

In the introduction to Meher Baba's *Listen Humanity*, D. E. Stevens explains that "despite the apparent handicap of substituting fluid gesticulation for speech, Meher Baba's silence of thirty years' standing slowed the rate of his repartee not one whit. With only minor hesitations, Baba's gestures were caught and translated with uncanny ease by Eruch" (Baba 1957, 6). But to understand the graceful expressivity of Meher Baba's system, however, we must think not only of correlational codes, but also of the relational meaning created by the various signifying functions of the system.

Meher Baba's gestural language makes us think anew about a notion that goes back to Saussure, that is, the distinction between correlational codes and the code of the system (*code de la langue*). This corresponds to Eco's distinction in *A Theory of Semiotics* "between s-codes (or codes as systems) and codes *tout court*."[33] Meher Baba's gestural language starts from a set of learned codes, a wide and fluid repertoire—composed, as we mentioned, of additional subcodes and subsystems, which include, among others, hand gestures, body and facial expressions, nonvocal sounds, and eye contact.[34] The elements of this repertoire enter into a system of relations and correspondences that generates additional layers of meaning untranslatable by the languages of description—what Lotman calls a "game effect" ([1970] 1977, 67–8).

33. Eco 1977, 57 n 48; for a summary of this theoretical question see also 48–49.

34. American Leatrice Johnston described on video her experience of looking into Baba's eye when she was eighteen. This was during Baba's first visit to Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MmS8ed1XnQw.

https://doi.org/10.1086/674313 Published online by Cambridge University Press

An analogy with (absolute) music or (pure) abstract art would point to the codes of the system (*s*-codes) but leave out the correlational codes of Baba's gestural system. Meher Baba's language certainly had an abstract quality, particularly intriguing to those unfamiliar with its internal codes, but it also served a pragmatic function—it was intended for signifying in communicative interaction. His younger sister Manija Sheriar Irani (Mani) uses painting as an analogy. Recreating some of Meher Baba's signs with her hands, she explains: "he was like an artist, subtle with the brush, a stroke here, a stroke there."[35] The gestures for love and forgiveness were the same; the sign for fortune was an index finger pointed to the brow point.

But rather than a new code, it was the flow of a complex system that attracted most attention. It has often been said that Meher Baba's gestural language was beautiful, and what is beauty in a denotative gestural language that uses the full expressive potential of the body—with the exception of the vocal cords—but a dance of interacting registers? Decoding the sophisticated aspects of Meher Baba's gestural language was not a skill to be learned as one acquires a second language.

His primary interpreters, Eruch, Mani, and Bhau, among others, also had to use intuition to understand his messages. This is how the American Gary Mullins describes his experience of meeting Meher Baba for the first time at the East-West Gathering in Meherabad in 1962:

> We were each introduced to him by Eruch Jessawala, one of Baba's "mandali," a close disciple. One of Eruch's functions was to act as interpreter for Baba's hand gestures, as he was no longer using his alphabet board. . . . That afternoon, and throughout the entire gathering, it was amazing to watch Baba communicate through him. Many times, Eruch would have his back turned to Baba, yet words would still flow with a fluidity that was astounding. Sometimes, Baba corrected him or clarified some points. On those occasions, Baba snapped his fingers. The sound resounded through the hall like a pistol shot. Today, I am certain that even in his silence, Baba was the perfect communicator—by far the best I have ever known. (Kalchuri 1988, 18:5969)

The snapping of Baba's fingers shows the different functions that a simple sign, a message segment, may have at both ends of the communication channel.

35. Meher Baba, interviewed by Gary Kleiner, in the film *Welcome to My World* (Meher Prasad Films, 1982). There are a number of films on the internet showing Meher Baba's gestures as well as explanations by his primary interpreters.

https://doi.org/10.1086/674313 Published online by Cambridge University Press

From the side of the sender, Baba's end, the snap preforms a phatic function; it says, "Pay attention!" "Keep up!" with my communicative act. On the other end, for the receptor and decoder of the message (Eruch), the sign has a metalingual, glossing function. "Where did I go wrong on the interpretation of Baba's message?" "How should I revise my decoding and recoding?" Of course, Meher Baba could have made any other nonvocal sign to add or call attention to a message.[36]

"Many times, Eruch would have his back turned to Baba, yet words would still flow with a fluidity that was astounding" (Kalchuri 1988, 18:5969). Context may have allowed Eruch to complete Baba's message in a sort of gestalt. But to "watch Baba communicate through" Eruch implies that Eruch was as much part of the channel as the receptor of the message. Familiarity with expected patterns allows two persons to complete each other's messages, as when a wife anticipates what her husband is going to say, even before a word is spoken, by the body language that precedes the message.

There are other kinds of communication that fall outside the usual sensory systems. "You are reading my thoughts," we say. The chronicles of Meher Baba's are full of accounts of him doing just that, knowing what people were really thinking, and subtly letting them know that he knew. I would like to put these occurrences not in the context of an Infinite Intelligence but of an ordinarily well-developed human intuition that, *pace* Kurzweil, may also be the result of an era where exponential technological advances have simultaneously brought earthlings semiotically closer to each other and alienated them from meaningful interpersonal contact. Machines are not the only things that are evolving.[37]

The phenomenon of intuition, our sixth sense, may be an uneasy subject for Western semioticians because it appears to forgo signs. Yet it is at the very heart of semiotics. Martinet points out that the Greek root of the word used to name the science of the sign, *Sēma* (*σέμα*), can mean "sign, distinctive mark, or presage" (1973, 7; my translation). A hunch is a sign, and so too is a premonition. In Indian philosophies, intuition is considered to be a basic

36. He continued to occasionally play the drum. A photograph of him tapping casually on a large tin can made me think that he may just as well have started a complex tonal language based on a recodification of the alphabetic code into a system of sounds.

37. Ray Kurzweil (2005, 9) assures us of "the culmination of the merger of our biological thinking and existence with our technology, resulting in a world that is still human but that transcends our biological roots." Machines will achieve human-level intelligence and humans will merge with them, each benefiting from the other's attributes, a merger that would involve a complex exchange of semiosis.

https://doi.org/10.1086/674313 Published online by Cambridge University Press

faculty of the human being, a subtle, silent quality of our sensory system.[38] It is said to reside in the *manipura chakra*, the lotus of ten petals, which is located at the navel point, the solar plexus (the gut, visceral feeling). At another level, it is also associated with the *ajna chakra*, which resides in the brow point—the third eye.

Reflection and Silence

At various times Meher Baba talked about the different but complementary facets of consciousness associated with the Eastern and Western hemispheres of our planet. He said that in the New Age these qualities would cross over: Eastern souls would be born in the West, and vice versa. The East has been known for advancing and refining spiritual knowledge. The West has advanced technological and scientific knowledge. Meher Baba reminds us, as others have, that we are not human beings having a spiritual experience. Rather, we are spiritual beings having a human experience.

Meher Baba, a son of the Indian land who communicated for most of his life without speaking, sent nonverbal messages that were nonetheless intended to be transposed into a Western language, namely, English. In this roundabout way, which indicates spirituality and silence, he was able to explain some of the most ineffable aspects of the mystery of being. The way he sent this message, the progression of systems used in its transmission, the stages of a semiotic output—and this has received much less attention—was as much part of the message as the message itself.

Understanding this multisystemic message requires similar critical skills to those needed for discernment in an age of multimodal communication. In this sense, Meher Baba's message points to the science of signs and sign systems that sprung in Western soil. This incitement to semiotic awareness can be compared to the self-reflective operation that takes place in the *turiya*. As nother of Meher Baba's contemporaries, Ramana Maharshi (1879–1950) explains, the object of *turiya* is "of making this clear, namely that the Self is that which is different from them [the three states of waking, dreaming, and deep sleep (*visva, taijasa*, and *prajña*)] and which is the witness of these states that is called the fourth (*turiyatita*)" ([1972] 2004, 36).

The destiny of man is to know himself, that is, to realize his never-ending, expanding, hybridizing creativity. Similarly, the destiny of semiotic systems is to describe themselves, to evolve into metalanguages without loosing their

38. It must not be confused, as Eliade ([1954] 1969, 128ff) notes, with a Bergsonian type of intuition.

https://doi.org/10.1086/674313 Published online by Cambridge University Press

creative potential. At various times Meher Baba explained in great detail the hierarchical process of the evolution of consciousness that culminates with the human body. Humans are also at the top of the evolutionary chain in the production of sign systems. And in a sense we are also signs, for we are, and now I am using Christian thought, incarnations of the word from which the universe sprung. "'And the Word became flesh.' This is not the privilege of Jesus Christ. This is the fate of every person and of every word" (Panikkar, 6).

We are semiotic animals not because we are the only creatures that use sign systems to communicate (zoösemiotics studies the signifying processes of speechless animals), but because we can talk about these systems: we are the only species that has developed metalanguages to describe signs and sign systems at an abstract level.[39] Among these languages of description, semiotics has evolved as the science that studies the full spectrum of signifying processes. An early and exemplary metalanguage is rhetoric, the ancient discipline that reigned in the West for more than two thousand years (from approximately the fifth century BCE to the nineteenth century CE) and that evolved as an elaborate and formidable metalanguage that has discourse—the written or spoken registers of language—as its object language.

Meher Baba also explained in much detail the hierarchical development of spirituality, which he called the "involutionary process," a path leading to *turiya* and beyond, where, as Maharshi puts it, "the idea that the Self is a witness, that is, the fourth, also disappears" ([1972] 2004, 36). The universe of sign systems is also characterized by degrees of complexity. In anthroposemiotics it progresses, for instance, from basic coding systems, such as the alphabetic listing in the telephone directory (the prototypical list) to the highest semiotic process, which is to build creative systems capable of self-description.

There is also a hierarchy among languages of description. Metalanguages go from, say, a rudimentary grammar to those capable of describing complex, oftentimes self-reflexive systems, where meaning is the result of the simultaneous interaction of multiple codes and/or the interplay of various forms of semiosis—such as verbal, visual, and musical. This metasystemic capacity becomes increasingly important in an age when "screens" have a growing role in the production and distribution of messages.

39. Semiosis, of course, takes place way before the emergence of animals on Earth. Biosemiotics studies all signifying processes in the biosphere. Venturing into possible areas of sign activity in the inorganic world, John Deely (1990, 30) hypothesizes an even "more inclusive macroscopic realm of evolution in general," which he calls *physiosemiosis*. For a discussion of the limits of the semiotic realm, see Sanjinés 2013.

https://doi.org/10.1086/674313 Published online by Cambridge University Press

In screens (smartphones, iPads, computers, televisions, movie screens, etc.) the message often becomes a function of the interplay of numerous different forms of semiosis. Meher Baba's life coincides with the dawn of the information age. Communication modes that appealed to a single sense (the telephone, the letter) have been to a large degree displaced by intermodal and intersemiotic formats. Meher Baba's gestural language was primarily a language to be decoded visually, but as a communicative act it was part of an extended channel in which the vocal cords of his interpreter would complete the message. As we have seen, by making a sound (snapping his fingers), Meher Baba could call attention to "noise" in this extended channel, including distortions of meaning.

Words, and signs in general, can be used as instruments of truth or lies. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God," we read in one of the Biblical cosmogonies. And Christ, the embodiment of truth, is realized as the Word of the Father. On the other hand, Hamlet's "words, words, words," as Lotman observes, is "a synonym for fraud" ([1973] 1976, 10). We all know how much some politicians and governments are accustomed to lie. The question of signs and lies has concerned Eco, one of the great semioticians of our times, throughout his career. The theme of his most recent novel, *The Prague Cemetery* ([2010] 2011), is the fabrication of one of the most horrible lies of the nineteenth century, the *Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion.*[40]

Friedrich Nietzsche, who, incidentally, was one of the few people Meher Baba called "a genius,"[41] offered a unique angle on the myth of Babel (without mentioning it) as well as a lucid view of the question of truth in language. In an essay written during his tenure as a young professor of rhetoric at the University of Basel, he made the following observation: "the various languages, juxtaposed, show that words are never really concerned with truth, never with adequate expression; otherwise there would not be so many languages." Language is disconnected with "the 'thing-in-itself' (which would be pure, disinterested truth)" ([1873] 1989, 248); it is unconcerned with "what is *true in itself*, real and universally valid, apart from man" (251).

If Nietzsche had realized in one of his earliest essays that language was incapable of speaking the truth, why did he continue writing throughout his life? Because language also has a reflective capability, the very quality that al-

40. See also Eco 1994.

41. Nietzsche (1844–1900) and Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855) were both "prophets of their time but did not know what they were prophesying," Meher Baba said (Kalchuri 1988, 20:6534 n 1).

https://doi.org/10.1086/674313 Published online by Cambridge University Press

lowed him to realize its limits in relation to truth. It also has a creative power that is kin to song and play. Language lies, it builds a "pyramidal order according to castes and classes, a new world of laws, privileges, subordinations, boundary determinations"—an immense planking of societal obligations, a collective and mandatory lie to which man clings his whole life "in order to preserve himself" (250). But language also gives the spirited signifying animal the tools to tear down the great structure of concepts, of "scattering it, and then ironically puts it together again, joining the most remote and separating the closest, he reveals that he does not need the emergency aid of poverty, and he is now guided not by concepts but by intuitions" (255).

Has the proliferation of images ameliorated language's capacity to lie? After all, visual messages are understandable by speakers of all languages. They can also condense high amounts of information about people, places, and things. They have a documentary quality that gives them credibility. It would seem that the answer is yes, but images can just as easily be used to lie. Photographic images can lie by a simple process of selection and omission (like when a person selects his or her personal Facebook gallery) or by digital manipulation. And in combination with words they cannot only be used to lie, but to validate a lie.[42] The critical skills needed to discern the truth in intersystemic cases call for a higher degree of abstraction and sophistication.

The larger the number of semiotic systems that intervene in the transmission of a message, the higher the level of information it can provide, but also the further it can take us away from the pure, disinterested truth (it can be like entering a house of mirrors). A world in which multimodal messages can be transmitted globally (and indiscriminately scanned by governments) exacerbates Nietzsche's observation. It is becoming clear today that language is but one among a plethora of communication systems. The urge of power to control the transmission of information is faced with the endless creativity of humans to communicate by means of an expanding repertoire of sign systems and communication channels.

Perhaps it was Nietzsche's thought that led Eco to define semiotics as "the discipline studying everything which can be used to lie" (1975). He adds, "I think that the definition of a 'theory of the lie' should be taken as a pretty comprehensive program for a general semiotics" ([1975] 1979, 7). More than thirty years later, Eco suggested ironically that the Internet could prove to be the "most

42. The last illustration of Eco's *The Prague Cemetery* makes this point. My commentary is forthcoming in the Spring 2014 issue of the *Interdisciplinary Journal of Germanic Linguistics and Semiotic Analysis.*

https://doi.org/10.1086/674313 Published online by Cambridge University Press

mystical" of all vertigoes (2009, 360). Maybe, but what is already evident is that it has become a battleground for truth and lies.

If sign systems are defined by their capacity to lie, how are we to talk about, or otherwise represent, the ineffable mystery of creation? What is the significance of this ephemeral life? The way that Meher Baba answered these questions calls attention to the systems used to express this information, and by doing so, he called them into question. By transmitting his message through a progression of sign systems, shedding gross physical channels and elementary correlational codes for more subtle ones, Meher Baba points to the communicative power of the human body, and to silence—a manner of signifying that leads to reflection, and a reflection that points to silence.

Ancient Indian philosophies speak of a method of approaching truth by negation and elimination known as "*neti, neti*" ("not this, not that").[43] You are not this body; you are not the world that your consciousness experiences and which will vanish like a dream with the body; you are not the signs that come to you in those other dreams, the dreams of eyes closed; you are not the restful unconsciousness of deep sleep; you are not this; you are not that. You are here to become fully aware of all those phases, and by doing so, to know thyself.

"The dew-drop slips into the shining sea," yes, but not to disappear in undifferentiated oneness. Each drop "is one and the same Infinite Ocean and realizes itself as such: and yet it does so individually" (Meher Baba [ca. 1926] 2005, 219). The universe is an illusion, but an illusion needed by reality, much like a person needs a mirror to see her or his image. But it would be yet another illusion to think of realization as something that will happen in time or that sometimes happens.

SILENCE is always present. It is here now in us and in everything. We can listen to it in deep meditation, which is eternal speech. As Ramana Maharshi explains, "silence is ever-speaking; it is the perennial flow of 'language.' It is interrupted by speaking; for words obstruct this mute language. Lectures may entertain individuals for hours without improving them. Silence, on the other hand, is permanent and benefits all" ([1972] 2004, 48).

"By silence, eloquence is meant," he adds.

References

Abdulla, Ramjoo. (1922–29). 1979 *Ramjoo's Diaries: A Personal Account of Meher Baba's Early Work*. Walnut Creek, CA: Sufism Reoriented.

43. Meher Baba places it under the yoga of knowledge, *Dnyan Yoga* ([ca. 1926] 2005, 262).

https://doi.org/10.1086/674313 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Anzar, Naosherwan. 1991. "When Gandhi Met Meher Baba." Conversation recorded by Framroz Dadachanji. *Glow International*. February 2–12.

Arnold, Edwin. (1879) 1881. *The Light of Asia; or, The Great Renunciation* (*Mahâbhinishkramana*)*: Being the Life and Teaching of Gautama, Prince of India and Founder of Buddhism* (*as Told in Verse by an Indian Buddhist*). Boston: Roberts Brothers.

Baba, Meher. (ca.1925) 2000. *In God's Hand*. Myrtle Beach, SC: Sheriar.

———. (ca. 1926) 2005. *Infinite Intelligence*. Ed. Bhau Kalchuri, Meherwan B. Jessawala, and Ward Parks. Myrtle Beach, SC: Sheriar.

———. (1934) 1978. *Meher Baba on Love*. Ed. K. K. Ramakrishnan. Poona: Meher Era.

———. (1955) 1973. *God Speaks*. Binghamton, NY: Vail-Ballou.

———. 1957. *Listen Humanity*. Binghamton, NY: Vail-Ballou.

———. (1960) 1961. "Recent Messages of Meher Baba." *Awakener* 7 (3): 2–3.

———. (1961) 1962. "Baba Pearls." *Awakener* 8 (2): 5–10.

———. (1963). *The Everything and the Nothing*. Beacon Hill: Meher House.

———. (1964) 1982. *Meher Baba Calling*. Woombye: Sunland.

———. (1967) 2007. *Discourses*. 4 vols. Myrtle Beach, SC: Sheriar.

———. (1968) 1983. *The Secret of Sleep*. Poona: Lokasangraha.

Barili, Amelia. 2009. "Borges, Buddhism, and Cognitive Science." *Religion East and West* 9:47–58.

Bhajan, Yogi. 1998. *The Mind: Its Projections and Multiple Facets*. Española, NM: Kundalini Research Institute.

Blavatsky, H. P. 1888. *The Secret Doctrine: A Synthesis of Science, Religion, and Philosophy*. Vol. 1, *Cosmogenesis*. London: Theosophical Publishing.

Brabazon, Francis. (1959) 1990. *Stay with God: A Statement in Illusion on Reality*. Hong Kong: Bookbuilders.

Davy, Kitty. 1981. *Love Alone Prevails*. Myrtle Beach, SC: Sheriar.

Deely, John. 1990. *Basics of Semiotics*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Donkin, William. (1948) 1988. *The Wayfarers*. Myrtle Beach, SC: Sheriar.

Eco, Umberto. 1975. *Trattato di semiotica generale*. Milan: Bompiani.

———. (1975) 1979. *A Theory of Semiotics*. Trans. James Fentress. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

———. 1977. "The Influence of Roman Jakobson in the Development of Semiotics." In *Roman Jakobson: Echoes of His Scholarship*, ed. D. Armstrong and C. H. van Schooneveld, 39–58. Lisse: De Ridder.

———. (1993) 1995. *The Search for the Perfect Language*. Trans. William Weaver. Cambridge, MA: Blackwell.

———. 1994. "Fictional Protocols." In *Six Walks in the Fictional Woods*, 117–40. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

———. 2001. *Experiences in Translation*. Trans. Alastair McEwen. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

———. 2009. *The Infinity of Lists*. Trans. Alastair McEwen. New York: Rizzoli.

———. (2007) 2012. "Living by Proverbs." In *Inventing the Enemy—and Other Occasional Writings*, trans. Richard Dixon, 162–69. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

https://doi.org/10.1086/674313 Published online by Cambridge University Press

———. (2010) 2011. *The Prague Cemetery*. Trans. Richard Dixon. New York: Harcourt.

Eliade, Mircea. (1954) 1969. *Yoga: Immortality and Freedom*. Trans. Willard R. Trask. Princeton, NJ: Bollinger.

Grant, John. 1987. *Practical Spirituality with Meher Baba*. Milsons Point: Merwan.

Jakobson, Roman. (1958) 2009. "Linguistics and Poetics." In *Language in Literature*, ed. Krystyna Pomorska and Stephen Rudy, 62–94. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

———. (1965) 2009. "Quest for the Essence of Language." In *Language in Literature*, ed. Krystyna Pomorska and Stephen Rudy, 413–27. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

———. (1968) 1971. "Language in Relation to Other Communication Systems." *Selected Writings II*, 697–708. The Hague: Mouton.

Jessawala, Eruch. 1992. "True to His Promise, He Has Broken His Silence." *Glow International*. May 13–18.

Kalchuri, Bhau. 1988. *Lord Meher: The Biography of Avatar Meher Baba*. 20 vols. Myrtle Beach, SC: Manifestation. Revised online version, http://www.lordmeher.org/index.jsp.

Katz, Albert M., and Virginia T. Katz. 1983. "Introduction to Nonverbal Communication." In *Foundations of Nonverbal Communication: Readings, Excises, and Commentary*, ed. A. M. Katz and V. T. Katz, xv–xvii. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press.

Kurzweil, Ray. 2005. *The Singularity Is Near: When Humans Transcend Biology*. New York: Viking

Lotman, Jurij. (1970) 1977. *The Structure of the Artistic Text*. Trans. Gail Lenhoff and Ronald Vroon. Michigan Slavic Publications 7. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Graduate Slavic Studies.

———. (1973) 1976. *Semiotics of Cinema*. Trans. Mark E. Suino. Michigan Slavic Contributions 5. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Graduate Slavic Studies.

Maharshi, Ramana. (1972) 2004. *The Spiritual Teachings of Ramana Maharashi*. Boston: Shambhala.

Martinet, Jeanne. 1973. *La sémiologie*. Collection "Clefs." Paris: Seghers.

Nietzsche, Friedrich. (1873) 1989. "On Truth and Lying in an Extra-moral Sense." In *Friedrich Nietzsche on Rhetoric and Language*, trans. Sander L. Gilman et al., 246–57. New York: Oxford University Press.

Panikkar, Raimon. 2001. "The Power of Silence." *Point of Contact* 5 (2): 3–10.

Pease, Allan, and Barbara Pease. 2004. *The Definitive Book of Body Language*. New York: Bantam.

Purdom, Charles Benjamin. (1964) 1971. *The God-Man: The Life, Journeys and Work of Meher Baba with an Interpretation of His Silence and Spiritual Teaching*. Myrtle Beach, SC: Sheriar.

Rauch, Irmengard. 2008. *The Phonology/Paraphonology Interface and Sounds of German across Time*. New York: Lang.

Sanjinés, José. 2005. "Afterthought on Silence: Towards a Poetics of Self-Communication." *Studies in Communication Science/Studi di scienze della comunicazione* 5 (2): 229–40.

https://doi.org/10.1086/674313 Published online by Cambridge University Press

———. 2013. "The Extrasemiotic in Borges' *The Library of Babel*." *Latin Americanist* 57 (1): 65–78.

Singh, Mata Mandir. 2008 "The Unstruck Melody: Understanding the Science of Naad Yoga." *Aquarian Times* 7 (3): 4–5.

Zimmer, Heinrich. (1951) 1989. *Philosophies of India*. Ed. Joseph Campbell. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

https://doi.org/10.1086/674313 Published online by Cambridge University Press