

# The Sound of Unsaid Words: Rethinking the Perception of Silence in Poetry

Dr. Mounir Ben Zid  
English Department College of Arts,  
Sultan Qaboos University, Muscat, Oman  
[mounir\[at\]squ\[dot\]edu\[dot\]om](mailto:mounir[at]squ[dot]edu[dot]om)

**Abstract-** *Most scholars and literary critics, whether adhering traditionally to the iron-clad rules of language or enhancing creativity seem to marginalize personal silence or fail to perceive it as a type of discourse. This research is an attempt to subvert established notions of silence and proposes a paradigm that reaches beyond the sound of words and the epidermis of texts. It identifies important hidden dimensions of language, calls for a deeper exploration of the language of silence, and argues that silence in poetry is not simply the absence or opposite of sound. It should be viewed instead as the beginning of listening, a means of communicating the unsaid and the unheard of language as well as the power which privileges the poet's desire for the impossible through "les mots jamais dit". Based on examples from poems, the paper will address silence as the eloquent outpouring of sound and meaning, and as a better language for the unsaid.*

**Key Words-** *Silence; Perception; Poetry; Language; Introspection; Unsaid Words*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

It has often been argued that nothing other than sound can be directly heard. This paper will advance the idea that there is a single exception. We hear silence, which is the absence of sounds and a successful perception of an absence of sound rather than a failure to hear sound. Hearing silence in the epistemic sense requires belief and differs from detecting silence by ear. Acoustically, silence is not a zero value sound and resembles white noise where there is an absence of discriminable tones (Dorman & Liberman, 1979).

Yet while aware of the obvious benefits of communicating with words, many scholars and literary critics are rarely sensitive to the absence of words and usually equate it with a lack of communication.

The discourse on silence has been dominated by the work of Deborah Tannen and Muriel Troike (1985) who adhere to the view that dematerialization, introspection, subjectivity and perspective-less-ness are the basis of the sound of silence, and that it is about listening to sound out of any context, musical, visual or otherwise. On these grounds, silence is not dead air, it is the will to create sounds in a hyper-reality because we start hearing things when there is nothing to hear as Salomé Voegelin puts it:

*Silence is not the absence of sound but the beginning of listening. This is listening as a generative process not of noises external to me, but from inside, from the body, where my subjectivity is at the center of the sound production, audible to myself. Silence reveals to me my own sounds" (2010, p. 83).*

Salomé Voegelin also argues that hearing is believing and is not limited to the heard but expands to the listener introspecting silence or hearing himself. In other words, silence is an internal experience and a personal poetic introspection of sound. In the quiet sounds of silence, he adds, "the listener becomes audible to himself as a discrete member of an audience" and that "silence provides the condition to practice a signifying language that takes account of its sonic base, it embraces the body of the listener in its solitude, and invites him to listen to himself amidst the soundscape that he inhabits" (2010, p. XV).

The meaningful silence discussed in this paper is distinguished from the cases in which an individual's refraining from speaking does not carry any meaning. Johannesen (1974), in this regard, points out that silence is a means chosen by a speaker for significant verbal communication alongside speech. It is not the listener's silence nor the silencing of the speaker.

To provide some clues on how silence should be perceived the study suggests to focus on the functions and meanings of silence from a poetic perspective. At a first stage, the paper examines the power of silence or the unsaid as poetic resource and its embodiment within the textual space as "areas of unprinted whiteness" (O'Connor 2012, p. 238). At a second stage, the study will demonstrate how through the words never said, a poet views the loss of words, incompetence and failings of language as a poetic resource to keep the impossible intact. Such loss of language is constitutive of the other language of silence, a form of speech which lies out of words' reach. At a final stage, the study will elaborate that silence, like thirst and forgetfulness, is presented as a kind of music,

cracks in language and the power which opens up space for the unsaid and the impossible.

## 2. SOUND AND SILENCE: TWO SIDES OF THE SAME COIN

In poetry, it is argued in this paper, silence is not a void and should rather be viewed as "one of the great arts of conversation" (Cicero as cited in Ephratt 2008, p. 1909). Romantic poets, in particular, view silence as a better language for the unsaid and they consider words and language as an awful power which defaces the poet's mind, "an ill gift", a counter spirit and even a poisoned vestment than an incarnation of thought. In reading poetry, more attention will be devoted to Wordsworth's elaboration of silence, of the unsaid that grows out of the written text, as the origin of the poem resisting to be cast into any one language and as the pure language which keeps the impossible untouchable and warrants the after-life of a text, its translatability, which is also a call to translate. The type of silence Wordsworth can hear consists of "internal demons freed from the noise of a busier soundscape they jump at [him] in his silent solitude" (Voegelin 2010, p. 85). Here, the poet does not translate but composes, produces and invents his own subjective silence.

Unlike the negative power of sound, silence privileges the poet's desire for the unsaid and the impossible through "les mots jamais dit (the words never said [My translation])" (Dolohau 1996 as cited in O'Connor 2012, p.11). This can be seen, for instance, in Wordsworth's *The Prelude* where the poet asks: "Yet wherefore speak? Why call upon a few words to say/ what is already written in the hearts" (Book V, ll. 83-85). In Book XIV of *The Prelude*, Wordsworth again privileges silence over sound when he describes the beauty of Mount Snowdon. Hinting at his self-silencing poetic ideal, he can hear both the silence and the inaudible sound of the landscape despite the quietness of the atmosphere.

With the power of silence, as Thomas Weiskel says, "Wordsworth's landscapes hover on the edge of revelation without revealing anything so that poems continue their circuitous quest for the intact and the impossible arrival at a closure" (as cited in Bloom 2007, p. 96).

Heather Dolohau echoes the same principle when she asks: "Pourquoi ne faisons-nous pas le plus important? Pour garder l'impossible intact (Why do not we consider the most important? To keep the impossible intact? [My translation])" (as cited in O'Connor 2012, p. 16). In Book V of *The Prelude*, Wordsworth also presents his longing for an immortal verse and his desire for his salvation of self through silence as

*an unknown tongue.  
Which yet I understand, articulate  
sounds,  
A loud prophetic blast of harmony,  
An Ode, in passion utter'd. (1940, ll:  
164-165)*

We can see in the above quoted passage Wordsworth's ambiguous engagement with the inadequacy of language and the sad incompetence of speech. By so doing, the poet aspires to silence as a different form of speech which is heard than being read, "a pure stream of words flowing fresh from the heart" (Bushell 2009, p. 101) rather than seeking to inscribe words and thoughts in writing. In other words, silence as a different type of speech is an unknown poetic language made up of articulate sounds, it is the speech that registers the sad incompetence of language and a silent discourse.

Wordsworth also refers to the sound of silence as a form of speech in "Tintern Abbey". In the opening lines of the poem, the soundscape becomes a matter of a subjective internal listening of external sounds. "slackening his thoughts by choice" (*The Prelude*, I, l. 64), the poet moves from hearing the sound of water to listening to the "ghostly language" (*The Prelude*, II, l. 307) of nature, the unheard, unborn and sweet sound of the mountain springs:

*Five years have passed, five summers,  
with the length  
Of five long winters! And again I hear  
These waters, rolling from their  
mountain-springs  
With a sweet inland murmur (ll. 1-4)*

In the pauses of deep silence, when nature is the obedient servant of the poet's subjective choice, hearing becomes an active personal act through the ears of the mind's eye. Unlike the bodily ear which is limited to hearing external sounds, the listener introspects the unheard notes of nature and the "strange utterance" of the wind like a "spectator ad participes":

*Oh! At that time  
While on the perilous ridge I hung alone  
With what strange utterance did the loud  
dry wind  
Blow through my ears! The sky seemed  
not a sky  
Of earth, and what motion moved the  
clouds! (The Prelude, I, ll. 346-350)*

In "Michael", nature becomes what the poet makes of it without immediate external excitement and the poet again invents his subjective personal silence. Here, the poet's sense of joy derives from the poet's exceptional ear which enables him to hear unborn sounds in nature and "subterranean music" and tones that ordinary men "heeded not":

*He was prompt  
And watchful more than ordinary men  
Hence had he learned the meaning of all  
winds  
Of every tone; and oftentimes  
When others heeded not, he heard the  
south  
Make subterranean music, like the noise  
Of bagpipes on distant highland hills. (ll.  
46-52)*

Relying on a subjective perception of death and despite the passage of time, Wordsworth introspects the natural landscape and uses his ear as a child to recall the sound of water, freeze time and listen to the sweet sound of the immortal sea:

*Hence in a season of calm weather,  
Though inland far we be,  
Our souls have sight of that immortal  
sea  
Which brought us hither,  
Can in a moment travel thither,  
And see the children sport upon the  
shore,  
And hear the mighty waters rolling  
evermore.* (Ode: Intimations of  
Immortality", ll. 162-169)

### 3. CONCLUSION

The present study has revisited the taken for granted meaning of silence and attempted to demonstrate that silence in poetry, should not be perceived as a void or absence of meaning and that the cracks within language are likely to reveal the unsaid and untouchable of a text since what a person does not say is as relevant as what is explicit in a text.

The present paper has also argued that although poetry is "voiceless", it "must yet become voice", that it contains within itself many spaces and silences that only speak through the reader. Another key concern of this study has been to show that silence, as perceived by Romantic poets like William Wordsworth, is not the absence of speech or sound but rather as another form of communicating the unheard and unsaid of language. The paper has also demonstrated that speech and silence represent two sides of the same coin and that they make an integral part of any single linguistic message exchanged between two different beings.

### REFERENCES

- [1] "Silence: Anything But." *Perspectives on Silence*, ed. by Deborah Tannen and Muriel Saville-Troike, 93-111. Norwood, NJ: Ablex, 1985.
- [2] Barltelt, G. 2010. "American Indian silence in House made of dawn". *California Linguistic Notes*, 1, 1-20.
- [3] Berger, C. R. 2004. "Speechlessness: Causal Attributions, Emotional Features and Social consequences". *Journal of Language and Social Psychology* 23 (2), 147-179.
- [4] Bloom, H. (ed). 2007. Bloom's Modern Critical Views: William Wordsworth. New York: Chelsea House.
- [5] Bruneau, T. J. 2008. "How Americans Use Silence and Silences to Communicate". *China Media Research*, 4 (2), 77-85.
- [6] Bushell, S. (2009). Text as process: Creative composition in Wordsworth, Tennyson, and Dickinson. Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press.
- [7] Dorman, M., Raphael, L., and Liberman, A. (1979). 'Some Experiments on the Sound of Silence in Phonetic Perception'. *Journal of the Acoustical Society of America*, 65: 1518-32.
- [8] Ephratt, M. 2008. "The functions of silence". *Journal of Pragmatics* 40, 1909-1938.
- [9] Ephratt, M. 2011. "Linguistic, Paralinguistic and Extralinguistic Speech and Silence". *Journal of Pragmatics* 43, 2286-2307.
- [10] Grice, H. P. 1975. "Logic and Conversation" in L. Cole and J. L. Morgan (eds.) *Syntax and Semantics*, Vol. 3: Speech Acts. New York: Academic Press.
- [11] Jakobson, R. 1960. "Concluding statement: linguistics and poetics." In: Sebeok, Thomas A. (Ed.), *Style in Language*. Wiley, New York, pp. 350-377.
- [12] Jaworski, A. (Ed.). 1997. *Silence: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- [13] Jaworski, A. 1993. *The Power of Silence: Social and Pragmatic Perspectives*. Sage, Newbury Park, CA.
- [14] Johannesen, R. 1974. "The Functions of Silence: A Plea for Communication Research". *Western Speech*, 38: 25-35.
- [15] Kurzon, D. 1995. "The right of silence: A Socio-pragmatic Model of Interpretation". *Journal of Pragmatics*, 23, 55-69.
- [16] Kurzon, D. 2007. "Towards a Typology of Silence". *Journal of Pragmatics*, 39, 1673-1688.
- [17] Nakane, I. 2006. "Silence and politeness in intercultural communication in university seminars". *Journal of Pragmatics*, 38 1811-1835.
- [18] Nudds, M. 2001. "Experiencing the Production of Sounds". *European Journal of Philosophy*, 9, 210-99.
- [19] O'Connor, C. 2012. "Un Manquement Comme Bien: The Unsaid as Poetic Resource in Heather Dollochau". *French Forum*, 37 (1-2), 237-255.
- [20] Rescher, N. 1998. "The Significance of Silence". *European Review* 6 (1), 91-95.
- [21] Selincourt de, E. & Helen Darbishire. (Ed.). 1940. *The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth*. 5 Volumes. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- [22] Selincourt de, E. (Ed.). 1940. *The Prelude or Growth of a Poet's Mind*. Second edition revised by Helen Darbishire. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- [23] Voegelin, S. 2010. *Listening to Noise and Silence: Towards a Philosophy of Sound Art*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic.
- [24] Wong, N. L. 2003. "The communicative functions and meanings of silence: An analysis of cross cultural views". *Journal of TagenBunka*, 3, 125-146.

- [25] Zuo, Y. 2002. *The Golden Silence: Pragmatic Study on Silence in Dyadic English Conversation*. Muenchen: LINCOM Europa.

### **Author Biography**

Dr. Mounir Ben Zid received his Ph. D in British literature from the Sorbonne University (France). His doctoral thesis was on the romantic poet William Wordsworth. He has published several articles on literary theory and pedagogy. He is currently Assistant Professor at Sultan Qaboos University (College of Arts & Social Sciences, Department of English - Oman).