



Abstract: Recent and competing definitions of “modernity” all point to a fundamental characteristic which has been explored and theorized time and again but deserves still more intellectual attention: the ambivalence towards language unparalleled by anything written before the nineteenth century. On the one hand, “modernity” has placed great faith in the power of the word; however, this faith has been overwhelmed with enough suspicion to undermine any potential linguistic stability. In its most extreme manifestation, this results in a phenomenon of linguistic anxiety, even paranoia, which threatens the semantic possibilities of poetics. The resulting threat of silence—

whether thematic, syntactical, metaphoric, or literal—is ubiquitous in modern poetry. As Eliot writes, “words, after speech, reach into silence.” An analysis of the general phenomenon of poetic silence and of two modern responses to it—

those of Mallarmé and Rilke—yield significant insights both into the idea of the “modern” as well as into the essence and inner machinations of modern poetry.

The Unspoken Possibility of Language:

**Poetic Silence in Stéphane
Mallarmé and Rainer Maria Rilke**

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Modern poetry in the West is notable for its self-conscious preoccupation with the limits of language.¹ The most cursory overview

¹ My use of the term “modern” refers to literature from early Romanticism on. As Walter Strauss writes: “Modern literature begins in the last decade of the

reveals the presence of this preoccupation in poetry as wide ranging as that of Stephen Mallarmé, Arthur Rimbaud, Georg Trakl, Rainer Maria Rilke, Paul Valéry, Wallace Stevens, and Octavio Paz—among many others. While some modern poets placed excessive expectations on the word, many others had linguistic suspicions critical enough to undermine the most secure of syntaxes. When the latter occurs, the poetic structure shatters and the poem opens itself to the possibility of silence.²

Scholars and critics have accounted for this modern phenomenon both philosophically and sociologically. George Steiner ascribes the emergence of this linguistic preoccupation in modern European literature and thought to the loss of a cultural and metaphysical centre within the Western experience (36). Erich Heller argues that the gaps and ellipses in modern poetry are due to the “absence from our lives of commonly accepted symbols to represent and house our deepest feelings” (29). Jacques Derrida blames the disintegration of modern literature on the loss of the grand metaphor of presence (13). These larger philosophical and sociological explanations, while fascinating, go far beyond the scope of this paper. However, an analysis of the modern phenomenon of poetic silence and of two responses to it—those of Mallarmé and Rilke—yield significant insights

eighteenth century: the spirit of this literature is characterized by an intense self-consciousness, undergirded by a complex sentiment of duality—the divorce of self from cosmos and division of self from self—along with a desire to heal the breach and usher in a new age and spirit” (20).

² As will become clear through my examination of Mallarmé and Rilke, I mean “silence” as a technique and theme rather than as a literal blank space. I investigate silence as a rhetorical figure or metaphor—a negative form of speech.

into the modern poet's self-exile into the realm of the unspoken and the linguistic potential it brings forth.

Before turning to Mallarmé and Rilke, however, it is important to point out that concerns over linguistic limitations and a fascination with silence as a linguistic possibility are integral parts of the development of Western literature. Steiner reminds us that this equivocal relationship with language is rooted in our mythic consciousness and has been a literary trope since the beginning of Western literature. Recalling earlier moments when writers stood on the edge of language unable to utter a word before the imponderable realities which confronted them, Steiner refers us to Dante in Canto xxxiii of his *Paradiso*, Wagner in Act II of *Tristan*, and St. John of the Cross before his mystical glimpses of God. His summary of the history of poetic anxiety is succinct:

From Medieval Latin poetry to Mallarmé and Russian Symbolist verse, the motif of the necessary limitations of the human word is a frequent one. It carries with it a crucial intimation of that which lies outside language, of what it is that awaits the poet if he were to transgress the bounds of human discourse. (39)

For writers like Dante, Wagner, and many of those before the end of the nineteenth century, the transgression of language, no matter how severe, was sure to result—eventually—in certainty, reassurance, and stability. For modern poets like Mallarmé and Rilke, however, what lies beyond words is something quite different—a confounding silence,

but one that brings with it the seeds of terrific expressive possibility. It is a suicide of sorts, but one that gives rise to rebirth.

The seeds of the modern preoccupation with the limits of language might be traced back to Hölderlin's 1802 elegy "Brot und Wein" ("Bread and Wine"), written in the midst of the instability created by Europe's struggle to gauge the meaning and magnitude of the French Revolution and the events that followed. Here, he foreshadows the self-conscious uncertainty about the role of poets and poetry—an uncertainty that was to imperil so many future poetic ventures. Martin Heidegger even goes so far as to suggest that one begins to sense something like modern *Angst* in the unsettling ambience of Hölderlin's poem (103). However, the central question posed by "Bread and Wine": "und was zu tun indes und zu sagen, / Weiß ich nicht, und wozu Dichter in dürftiger Zeit" ("and what's to do and to say in the meantime I do not know, and what poets are for when times are hard") (2:98) is eventually given a reassuring answer.³ The last section of the elegy bestows on the poet the powers formerly reserved for gods and mythical heroes: "Ja! sie sagen mit Recht, er söhner den Tag mit der Nacht aus,/ Führe des Himmels Gestirn ewig hinunter, hinauf" ("Yes! They say, justifiably, he reconciles daylight and darkness, / Steering the stars of the heavens") (2:99). The final formula given in the elegy to explain the role of the poet within the historical configuration of his Romantic age conforms to an image of the poet that would soon become familiar and widely shared by a

³ All translations are mine unless otherwise noted.

whole generation of Romantics—Schiller and Novalis, Coleridge and Shelley, Hugo, Baudelaire, and Rimbaud will, without exception, proclaim the poet as the new seer for the age. Naturally, this faith in the poet and poetry is supported by an equally strong faith in the powers of language. Not until almost a century later would the repercussions of Hölderlin's doubts be fully understood or appreciated.

Like the Romantics, the French Symbolists of the late nineteenth century initially clung to Hölderlin's belief that the aesthetic ideal could provide a new form of redemption. Charles Baudelaire pointed to the poet as the new synthesizer. His "Correspondences" (1857) views the poet as a universal translator, one endowed with the powers to translate the dark mysteries of the world and to synthesize them into comprehensible symbols. Rimbaud's initial faith in the powers of poetry was even more effusive, as is evident in his 1873 "Adieu" ("Goodbye"), the last section in the extended poem "Une Saison en Enfer" ("A Season in Hell"):

J'ai créé toutes les fêtes, tous les triomphes, tous les drames. J'ai essayé d'inventer de nouvelles fleurs, de nouveaux asters, de nouvelles chairs, de nouvelles langues. J'ai cru acquérir des pouvoirs surnaturels. (240)

I have created all festivals, all triumphs, all dramas. I have tried to invent new flowers, new stars, new flesh, new tongues. I believed I acquired supernatural powers.

The yearning for correspondences shared by both Romantics and Symbolists can be understood in terms of a revived and redefined belief in analogy, in the unity and “complementarity” of all things. However, this rather overconfident faith in analogy rapidly evolved into a realization that the poets’ perceived unity was a false one—that, in fact, plurality and fragmentation were the essence of all things. Verbal analogy could neither cancel nor neutralize differences. Baudelaire’s belief in correspondences ends in spleen, and Rimbaud’s record of the poet’s glorious aspirations in “Adieu” is followed by the bitter realization that poetry’s magic is not enough to offset the pettiness, stupidity, and utter banality of everyday reality. Prosaic reality begins to subsume sound and image. Rimbaud transforms the late nineteenth century poet into a measly peasant: “Moi! moi qui me suis dit mage ou ange, dispensé de toute morale, je suis rendu au aol, avec un devoir à chercher, et la réalité rugueuse à étreindre! Paysan!” (240) (“I! I who called myself a seer or an angel, exempt from all morality, I am restored to the earth, with a duty to seek, and rugged reality to embrace! Peasant!”). Significantly, while Rimbaud once took pride in his ability to express the inexpressible, he was also one of the first modern poets explicitly to recognize silence as a poetic option or, more accurately, necessity. Eventually, he concludes that poetry cannot deliver the transcendence he desires, so he rejects the poetic ideal outright and lives a life of self-imposed poetic silence. This realization similarly affects Mallarmé (resulting in his “crisis years” at Tournon), although he reemerges poetically bearing the indelible stamp of silence. As Walter Strauss writes, the modern poetic “fork”

exemplified by Rimbaud and Mallarmé results “either [in] a poetry of silence or a silence without poetry” (99). Rimbaud chooses the latter while, to the benefit of modern poetry, Mallarmé and Rilke choose the former. Blanchot writes: “Rilke, comme Mallarmé, fait de la poésie un rapport avec l’absence (“Rilke, like Mallarmé, relates poetry to absence”) (165).

Metaphoric and thematic silences fill Mallarmé’s later work—especially his long prose poem *Igitur* (1869). In this poem, silence is used to carve out a space of nothingness, of emptiness, in which the word is (re)infused with tremendous creative power.⁴ Mallarmé’s approach to silence is complex. He is not at all concerned with the Romantic focus on creative inspiration. Instead, he takes the opposite approach, that of negativity, elimination, and destruction. Like Hegel, Mallarmé seizes upon the notion of the absolute as *the* liberating principle. Unlike Hegel, however, Mallarmé’s absolute is self-contained and non-transcendent. Moreover, Mallarmé’s desired goal is an *aesthetic* phenomenon—a textual absolute which could bracket history by containing it between its covers, a totality that can be sensed only through its absence, rather than moving away from time and towards the metaphysical realm of static Being (of total synthesis and absolute presence). It is this absence that becomes the foundation for *Igitur*.

⁴ Pearson argues that for Mallarmé the role of the poet is to break the silence with language and to confer upon the contingency of circumstance a therapeutic semblance of formal and semantic pattern. Literature thus provides a “translation of silence,” “intimate galas” in which the mysterious drama of the human condition is performed for and by the reader on the stage of the verse poem, the prose poem, and what Mallarmé calls the “poème critique.”

Like most of Mallarmé's later poetry, *Igitur* stands at the verge of the unsayable, of utter negation and absolute silence. Perhaps more than any of his other poems, this one demonstrates the depth and breadth of silent space as a meaningful counterpart and witness to the language it paradoxically threatens to absorb. In *Igitur*, Mallarmé attempts to create a poetic absolute. However, he must first come to terms with the problem of finding a poetic syntax that can accomplish this virtually impossible task.

The drama of this densely complex prose poem begins in an old study lined with thick draperies that prevent exchange between the interior, controlled world of Igitur's room and the less controlled exterior world. It is midnight, the moment wavering between present and future—a time suggesting an absence of time—an appropriate context for a poem that attempts to capture the absolute. Igitur is alone except for the presence of night and the memory of his dead ancestors. His task is to destroy the infinite which has kept the family line in a state of dissipated becoming until now. Infinity must be controlled, even destroyed, since it is both a product and further cause of chance. The absolute can only be obtained once chance is eliminated: "L'infini enfin échappe à la famille, qui en a souffert—vieil espace—pas de hasard. Elle a eu raison de le nier—sa vie—pour qu'il ait été l'absolu. (434) ("The infinite at last escapes the family, which has suffered from it—old space—no chance. The family was right to deny it—its life—so that it stayed the absolute.") Between infinity (endless becoming) and static being (nothingness), Igitur begins his

“va au fond des choses” (“descent to the bottom of things”) (434). He intends to usher in the absolute by surrendering his lucidly conscious self to death—a state of ultimate elimination, absence, silence. If *Igitur* had chosen to follow the example of his ancestors, he would have lived and died a death determined by chance and contingency. Word and gesture, mentioned twice in “Argument,” are part of this imperfect existence shared by his ancestors. The end of becoming, the controlling of infinity, and elimination of chance, entails the “fin de parole et geste unis” (“end of word and gesture”) (240).

There is an inverse relationship, then, between language and the absolute from the very beginning of the poem. It is through language that the poet seeks to articulate a self-contained absolute, although he seems to imply from the beginning that this absolute cannot be verbally expressed. *Igitur* denounces all language as either archaic or anachronistic and, in any event, a thing of the past. The reader soon realizes that all language will be made useless by *Igitur*’s insistence on extreme acts—gestures, modes of being: all of them in the end unspeakable.

Significantly, *Igitur* denies the present moment in order to freeze (and thereby eliminate) time. In order to approach the absolute, the connection between past and future must be ruptured, the present moment frozen: “pour en laisser l’essence, à l’heure unie, faire le présent absolu des choses” (“to permit its essence, united to the hour, to form the absolute present of things”) (435). Moreover, in *Igitur*’s study, present time is connected to the sterile open book

sitting on the table: “plonge dans l’ombre, resume sa sterilité sur la paleur d’un livre ouvert que presente la table” (“plunged into the shadow, sums up its sterility on the pallor of an open book presented by the table”) (435).

The image of the open book is significant since books record history and belong to the past. Just as he does to his ancestors, Igitur closes and silences the open book in order to approach the absolute. He will eventually close it for the last time before lying down on the tomb. It is only when the book as historical record is closed, when absolute silence is attained, that the new book (this poem) can find the freedom and space it needs to create its own speech. For Igitur, old words, like old books and time itself, must be frozen, silenced, eliminated in order for new words to be heard—even if these new words border on the inexpressible and unspeakable. For now, he can only leave the study and abandon the open book. To freeze time and history, Igitur “QUITTE LA CHAMBRE ET SE PERD DANS LES ESCALIERS” (“LEAVES THE ROOM AND IS LOST ON THE STAIRS”) (435).

In this section of the poem, dealing with the chaos of the stairs, we begin to appreciate the discrepancy between Igitur’s extreme experiences and the inability of ordinary language to record these experiences. Here Mallarmé—through Igitur—reaches out to the absolute but achieves only linguistic redoubling and semantic confusion:

D'un côté si l'équivoque cessa, une motion de l'autre, dure, marquée plus pressante par un double heurt, qui n'atteint plus ou pas encore sa notion, et dont un frôlement actuel, tel qu'il doit avoir lieu, remplit confusément l'équivoque, ou sa cessation: comme si la chute totale qui avait été le choc unique des portes du tombeau, n'en étouffait pas l'hôte sans retour... comme si c'était soi-même, qui, doué du mouvement suspendu, le retournât sur soi en la spirale vertigineuse conséquente. (436-37)

If on one hand the ambiguity ceased, on the other a motion persists, marked as more pressing by a double blow which no longer attains its notion or not yet, and whose present brushing, such as must have taken place, confusingly fills the ambiguity or its cessation: as if the complete fall, which the single shock of the tomb doors has been, did not stifle the guest irremediably; and in the uncertainty the affirmative cast probably caused, prolonged by the reminiscence of the sepulchral emptiness of the blow in which clarity is confused, comes a vision of the interrupted fall of the panels, as if it were one who, endowed with the suspended motion, turned it back on itself in the resulting dizzy spiral.

Far from demonstrating silence, this passage demonstrates the opposite phenomenon: language has become more, not less, cumbersome. Here language undoes the eliminative work Igitur has thus far performed in leaving his study to eradicate time and history. The poem ends with the section entitled "IL SE COUCHE AU

TOMBEAU" ("HE LIES DOWN IN THE TOMB") (436-37) which is characterized by a spare, almost blank, style. By the end of this section, *Igitur* lies dead on the ashes of his family. As Sartre points out with reference to this section of the poem, self-destruction is the ultimate act of self-affirmation (156). When the space of the poem has been emptied of all presence, the poem is over, and we are left with the indelible image of what Mallarmé must have meant when he wrote that his whole work was created by elimination. By the end of the poem, it is clear to the reader that *Igitur*'s dream of the absolute is the dream of absolute absence, total silence. As Blanchot writes: "*Igitur* n'est donc pas seulement une exploration, mais une purification de l'absence" ("*Igitur* is therefore not only exploration, but purification of absence") (111). This last section consists of only two statements and a question. Death and the speech of dying cannot be captured in words. *Igitur* eliminates himself and language defers to silence. This ultimate elimination and the silence which follows bring about an internally created absolute.

Silence in *Igitur*, then, functions as a syntactical (as well as thematic) element. When language, asked to express inexpressible experiences (death from the point of view of death, the voice of the night, etc.), is pushed against its limitations, the outcome is the end of speech. When the poem is asked to articulate ideals of purity and nothingness—ideals which ordinary language cannot describe without compromising or tarnishing them—the poetic syntax capitulates to silence. Whereas Mallarmé crafts a syntax so controlled and precise

that only silence can follow, the syntax of Rilke's *Sonette an Orpheus* ("Sonnets to Orpheus") asserts that fluidity is more valuable than precision. Rilke's poetic speech neither affirms nor denies as Mallarmé's does; instead, the voice of the *Sonnets* takes a middle ground—fluid, malleable, dependent on the silence surrounding it in order both to mean anything at all. At the risk of perpetuating a cliché, one might regard Mallarmé's silence as a destination while regarding Rilke's as a journey. For Rilke, silence is a necessary component of speech itself.

The air through which the poet breathes the world in Sonnet II, 1 becomes the "Rinde, / Rundung und Blatt" ("Rind, / Swell and Leaf") of his words (*Selected Poetry*, 226-27). Air and space, which allow expansion and free movement of things and beings, are an essential complement and counterpart to the songs of Orpheus. Without this encasement of silence, the words of the poet cannot be heard. The first sonnet makes silence a prerequisite for true hearing. Confronted with the power of song, forest and creatures are attentively and expectantly silent, not out of fear but, according to Sonnet I, 1, in order to be more receptive to the message of the god: "nicht aus Angst in sich so leise waren / sondern aus Hören" ("not from fear, that they were so quiet in themselves, / but from simply listening") (*Selected Poetry*, 226-27).

Commentators have noted the significance of silence in the *Sonnets*. Strauss writes that "true Orphic space is silent space, and Orphic song is but the celebration of this silence as inwardness" (202) and Linda

Pickle notes, "To hear properly and truly is as important as to say or sing truly, and it requires the same intensity and an equal knowledge of the unity of being" (594). The *Sonnets* can be divided into roughly two categories—those which are primarily concerned with listening ("Hören"), and those which have as their principal object the definition of proper poetic speech. However, these categories occasionally merge into a single sonnet. In Sonnet I, 1, for example, a tree of sound rises in the hearer's ear, but this ear soon encompasses all of nature. The world welcomes Orpheus's song by reducing its own noises to silence:

Da stieg ein Baum. O reine Übersteigung!
O Orpheus singt! O hoher Baum im Ohr!
Und alles schwieg. Doch selbst in der Verschweigung
Ging neuer Anfang, Wink und Wandlung vor. (*Selected Poetry*
226-27)

A tree ascended there. Oh pure transcendence!
Oh Orpheus sings! Oh tall tree in the air!
And all things hushed. Yet even in that silence
a new beginning, beckoning, change appeared.

Repeated images of hearing, stillness, and silence pervade both parts of the sonnets. Sonnet I, 2, which addresses specifically the death of the young dancer, Vera Ouckama Knoop (to whom the sonnets are dedicated), contains the image of the girl sleeping in the poet's ear. The passive activity of sleep, counterpoised to the organ of hearing,

immediately suggests the notion of silence. In Sonnet I, 15, the dancing girls are described as ("summen" or "humming"); Sonnet II, 8 describes the children speaking silently ("sprachten als schweigende"); in Sonnet II, 13, Nature is "dumpfen" ("muffled"); the fountain mouths of Sonnet II, 15 are said to be "ein Ohre der Erde" ("an ear of earth"); and in Sonnet II, 16, we are told that Orpheus sings silently ("schweigend") to the dead; only we who are alive need audible sounds to hear him.

Away from any forests, the technological monsters of our twenty-first-century world are constantly threatening to drown out real sound. Explaining that "Zwar ist kein Hören heil / in dem Durchtobtsein" ("True, no hearing is whole / in all the turmoil"), Sonnet I, 18 addresses the dangerous new "dröhnen und beben" ("droning and throbbing") of the machine. Unlike nature, which unanimously understands the importance of silence, these potentially useful but worrisome products of technology are constantly threatening to drown out meaningful sounds. Sonnet II, 10 voices a similar concern, but here the inhuman voice of the factory ("stiller Fabrik" or "silent factory") is implicitly contrasted with the silence of the human voice which withdraws before the unsayable.

Interestingly, music fills the space left unoccupied by fleeting words incapable of naming the "reinen Kräften" (pure Forces") of existence (II, 10). Through music, the stones once hurled by angry maenads to tear apart the god of poetry are transformed into a grotto for the ever-singing Orpheus. What emerges is an ideal balance between

speech and silence, imperiled only slightly by the memory of the distant but resolute machine in the earlier stanzas:

Worte gehen noch zart am Unsäglichen aus...

Und die Musik, immer neu, aus den bedendsten Steinen,
baut im unbrauchbaren Raum ihr vergöttlichtes Haus. (*Sonnets to Orpheus* 88-9)

Words still gently fade before the unsayable...

And music, ever new, out of most tremulous stones
builds in unusable space her deified house.

Silence offers the possibility of understanding nature's essence, described as "dumpfen und stummen" ("muffled and dumb") in Sonnet II, 13. In the Thirteenth Elegy, the mouth's wordless discovery of fruit occupies the space normally reserved for words: "Wo sonst Worte waren, fließen Funde, / aus dem Fruchtfleisch überrascht befreit" ("Instead of words, discoveries flow out / from the ripe flesh, astonished to be free") (107-08). As Hermann Mörchen notes, these images become metaphors for the inexpressible (144).

Faced with the experience of the unnamable and inexpressible, the poetic voice must, at times, capitulate to the silence of the unspoken. For Rilke, however, the inability to find a proper name for certain things or events is not a failure, but recognition of silence pointing to that which cannot be uttered. In the *Sonnets*, there is an acceptance of imprecision as regards language and labeling. In Sonnet II, 6, we do not know the rose's true name despite centuries of repeated

attempts to label it, yet the flower's fragrance continues to converse with us: "Dennoch, wir wissen nicht zu nennen, wir ratten... / Und Erinnerung geht zu ihm über, die wir von rufbaren Stunden erbatem." (Even so, we don't know what to call it, we guess ... / And memory goes over to it / that we have asked from hours we could tell") (*Sonnets to Orpheus*, 80-81).

The critic Gemma Corradi Fiumara suggests that the ability to prefer silence in the absence of the right words to white noise (or the wrong words) denotes a willingness to accept the "Other" as truly other, thereby ushering in a truer form of language:

the term "silence" is also needed, paradoxically, if we want to indicate a desire to abandon automatic verbal sequences that fill our games; this same willingness is also, in my opinion, the origin of a more mature capacity for recognizing and tolerating the gap (distance, or hiatus) between the self and the others, between language and reality. We must recognize that this hiatus is what makes necessary and possible the development of our more authentic dialogical interactions. (103)

These insights provide a way of understanding the connections between Rilke's positive conception of silence and his insistence that human beings substitute exchange and complementarity for the more common practices of imposition and exclusion in dealing with their world. Wittgenstein's now famous phrase, "Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent," written a few years after the *Sonnets*, echoes Rilke's sentiments towards refusing to define in

words that which ought to remain indistinct, unsaid, or merely suggested. The need to adopt a tentative, provisional attitude towards language suggests Rilke's willingness to let things speak through a human voice, to become a mouthpiece for the silent, but not speechless, world. Silence, then, is seen in the *Sonnets* as the origin and final horizon of poetic language. It is from this stillness that words emerge and towards this perfect quietude that they aim. Real song, according to Sonnet I, 3, is "Ein Wind" ("A Wind").

Its depth and omnipresence notwithstanding, the silence of Rilke's *Sonnets to Orpheus* is undoubtedly a less ominous silence than that of Mallarmé's *Igitur*. There is nothing flexible in the final silence of *Igitur*'s tomb. On the contrary, in Rilke's sonnets, silence comes and goes. It surrounds words and nonverbal activities without threatening to cancel them; it gently comes to the poet's rescue when words fail him. Because it is a less absolute silence than that of Mallarmé, it is also less fearfully real. Of Mallarmé's poetry one remembers, long after reading it, the frozen breath of nothingness palpable in the unbridgeable vastness of the unsaid. With the Rilke of the *Sonnets*, however, one feels drawn and sheltered by the poet's silence, perhaps because, like the dancer of Sonnet I, 28, one knows that at the right time it will break forth in sound or motion. ©

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