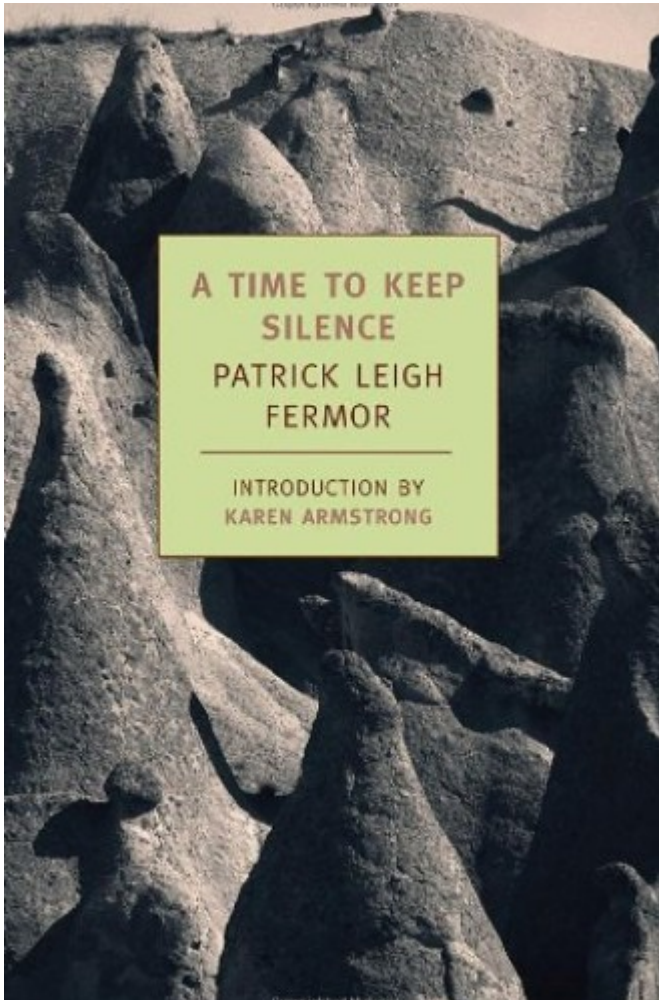


Adjusting to quiet

By [Debra Bendis](#)

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In Review



A Time to Keep Silence

by Patrick Leigh Fermor

New York Review of Books Classics

While on retreat recently, I picked up Patrick Leigh Fermor's *A Time to Keep Silence*. I

was making my own transition from noisy life and noisy mind to four days of retreat when I came upon Fermor's description of his retreat at a French monastery in the '50s.

My adjustment process isn't as difficult as Fermor's. For one thing, I'm retreating close to home (and not close to Paris, as is Fermor); for another, I don't find myself having to emerge from a "monsoon" caused by a drinking habit. (I sneak away from the monastery to find good coffee, but I have yet to sneak in a flask of Calvados.) In part because of his ignorance of monastic life and then his sudden immersion into it, Fermor's is a humorous but accurate account of the transition.

Here's Fermor after his first four days at the Abbey of St. Wandrille de Fontanelle:

My first feelings in the monastery changed: I lost the sensation of circumambient and impending death, of being by mistake locked up in a catacomb. . . .The mood of dereliction persisted some time, a feeling of loneliness and flatness that always accompanies the transition from urban excess to a life of rustic solitude. . . .the desire for talk, movement and nervous expression that I had transported from Paris found, in this silent place, no response or foil, evoked no single echo; after miserably gesticulating for a while in a vacuum, it languished and finally died for lack of any stimulus or nourishment.

Fermor ended up thriving at the monastery and focusing on the book he had hoped to write. He compares his coming with his going and says the departure was "ten times worse."

For more of Fermor and his visit to this and other monasteries, see [this post](#)--or pick up the book and get thee to a monastery/convent.