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**The Writing of Silence, Absence, and Ineffability. An Introduction to**

***Texts with no Words: The Communication of Speechlessness***

The perception of speechlessness and the absence of words is closely related to their exact opposite: extensive speech and overabundant writing. Therefore, silence, muteness or emptiness, just to name some of the synonyms, are highly prolific concerning the studies of literary writing. Apart from outlining the chosen papers of this issue, the introduction gives a short presentation of the phenomenon and its literary relevance. Based on Wittgenstein's concept of language as a medium that *tells* and *shows*, this introduction argues for silence as a primary concept in considering literary writing of speechlessness and texts with no words as a combination of the sayable, the conceivable, and the perceptible. Accordingly, different techniques to write silence or absence are considered. As the introduction suggests, the variety of modern poetics can be divided into forms of reduction, extension, and ambiguity. Furthermore, following Susan Sontag's and Jacques Rancière's aesthetic considerations on modern literature, the poetological qualities of speechlessness are discussed in their relation to representation, expression, and the materiality or transmedial adaptation of texts.

As commonly known, to perceive the lack of words or speechlessness in literature requires a contrastive presence of written characters, images or lines, or an extensive speech. This interrelation of presence and absence unfolds a paradoxical interaction that allows discerning one by concealing the other, as will be illustrated by the papers of this special issue. To introduce the chosen literary motif, these preliminary remarks are divided into four parts: The aim is, firstly, to circumscribe the phenomenon of speechlessness or silence; secondly, to mention some of the writing modes of silence; thirdly, to touch upon the aesthetic particularities of writing speechlessness and texts with no words; and fourthly, to give an overview of the papers collected in this issue.

Modern literature is rich in a variety of cultural expressions of silence. The literary themes range from physically or psychologically caused muteness to silence as a symbol to express existential crisis of grief, shock, or the feeling of emptiness. Moreover, the lack of words can express human behavior in the confrontation with individual or social borders. It can indicate an inability to speak as well as an intentionally chosen attitude of the speaker to express e.g. politeness, humility, consent, seriousness, contempt, or mockery (cf. Alloa / Lagaay 2008; Assmann 2013; Hahn 2013; Nibbrig 1981: 11–50). In this context, both speech and its absence can – in the case of intentional silence – demonstrate the power of the speaker, whereas in the case of forced silence, speechlessness equates with the speaker's powerlessness.

As will be shown in this issue, besides representing cultural expressions of speechlessness, the writing of silence or speechlessness bears an auto-referential turn. Indeed, by pointing at the absence of reference, words indicate the conditions of language. Hence, writing silence, absence, or ineffability allows us not only to sketch the literary communication of speechlessness with or without words, but also to discuss the question of how (un)important words are to texts and to communication in general. The study of writing speechlessness or texts with no words makes it possible to consider the spatial and visual character of the texts and to dissociate writing from a simplified notion of text as the spoken language's trace. Although the writing strategies might vary within the selected genres or media – as trans-medial adaptations of speechlessness show in particular (cf. Wolf 2016: 8) – the texts' reference to their mediality is a common ground. Especially in modern literary texts, writing is exposed in an explicit or implicit manner by scenes that question different media and technical conditions of writing to communicate speechlessness such as language, image, or sound, but also writing utensils such as paper, ink, or typewriter (cf. Schmitz-Emans 1995: 41). Accordingly, texts with no words enlarge the notion of literature as a temporal art form, pointing rather to their spatial dimension. The art of writing is not only bound to language, as writing practices emphasize the intricate relation between the sayable, the conceivable, and the perceptible by accentuating writing as a particular mode of literary speech (cf. Rancière 2011). Apart from singular studies of the poetics of silence – from Stéphane Mallarmé, Samuel Beckett or Marguerite Duras, for instance, – the corresponding aesthetics of this writing of silence or speechlessness is still underexplored, especially if one considers the role of inter- and transmedial presentations or the material aspects of writing.<sup>1</sup>

Treating the question *What do or don't we speak about?* inevitably leads to the aligned questions concerning text-production: *What do or don't we write about? And if so (if not), how?* The communication of speechlessness points towards the differentiation of speaking and saying and recalls Watzlawick's phrase, that "no matter how one may try, one cannot *not* communicate. Activity or inactivity, words or silence all have message value" (Watzlawick / Beavin / Jackson 1967: 49). Wordless texts instead present different modes of what can be written without literally

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1 For studies which primarily scrutinize an aesthetic of silence cf. Sontag (1969) and Rancière (2011); with a particular interest in transmedial forms analyzing absence in literature and music cf. Wolf (2016) and from a comparative studies' approach cf. e.g., La Motte (2004).

being mentioned, and therefore show various techniques of how the unspeakable can be communicated in texts. In certain respects, the literary presentation of speechlessness points to the preconditioned differentiation between speaking and writing, and, referring to Jacques Derrida's observations on '*différance*', these texts outline the surplus of writing compared to speech. Furthermore, the literary communication of speechlessness not only refers to missing words, but specifies besides these linguistic components the literary writing of silence as a particularity of auto-critic poetics. It points at language as the medium of expression, at speech as the act of enunciation, and at writing as the mode of communication that can operate with mimetic representation of oral speech, with the expressive power of the words, or with the interplay of words, images, gestures, and as a result, can shape the writing scene<sup>2</sup> itself. Analyzing speechlessness and texts with no words, thus, exposes a polyphonic discourse of a wide range of cultural practices and specific aesthetic modes to express speechlessness. Such analyses also explore the importance of the material aspect of the texts in the form of blank spaces, the materiality of the page as rhythmical structure of the writing and reading process, or the play with punctuation signs.

### 1. The Phenomenon of Silence

Silence or the lack of words is a widely spread human phenomenon that is studied in a variety of disciplines from philosophy to psychology and from theology to linguistics. Research comprises stoic silence, traumas as well as autism or aphasia, or the mystic silence in contemplation (cf. La Motte 2004: 12). Roland Barthes studies silence in relation to the 'sacred nothing' of satori, linguists relate it to the zero signifier in communicative situations, whereas Michel Foucault relates reflections on speechlessness to thinking modes of the 'Outside' or Michel de Certeau to the 'Unforgettable' as an effective practice without discourse (cf. Schaub 2008: 238). The study of the cultural codification of speechlessness and the ability of art to express the ineffable is as old as modern literature (cf. Assmann 2013; Cooper 2009; Nibbrig 1981). Nevertheless, the different cultural functions of speechlessness –

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2 The 'writing scene' ('Schreibszene') delineates a relationship of the language system, specific manual techniques, and physical gestures including culturally embedded practices, gestures, and preparations (cf. Campe 2012: 276–282, also Campe 2005). To distinguish writing scenes from writing's auto-reflection in terms of a configuration of language, instrumentality, and corporeality, Martin Stingelin proposes the term '*Schreib-Szene*' (cf. Stingelin 2004: 15). Both concepts refer to modern literature and contribute to an aesthetic of silence, following Rancière.

that in everyday life could range from prudence, artificiality, consent, seriousness, or mockery to the expression of an individual mood – will not be discussed in this issue. In contrast, by analyzing writing modes of speechlessness and texts with no words, the papers delineate the characteristics of literature as a combination of language, text as medium, and writing as reconstructable trace of a process. This notion gains importance in the 20th century, when writers in their critique of language rethink language's referentiality and the making of meaning within language (cf. Alloa / Lagaay 2008: 8).

After the observation of language's impotence, philosophers like Ludwig Wittgenstein and Theodor W. Adorno prepare the theoretical turn towards the force of the speech act and language's capability to communicate even the unspoken (cf. *ibid.*: 8–10). Scholars often mention Wittgenstein's perspective on silence with his famous last words of the *Tractatus logico-philosophicus* (1921): "What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence." (Wittgenstein 2018: [7])<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, the *Tractatus* already proposes a productive side of silence and speechlessness by indicating a differentiation of telling and showing as two communication forms in the use of speech. Hence, the meaning of texts unfolds between the sayable, the conceivable, and or the perceptible: "What finds its reflection in language, language cannot represent. What expresses *itself* in language, *we* cannot express by means of language." (*ibid.*: [4.121])<sup>4</sup> In the context of this issue, I would like to emphasize Wittgenstein's allusion to language's aptitude for *telling* and *showing* something, as both can be related with a modern notion of literature and its tendency to silence.

As authors at the turn of the 20th century show, the reconsideration of language's limits occurs within the interchange between the arts. Writers like Stéphane Mallarmé, for instance, constantly search different modes to transmit meaning without its direct formulation. Within this process they reconsider the material and medial character of literature. By adapting the aesthetic qualities of non-referentiality from the poetics of modern dance, of the play with sounds and rhythms from the poetics of music, or of the visualization strategies from painting, writers create new literary forms out of language's (non-)referentiality, literature's potential to auto-reflexivity, and the visual trait of the written text (cf. La Motte 2004: 53).

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3 "Wovon man nicht sprechen kann, darüber muß man schweigen" (Wittgenstein 1969: 83 [7]).

4 "Was sich in der Sprache spiegelt, kann sie nicht darstellen. Was *sich* in der Sprache ausdrückt, können *wir* nicht durch sie ausdrücken" (Wittgenstein 1969: 33 [4.121]).

## 2. Modes of Writing the Unsayable or the Absent

As absence can only be perceived in contrast to presence, literature sets textual mechanisms which capture the attention of the reader against those that create spaces of the not-said, the not-reference, or suspend the conventional sense with the objective of enriching the signification (cf. *ibid.*: 117). Writers can operate with Iser's '*Leerstelle*' (blank), which refers to the lack of information, but also to the materiality of the 'blank page'. Considering the materiality and mediality of the texts, meaning is processed by the interplay between linguistic signs and iconic symbols or the conscious treatment of typographs and the blank space of the page. One of the visually perceptible typographic manifestations of silence can be seen in the use of punctuation signs. While blank spaces result out of the non-written, the punctuation signs and the typographic emphasis, such as with capital, bold, or italic letters, transmit the unsayable via their palpable forms. Unlike typographical emphasis, the poetic functions of the punctuation lie in the rhythmical structuration of the texts, as the suspension points, the dashes, the colons, or the commas not only separate the discourse and mark the discontinuity but also serve as connections for the different parts of the text.

Apart from these physically perceivable silences, the variety of writing strategies can be discerned as techniques of reduction, extension, and ambiguity. Analogous to its topic, the writing of speechlessness and the not-said can appear under the condition of a reduced verbal expression, a concise style, which could even lead to unfinished phrases and skipped personal pronouns. In narrative texts, the protagonists can be portrayed as empty or mute. Authors can refer to the nonverbal speaking in the sense of tacit knowledge by highlighting, for instance, the description of a living room, its dishes, and the dinner served in realist novels. This form of writing of speechlessness approaches the referred silence, absence, or ineffability via mimetic representations.

In contrast to strategies that reduce or provide substitutes for the linguistic material, in palimpsests the excess and overlapping of signs, formulas, or gestures can be used to produce a semantic overdetermination (cf. Gronau / Lagaay 2008: 14). Overlapping writing modes not only transform different 'voices' into pure 'noise', they also disrupt the frame of referentiality of the text. Rhetorical techniques such as repetition, hyperbole, or augmentation can be discerned. Among the many silent texts of Beckett, the logorrhea of Lucky in *En attendant Godot* (1952) serves as

example to illustrate a silent universe created out of an absurd communication (cf. La Motte 2004: 189).

Moreover, writers also introduce ambiguous speech to communicate speechlessness or silence, operating with tropes and rhetorical techniques such as antithesis, oxymora, paradoxes, or irony. Like all modes of indirect expression, the metaphors, the allusion or the suggestion are kinds of eloquent silence, as they refuse to name or to define exactly and nevertheless indicate something (cf. *ibid.*: 62). Among the many strategies of paradox or ambiguous enunciations, irony and the functions of quotes also bring a certain ambivalence to the expression because they both say other than what is expressed literally.

### 3. Writing and Speechlessness as Aesthetic Paradigms

Besides the different cultural expressions of speechlessness, silence, or absence, writing speechlessness and texts with no words also indicates aesthetic concepts of modern art. Most prominent as contributions of an aesthetic of silence in French Literature are, e.g., Gustave Flaubert's attempt to write 'a book on nothing', Stéphane Mallarmé's project of *Le Livre* to fix the Idea, or Marcel Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu* (1913), a novel about the becoming of a novelist. Romantic, Modernist and contemporary poetics prove especially rich in writing silence and contribute to a particular aesthetic.<sup>5</sup>

In her essay *The aesthetic of silence* (1967), Susan Sontag distinguishes different forms of writing: one such form is art as an expression of human consciousness. This understanding contrasts with her second view: that art is related to self-estrangement. Considering speechlessness, the third aesthetic concept of Susan Sontag is most interesting, insofar as it is based on a post-psychological notion of consciousness that relates art to mysticism (cf. Sontag 1969: 4f.). Art is interested in "the silence beyond speech" and hence forms an aesthetic that tends toward "anti-art, the elimination of the 'subject' (the 'object', the 'image'), the substitution of chance for intention, and the pursuit of silence" (*ibid.*: 5).

More extensively, Jacques Rancière with *La parole muette* (1998) proposes silence as a specific mode of modern writing which combines the perceptible, the

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5 The authors and works analyzed in Schmitz-Emans (1995), Nibbrig (1981), La Motte (2004), and Rancière (2011) are mostly taken out of French, German, and English Literature such as Goethe, Kleist, Mallarmé, Hofmannsthal, Kafka, Beckett, Sarraute etc.

conceivable, and the sayable with the written characters and the performative qualities of the word. In this way, literature's muteness questions the representative and the expressive modes of writing. Whereas a poetics of representation tends towards the mimetic presentation of actions and a poetics of expression towards the performative qualities of the word, the poetics of writing contrasts "the incarnate Word and the mute-loquacious letter" (Rancière 2011: 99). With reference to the Platonic *muthos*, Rancière describes writing as a regime of speech. Thought as a system of coordination, a regime of art relates the creative processes of the artists with the modes of perception and the necessary forms that permit to think what the artists are making (cf. Rockhill 2011: 7). Under consideration of this extensive definition of art, speechless literature is seen as a practice of speech. Writing cannot be merely defined

as the tracing of signs in opposition to vocal pronunciation but as a particular staging of the speech act. Writing always traces much more than the signs it aligns; it also traces a particular relation of bodies to their souls and to other bodies, and of the community to its soul. It is a specific distribution of the sensible, a specific structuring of a common world. (Rancière 2011: 94)

Thus, it is not only self-referentiality of language that distinguishes modern silent literature, but also a particular tension between the letters and writing as culturally embedded practice. Moreover, it is to suppose that writing speechlessness and texts with no words relies on a *mise-en-scène* of the writing process that arises from the interplay of elements of a poetics of representation and a poetics of expression. The following papers will touch on the question of how these different poetics interrelate and could support a contemporary aesthetic of speechlessness, including cultural expression of speechlessness in North and South America, Europe, and Africa.

#### **4. Texts with no Words: The Communication of Speechlessness**

With the objective to discern the poetics of writing speechlessness and texts with no words from a comparative studies' approach, the papers of this issue are arranged into three sections according to their main theme.

The first section, "Texts With No Words", focuses on the eloquence of blank spaces, the materiality of the page and all kinds of symbols, lines, and graphs that are no letters which form words. DAMIANOS GRAMMATIKOPOULOS analyzes the narrative techniques in wordless comic books and woodcut novels by Milt Gross, Peter Kuper, Shaun Tan, and Lynd Ward from a transmedial perspective. For this, he not

only investigates the role of the turning of the page. He also carves out different narrative strategies borrowed from film, painting, pantomime, or building art to scrutinize the 'co-mix' of word and picture as distinguishing and still underexplored characteristics of the narrations in comics and woodcut novels. JULIA GRILLMAYR, in turn, demonstrates how Jonathan Safran Foer's short story *A Primer for the Punctuation of Heart Disease* (2002) supports the reading of his novels. Speechlessness emerges in a double sense: On the one hand, the literary lack of words depicts the protagonists' inability to speak in emotionally charged situations and encourages modes of communication via symbols or punctuation signs. On the other hand, Foer's works serve as examples to expose a writing strategy that refers to the spatial-material conditions of literature.

The papers of the second section, "Literary Communication of Speechlessness", present different modes to approach speechlessness in the context of the psychophysical capacity to speak and the relation of power and disempowerment when it comes to silence. MAREN SCHEURER reflects on the different therapeutic and poetological functions of silence in psychoanalytical theory and in theater plays of Tom Kempinski and Sarah Kane. By elaborating the mutual exchange of concepts in theater and psychotherapy, she exposes cultural forms and aesthetic effects of muteness. Scheurer not only explores the importance of a transmedial approach but also distinguishes different kinds of silence in therapy and on stage according to the effects of verbal, para- and nonverbal speech. The loss of language due to traumatic experience and the supposed capability of poetic language to transcend this silence is the topic in MARTINA MEIDL'S analysis of First World War poetry. Discussing the concepts of 'ineffability', 'silence', and 'speechlessness', she qualifies the former as a means of expressing the sublime, following Kant, and contrasts it with the limits of Wittgenstein's logic-based language; the latter two concepts, in turn, allow circumscribing the social, psychological, and human state of the (not) speaking subject. The political dimension of speechlessness is discussed by DIMITRI SMIRNOV, who explores the narrative strategies which Cheik Aliou Ndao chooses in *Mbaam dictateur* (1997) to narrate the dehumanization and transformation of the autocratic ruling protagonist into a mute donkey. While on the *histoire*-level speechlessness alludes to the representation of power or powerlessness in the behavior of dictators, Smirnov also emphasizes speechlessness as an important narrative technique. In particular, by defining the changes in focalization and the modes of speech of the



protagonists, he shows that the absence of direct speech has an iconic character, since the novel's form and meaning can be described as a miming relation. The last paper of this section discusses the process of communicating via speech or the lack of words from a perspective of successful or failed reception. Following Derrida's reflections on language and thought, EVA GILLHUBER concentrates on the role of the 'undigestible' parts of language in Virgilio Piñera's short story *La Carne* (1944) and Jorge Luis Borges' *El Evangelio según Marcos* (1970). By coupling the eating and narrating processes and with an emphasis on the use of metaphors, Eva Gillhuber demonstrates that the texts are based on a poetics of cannibalism, which can be characterized as a constant trespassing of several borders, particularly between literal and figurative sense.

The third section, "The *Mise-en-Scène* of Speechlessness", considers different writing modes to communicate speechlessness via a constant play with speech and the lack of words or an overabundance of words. CHRISTINA FÄRBER investigates the autopoietic structures of literary speechlessness in Terézia Mora's *Das Ungeheuer* (2013) and Franz Kafka's *Ein Traum* (1920), where they are related to death and the empty grave, two of the tropes of absence par excellence. By exploring writing strategies such as polyfocalization and belated narration in relation to language's own non-referentiality, Christina Färber shows how speechlessness is performed and produced in these two texts. In contrast, ANJA KETTERL analyzes Thomas Bernhard's novella *Walking* (1971) as an example of the 'literature of speechlessness'. For this, she relates the narrative techniques of extensive repetition not only with Michel de Certeau's 'rhetoric of walking' and the notion of going too far, but also with a lack of breath. Following Giorgio Agamben's negative idea of voice, Anja Ketterl shows how speechlessness on the one hand indicates the absence of language, and on the other hand is one mode of speech in which voice is missing. In the last paper in this section, ANNA BROD introduces another facet of speechlessness when she studies Elfriede Jelinek's play *Das schweigende Mädchen* (2015) and its allusions to Beate Zschäpe's silence in the court trials against the NSU. Besides the juridical dimension, Anna Brod considers the lack of speech in Jelinek's play from a cultural-theoretical and a philosophical perspective related to Aleida Assmann's and Martin Heidegger's concepts of silence, whereby she contrasts 'silence' with 'idle talk' and their ability to express or conceal meaning, suggesting to read Jelinek's silence as concealment.

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