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"Oublier l'usage des mots": Speech and Speechlessness in First World War Poetry

The historical avant-garde of prewar time undertook a considerable enhancement of the verbal and medial possibilities of poetry, assigning an eminent role to the genre. Vanguard aesthetics may have given expression to the subsequent trench warfare of the Great War; however, instead of intensifying their experimental modes of representation, many vanguard poets turned to more traditional forms when referring to front experiences.

This contribution addresses several aspects of silence as a *topos* in war literature, examining a selection of poems by Carlo Emilio Gadda, Clemente Rebora, Giuseppe Ungaretti, Jean Cocteau, and Guillaume Apollinaire. Apart from the literary topology of silence, it considers speechlessness in its social dimension and as an expression of traumatic writing, paying special attention to the means of poetry as a medium of war experience and touching on structuralist and post-structuralist approaches to ineffability.

Where should one start when talking about the limits of what can be said and the transgression of those limits in a kind of literature which refers to the sufferings caused by war experiences? As Antoine Compagnon stated in his introduction to the recent anthology *La Grande Guerre des écrivains* (2014), after all, "all war literature highlights the belief that putting experience into words is difficult, painful, even impossible."¹ The following considerations are focused on silence as a motif in war literature and on the ways to overcome the threat of silence taking into consideration a number of examples from French and Italian poetry, written by authors who were involved in the First World War, serving at the frontline or in military hospitals. Any selection cannot but fall short of the mark, in view of the copious lyrical war testimonies, whose common ground, however, has been stressed by an abundance of studies² and can be fully proven also by some *topoi* listed below.

No traditional way of representing death seems to cope with the terror caused by the mechanized battles and anonymous mass slaughter which differentiate the First World War from all previous martial events. On the one hand, vanguard aesthetics such as the cubistic techniques of fragmentation and montage, the visual and sound effects of futurist battle representations, the condensation and language reduction

1 "[...] toute la littérature de la guerre tourne autour de la conviction que la mise en mots de l'expérience est difficile, pénible, voire impossible" (Compagnon 2014: 42) [If not stated otherwise, all quotations are translated into English by Franca Alberti, to whom I wish to express my thanks].

2 A representative selection of studies might include those by Elisabeth Marsland (1991), Frank Field (1991), Martin Löschnigg (1994), Philipp Rehage (2003), or Nicolas Beaupré (2006).

of hermetic poetry, or expressionist techniques of cross fading may vividly portray the experience of war, while, on the other, instead of intensifying their experimental modes of representation, many vanguard poets turned to more traditional forms when referring to front experiences or even chose the path of silence.

The concepts of "silence", "speechlessness" and "ineffability" will be at the center of the following remarks. Although they interact, their meaning is, of course, well delimited. As will be seen below, our use of "ineffability" mainly reverts to Immanuel Kant and Ludwig Wittgenstein. It brings the referent or object – namely the unsayable dimension of war experience – into focus, whereas "silence" and "speechlessness" relate to the subject of enunciation in its psychological and social dimension, evoking the context of a particular and individual response to war experience. Whilst "silence" may also denote a voluntary refusal of expression, the term of "speechlessness" points at a non-arbitrary form of silence.

1. Beyond Comprehension

Questioning one's ability to express to the point of choosing silence became a common motif underlying First World War literature. In a way, speechlessness has become a war literature *topos*, whilst it also expresses some deeply-felt personal experiences. The often-quoted words used by August Stramm in his letter to Herwarth Walden (dated 6 October 1914) to announce his silence in the face of the war terror may highlight this issue:

What shall I say. There is so infinitely more death in me death and death. I weep inside and outside I'm hard and rough. [...] There is so much wonder around me wonder all around I cannot read and think at all anymore Even the word is stalling in me for terror.³

In a similar way to Stramm, Jean Cocteau associates speechlessness with the impossibility of comprehension when telling his mother about the battle of the Somme with the following words: "We are in the middle of an affair which is too enormous to describe and become aware of."⁴

3 "Was soll ich sagen. Es ist so unendlich viel Tod in mir Tod und Tod. In mir weints und außen bin ich hart und roh. [...] Es ist so viel Wunder um mich Wunder ringsum ich kann überhaupt nicht mehr lesen und denken Das Wort schon stockt mir vor Grauen" (Stramm 1988: 24).

4 "Nous sommes au milieu de trop énorme chose pour décrire et se rendre bien compte" (Cocteau in Rehage 2003: 31).

The relationship between the impossibility of thinking and of uttering thought into words was prominently stressed by Wittgenstein, who considered logic as opposed to ineffability. Underlying the whole *Tractatus* (1928), his postulate of a logic-based language is probably illustrated in the most condensed manner by sentence 5.61: "Logic fills the world: the limits of the world are also its limits. [...] What we cannot think, that we cannot think: we cannot therefore *say* what we cannot think." (Wittgenstein 2005⁹: 5.61)⁵ In their traumatic dimension, the sufferings caused by trench warfare are beyond comprehension. Speechlessness as a psychosomatic symptom and part of a post-traumatic pattern was massively documented, both during and after this first 'industrial' war in history. Well known under the term 'shell shock', post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms as a response to the extreme conditions at the front constitute a broadly studied topic in the fields of social and psychological studies.⁶ The role that writing and – more specifically – the literary expression can assume in a situation of psychological affliction or traumatism due to experiences of the Great War, though, was given less consideration. Following a concept developed by Lawrence Langer and adopted by Saul Friedländer (with reservations, for it was framed in the different context of Holocaust studies), literature might be considered as a medium able to break silence by articulating the content of "deep memory" in contrast to common memory (cf. Friedländer 1992: 40f., 55), i.e., the unresolved traumatic experience which is inaccessible to meaning and whose representation cannot be but incoherent and fragmentary.

2. The Silence of the Homecomers

Many traumatic events that took place during the Great War are recorded through the literary medium rather than, for instance, letters from the frontline. In general, there is a tendency among the soldiers to conceal their experiences from others. Carine Trevisan dedicated several studies to the attitude of silence towards the civilian population during the soldiers' leave of absence, a well-known phenomenon that she defines as "silence du permissionnaire" (Trevisan 2001: 149–156).⁷ In war

5 "Die Logik erfüllt die Welt; die Grenzen der Welt sind auch ihre Grenzen. Wir können also in der Logik nicht sagen: Das und das gibt es in der Welt, jenes nicht." (Wittgenstein 1968⁵: 5.61)

6 Recently, see Reid (2011) and Leese (2014²).

7 As Trevisan highlights, the literary image of the soldier or homecomer keeping silent about his war experiences towards civilians is in sharp contrast to the eloquence of the figure of the surviving narrator bearing witness to the cruelties of war (cf. Trevisan 2001: 150). In his essay *Les Fleurs de Tarbes ou la terreur dans les lettres* (1941) Jean Paulhan speaks about the "mal du langage" of homecomers who see themselves affected by a mysterious silence. He even mistrusts

literature, records of this phenomenon are copious and provided by such prominent authors as Henri Barbusse, Erich Maria Remarque, and Curzio Malaparte. Apart from the intention to spare family members from worry, it was traumatic time lag or self-censorship due to lack of comprehension on the part of civilians that led to the choice of silence.

In "The Storyteller" ("Der Erzähler", 1936), Walter Benjamin associates the soldiers' silence with the fragility of the human body in contrast with the overwhelming concentration of mechanical force. Due to the growing incommunicability of experience in the modern world, on the one hand the tradition of storytelling is decreasing, and on the other, even silence becomes symptomatic of the modern human condition: "Was it not noticeable at the end of the war that men returned from the battlefield grown silent – not richer, but poorer in communicable experience?" (Benjamin 2000: 77) Benjamin underscores that, significantly, it was only ten years later that war memories were "poured out in the flood of war books" (ibid.).

Though the literary representation of the homecomers' silence towards the civilian population became an essentially narrative *topos*, it was also represented in poetry. It can be found, for instance, in "Voce di vedetta morta" by Clemente Rèbora, published in 1917 in the literary magazine *La Riviera Ligure*. The lyrical voice is that of a dead, decaying sentinel speaking to a soldier passing by. He recommends to him not to talk about war at home, because there is no understanding there of what is actually happening:

Però se ritorni
 Tu uomo, di guerra
 A chi ignora non dire;
 Non dire la cosa, ove l'uomo
 E la vita s'intendono ancora. (Rèbora in Cortellessa 1998: 380)

But if you return home
 You, man, of the war
 to whom doesn't know don't speak;
 Don't speak the thing, where man
 And life still understand each other.

The repetition of "non dire" as *anadiplosis*, as well as the substitution of "guerra" by "la cosa", underscore the urge for silence. Nevertheless, the sentinel still expresses the hope of communication – even though it would not be a verbal one. If

the truth of eloquent manifestations of war experience both in literature and in conversation (cf. ibid.).

at all, it might be possible to approach and communicate war experience by emotional means and countering death by a vehement, nearly violent affirmation of life, as the following lines from the same poem seem to highlight:

Ma afferra la donna
Una notte, dopo un gorgo di baci,
Se tornare potrai;
Sóffiale che nulla del mondo
Redimerà ciò ch'è perso
Di noi, i putrefatti di qui;
Stringile il cuore a strozzarla:
E se t'ama, lo capirai nella vita
Più tardi, o giammai. (ibid.)

But seize the woman
One night, after a storm of kisses
If you're allowed back;
Softly blow into her ears that nothing in the whole world
will redeem what's lost
Of us, that are rotten here;
Hold tight her heart till she chokes:
And if she loves you,
you'll know it in life or never.

By contrast, no redemption from alienation towards those left home is offered by Jean Cocteau in his *Discours du grand sommeil* (1925),⁸ an epic work of 42 stanzas centered on the character of an angel as an allegory of poetry. The angel, sleeping inside the lyrical voice called Jean, wakes up at the beginning of the poem and speaks to Jean in the form of a long monologue. He invites him to join the war and to report what he sees, showing him some visionary images of what is expecting him there. These images are focussed on the experiences of a single soldier – a stereotypical figure which throughout the poem represents the collective.

In the following stanza, which may evidence the poet's tendency to use biblical imagery, the angel announces that Jean will see "Eden infected" ("Tu verras l'Eden infect") and a "naked, unknown man" ("[l]'homme nu, l'homme inconnu"), that is the soldier, whose anonymity is related to Adam's nakedness by repetition and internal rhyme. The soldier's relationship to his wife is anything but confiding and his home life far from being paradisiacal:

S'il rentre parmi les siens
son regard remplit sa femme de détresse.
Il assoit son corps
qui fume la pipe;
mais la pensée,

8 Drafted in 1916, the poem was published only in 1925 and after an extensive revision due to the author's change of attitude towards the war (cf. Rehage 2003: 156).

prise aux détours du labyrinthe,
reste lointaine.

*

Il interroge peu, il raconte peu,
il tape sur ses cuisses,
il dit: "J'ai juste le temps de reprendre mon train"
et se lève pour rejoindre la chose, que l'épouse
redoute plus que la montagne
creuse où va Tannhäuser. (Cocteau 2003: 165)

If he goes back home
His eyes fill the woman with dismay
He sits down,
Smoking his pipe;
But his thoughts,
Lost in a meandering labyrinth,
Are far away.

*

He asks little, tells little,
He slaps his thighs,
He says: "I'm just in time to catch my train"
And he stands up to join the thing his spouse
Is more scared of than the hollow
Mountain where Tannhäuser goes.

During his leave of absence, the soldier's mind is wandering, whilst even his presence at home seems to be a merely physical one. The fact that the woman is excluded from the war experience is underlined by using the term "la chose", the same substitute as Rèbora uses in "Voce di vedetta morta". Furthermore, the impossibility of comprehension is illustrated by the image of the Venusberg, the "hollow mountain", where Tannhäuser returns after his failed redemption.

Remarkably, the style of Cocteau's epic war poem is rather traditional and nearly prosaic, while in his *Le Cap de Bonne Espérance* (1919), which was composed at the same time, experimentalism is more striking – with the exception of the war-centred poems "Géorgiques funèbres" included there. According to Philipp Rehage, there is a clear relationship between the war topic and the poet's choice of a more traditional style – one that Rehage ascribes also to the war poetry by Guillaume Apollinaire (cf. Rehage 2003: 150).

3. Loss of Language

Another motif forming part of the isotopy of silence is the loss of language due to a loss of identity or selfhood in the course of a war-caused process of de-humanization. A few weeks before suffering shell shock, Clemente Rèbora writes the following words in a letter to his mother:

Please forgive me if I do not write as you would like me to – the horror of what surrounds me (the stench of our unburied dead ones, whilst the friendly fire kills us off by mistake!), the beastliness and the effort to keep these hollow men up, I've got nothing more to say – only the dogged habit of toiling on my breach.⁹

In poetry, there are plenty of similar expressions referring to the sensation of loss of humanity at the frontline. I would like to quote two more stanzas from *Discours du grand sommeil* by Cocteau, whose imagery shows the soldier losing his capacity of verbalization in a degradation process which turns him from an anonymous registration number first into an animal and finally, as an utter state of passivity, into a plant which cannot even move:

Va et raconte
L'homme tout nu,
tout vêtu de ce qu'il trouve
dans sa caverne,
contre le mammouth et le plésiosaure.

*

Tu le verras dépouillé,
délivré,
matricule,
avec le vieil instinct de tuer;
mis là comme l'animal qu'on emploie
d'après les services qu'il peut rendre.
Avec la vieille loi de tuer
Pour les maîtres infatués
De la ferme.

*

Il a oublié l'usage des mots.
La vie brûlante
Et somnolente...
Plante immobile, et plantes
Qui bougent: les animaux. (Cocteau 2003: 164f.)

Go and tell
About the stark naked man
Clothed in what he found
In his cave,
Against the mammoth and the plesiosaurus.

*

You will see him laid bare
Delivered
Tagged
With the ancient killing instinct
Put there like an animal one uses
According to the uses it can be put to,
With the old law of killing
For the crazed lords
Of the farm.

*

9 "Perdona se non scrivo come vorreste – l'orrore di ciò che mi circonda (che tanfo di nostri morti insepolti, mentre l'artiglieria *nostra* ci accoppa in sbaglio!), l'imbestiamento e lo sforzo di tener su queste larve d'uomini; non mi lascia espressione più – solo, la calma abitudine di faticare sulla mia breccia [...]" (Rèbora in Cortellessa 1998: 382).

He has forgotten what words are for
 The burning
 Sleepy life
 Still plants and
 Moving ones: the animals.

In the first lines of the passage quoted above, the image of bareness is stressed once again. Here it appears in an atavistic context – the soldier in the trench is compared to a Stone Age man in his cavern and even seems to be transferred to further ages before the appearance of man on earth. The slow pace of the regression generated by war is reflected by the poet's choice of versification. The soldier seems to fall into an instinctual as well as biddable state where he "forgets" the use of language: speechlessness becomes the expression of a kind of animal status. It is contrasted by the angel's exhortation "Va et raconte", whose anaphoric repetition in the opening stanzas of the epic poem highlights the role of poetry as a medium to overcome speechlessness.

4. The Silence of Death

Another related motif, one of the most productive, is the contrast between the noise of battle and the silence of death as presented by First World War poetry in countless shapes.¹⁰ In Cocteau's *Discours du grand sommeil*, to revert to the quoted example, silence accompanies the images of a military hospital – Cocteau served as an ambulance aide on the Belgian Front. In the same text, the silence of the Christmas truce of 1914 is in sharp contrast with the noise of fighting. All these different kinds of silence or lack of sound in war poetry are not exactly representing the "zero-function", in the sense of a pivot for an unlimited process of interpretation attributed by Frank Habermann to ineffability, wherefore, according to Habermann, what can't be said comes to symbolize interpretation itself (cf. Habermann 2012: 26). Fairly distinct from ineffability, these motifs of silence rather correspond to 'noise' as defined by Jurij Lotman in his communication-model-based theory about literary ambiguity (cf. Lotman 1993⁴: 118–121), or to Iser's 'blanks' as moments of the empowering of sense (cf. Iser 1976: 284f.), or, reverting to classical rhetoric, to the function of *aposiopesis*.

¹⁰ For instance, see the images of silence which close some of the war poems by Georg Trakl, examined by Giulia Disanto (2007: 160).

In the following lines from the poem "Sul San Michele",¹¹ Carlo Emilio Gadda, who headed a division of Alpini (Alpine soldiers) as a lieutenant, remembers his visit to the battlefield of Monte San Michele on the 4th of July 1917, the latter being one of the most important strategic sites of the Karst front which was fought over bitterly. The presence of death in view of the anonymous and provisionally buried soldiers is symbolized by silence and by the passing of clouds. The sky and personified landscape seem to share the overall sorrow:

[...]
Non vedo che schiere
Nel cielo di nuvole perse
Tetre, nere,
Passare, col vento, di là,
Come una gente che vada
Verso l'eternità.

Morti, compagni morti
Su l'ascesa della collina,
So come fu, come sarà:
Saliva lenta la china:
Scendeva a saette, scendeva
Terribilmente l'oscurità.
Morti, compagni morti,
So come fu, come sarà
Le nuvole passano il muto
Cielo. Ha taciuto
La battaglia. Tace coi morti
Il monte,
Senza suono, senza terribilità. (Gadda in Cortellessa 1998: 437)

[...]
I can't see anything but legions
Of lost clouds in the sky,
Gloomy, black ones,
Blown by the wind, from there,
Like a people on the move
To eternity.

Dead, dead mates,
On the ridge of the hill,
I know what it was like,
What it will be:
Darkness was slowly climbing up,
Climbing down in flashes,
frightfully engulfing all.
Dead, dead mates,
I know what it was like,
What it will be.
The clouds float across the silent
Sky. The strife
Is silent. The mountain
Is silent with the dead.
No sound, no terror.

11 The poem is the first of his war poems, all of them written after the end of the war (1919).

A striking and evident symbolism, characteristic of Carlo Emilio Gadda's poetry, associates the wind and the clouds passing in the sky with troops of fallen soldiers. Darkness relates to death and sorrow. From the visual impression of the first lines quoted here, the poem passes to a sound dimension – darkness corresponds to the silence which follows the battle. This silence is intensified by a quadruple repetition: It can be found in "muto | Cielo" and "Ha taciuto | La battaglia", both times highlighted by rhyme and by *enjambement*; furthermore, it can also be found in "Tace" and "senza suono".

The importance of repetition and other stylistic tools concerning rhythm is quite clear: some pauses, lengthened by short or final-stressed lines, repeatedly slow the rhythm down. On the other hand, numerous rhymes and repetitions – frequently in form of a *kyklos* – reinforce the idea of the passing of time and contrast this with the stillness of death. Unperturbed, the war goes on, as highlighted in the final couplet of the following stanza: "E sento il cannone che batte; | Che batte, che non ristà" / "And I hear the cannon firing; | firing on, without cease."¹²

5. At the Edge of Language

A further important dimension of silence addressed by the poetry of the Great War is the poetological one. Speechlessness is often made the subject of poetry through images of a poetic force capable of transcending silence. As an example, a crucial quotation may well be one by Giuseppe Ungaretti, whose poetry was considered by Andrea Cortellessa as an ultimate expression of mourning, determined by trauma (cf. Cortellessa 1998: 430). Moreover, for stillness as a recurrent topic in his poetry, as well as for the essentiality of his hermetic style, Ungaretti could also be considered the quintessential poet of silence.

"Commiato" or "Farewell", which concludes the first collection of war poems by Ungaretti written on the Southern frontline, was dated October 2nd, 1916 in Locvizza (Lokvica) near the already mentioned Monte San Michele. It is addressed to Ungaretti's lieutenant and friend Ettore Serra who published the poet's collection *Il porto sepolto* in 1916, in an edition of 80 copies. The poem can be considered a manifesto of what can be said, a homage to the mighty power of the poetic word.

¹² The astonishment of the lyrical speaker becoming aware that the world keeps spinning around despite the overpowering presence of death, as well as the motif of speechlessness, is shared by "Amici taciturni (ovvero 'ritorno')", another poem from Gadda written in the same year (1919) (cf. Cortellessa 1998: 439–441).

Furthermore, it reflects upon the interdependence of poetry and life. Both the sober and concise style characteristic of the war poetry of *L'Allegria* (1919), and the slow rhythm created by the versification – which usually offers just one central concept per verse – somehow suggest a kind of silence:

Gentile
Ettore Serra
poesia
è il mondo l'umanità
la propria vita
fioriti dalla parola
la limpida meraviglia
di un delirante fermento

Quando trovo
in questo mio silenzio
una parola
scavata è nella mia vita
come un abisso (Ungaretti 2000¹⁷: 58)

Noble
Ettore Serra
Poetry
Is the world, is mankind,
Is life itself
flowered by the word
the pure marvel
of a delirious turmoil

When I find
in this silence of mine
a word
it thrusts into my very being
like an abyss (Ungaretti 1997: 93)

The poetic word is rising from the inner silence of the lyrical voice whilst the abyss as a symbol of the ineffable is well known from Baudelaire's "Le gouffre" of *The Flowers of Evil* (1868). In Ungaretti, furthermore, the poetic word "scavata è nella mia vita": literally, 'is dug into my life' – an image which hints at dolorous memories and the testimonial character of Ungaretti's war poetry, but also at the suffering of creation. The symbol of the abyss implies another important connotation of ineffability: the idea of the depth and darkness of the unconscious, the irrational, intangible dimension of our being – a connotation broadly evidenced by Baudelaire.¹³ In the 1923 edition, Ungaretti commented on "Commiato" with the following words:

13 "Pascal had his abyss, which moved with him. | Alas! Everything is an abyss –action, desire, dreams, | Words! And over my hair which stands upright | I often feel the wind of Fear pass. || [...]"/"Pascal avait son gouffre, avec lui se mouvant. | - Hélas! tout est abîme, –action, désir, rêve, | Parole! et sur mon poil qui tout droit se relève | Maintes fois de la Peur je sens passer le vent. || [...]" (Baudelaire 1992: 114f.).

"Finding the word [the poetic one] means to delve deep into one's own abysmal darkness without stirring it or even succeeding in getting to know its secret."¹⁴

A similar image of darkness generating the poetic word is that of the lyrical speaker's shadow in Guillaume Apollinaire's "Ombre", the last poem of the collection entitled "Étendards" in *Calligrammes* (1917). His shadow joins the lyrical speaker while writing and symbolizes the past, especially the mournful remembrance of his fallen comrades. The lyrical voice is speaking to his shadow as if he were speaking to his dead comrades, whose divinity is shared by poetry. The following are the last lines of the poem:

[...]
 Mais vous ne m'entendez plus
 Vous ne connaîtrez plus les poèmes divins que je chante
 Tandis que moi je vous entends je vous vois encore
 Destinées
 Ombre multiple que le soleil vous garde
 Vous qui m'aimez assez pour ne jamais me quitter
 Et qui dansez au soleil sans faire de poussière
 Ombre encre du soleil
 Ecriture de ma lumière
 Caisson de regrets
 Un dieu qui s'humilie (Apollinaire 2013: 103)

[...]
 But you do not hear me any more
 You will not know any more the divine poems I sing
 But I hear you still and see you still
 Destinies
 Multiple shadow may the sun preserve you
 You who love me so much that you will never leave me
 And who dance in the sun without stirring the dust
 Shadow ink of the sun
 Signature of my light
 Holder of sorrows
 A god that condescends (Apollinaire in Silkin 1981: 243)¹⁵

Here, the notion of divinity is related both to poetry and to war experiences which can't be put into words. A highly productive mode of representation of First World War literature dealing with traumatic experiences is introducing motifs of the divine and using biblical intertexts, especially apocalyptic ones – a kind of imagery often to be found both in prose and in poetry.¹⁶ A longing for transcendence, for the infinite, seems to rise in the face of extreme experiences.

14 "Trovare una parola [poetica] significa penetrare nel buio abissale di sé senza turbarne né riuscire a conoscere il segreto" (Ungaretti 2000¹⁷: 524f.).

15 Translated by Christopher Middleton.

16 See also the above mentioned *Discours du grand sommeil* by Jean Cocteau. For an analytical approach to the apocalyptic representation of First World War experiences see Jay Winter, who

6. Ineffability as Myth and Other Modes

Embracing silence in the face of extreme experiences is just one in a vast field of personal responses. At the same time, speechlessness became a subject of abundant reflection and discussion. From the point of view of Martin Löschnigg, in narrative prose and poetry dealing with front line experience, ineffability has not only become part of a vast literary topology; indeed, Löschnigg refers to ineffability even as a "myth" founded by the literature of the Great War. On the one hand, the emphasis placed on ineffability deprives war of any heroism, whilst, on the other, it mythologizes war and transfers it to the sphere of the sublime (cf. Löschnigg 2014: 53).

In any case, the "myth" of ineffability, responsible for some kind of elevation of war, develops its own dynamics. Evidently, it cannot be equated with the lack of words due to traumatizing experiences. Speechlessness rising in the face of experiences which are withdrawn from understanding is often skirted by introducing concepts of the divine or of the sublime in a Kantian sense, i.e., the concept of an entity which is contrary to our faculties of judgement and of representation. What is beyond comprehension and has no rational approach is referred to by using images of sublimity (even if, according to Kant, the sublime can only be made tangible through the inadequacy of its representation) (cf. Eisler 2015: s.v. "Erhaben"; Löschnigg 2014: 36).

Where can the ineffable or the sublime more likely find their expression if not in literature? Indeed, exploring the limits of language might be the most genuine function assignable to literature. In his study *Literatur/Theorie der Unsagbarkeit* (2012), Frank Habermann undertakes an examination of the discourse tradition which handles literature as a "medium of the unsayable". He states that the main function of the *topos* of literature expressing the ineffable consists in conferring on literature an additional value with regard to philosophy (cf. Habermann 2012: 27, 44).

Rationalistic approaches such as that of Habermann contrast with an idealistic discourse of the unsayable prevailing from Romanticism until the last decades of the last century. According to Ingeborg Bachmann, for instance, whose approach embraces mystical paradigms, something arises at the extreme edge of language

dedicates a chapter of his monography *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning* to the topic (Winter 1997²: 178–203).

and of thought: this something is the "mystical", the "ineffable experience" (Bachmann 1982: 120). Some similar ideas are also presented by Octavio Paz in his metaliterary essay *The bow and the lyre* (*El arco y la lira*, 1956), where – in the poetic style characteristic of his prose – he argues that "[p]oetic expression expresses the inexpressible" (Paz 1973: 96).

In the same essay, the Mexican author highlights the role that rhythm as a kind of pre-rational expression plays in the approach to the unsayable, a thesis rooted in Romanticism: Paz was inspired by the reflections upon rhythm and spirit made by Novalis and Friedrich Hölderlin (cf. *ibid.*: 66–70, 121–125; Ulshöfer 2010: 156–185). In her study *La poesia nel tempo della guerra* (2007), also Giulia Disanto highlights the role of rhythm when she examines the relationship between conflictual moments and writing poetry on the basis of the war poems of Guillaume Apollinaire, Georg Trakl, Giuseppe Ungaretti, and Paul Celan. She explains the semantic surplus that approximates poetry to the unsayable in terms of the affinity of poetic expression to music (cf. Disanto 2007: 131–140).

Apart from rhythm, one could draw up a long list of other essentially lyrical modes of expression at the edge of what can be said. In view of the threat of speechlessness in war poetry, a detailed study of textual strategies to overcome silence, regarding also sound and typographic image, for instance, would be worthwhile. Most of all, it is the vanguard techniques employed by poets of the Great War that seem to support what Hayden White claims: modern literature has developed methods to cope with the contradictions and incompleteness of traumatic experiences (cf. White 1999: 82). According to Jay Winter in a similar order of ideas, as a mirror of the unsayable, poetry enables the soldiers of the Great War to convey their experiences of battle and death (cf. Winter 1994: 67). There is no doubt about the connection between war experience and the need to shift the boundaries of the sayable. In vanguard language, many authors found a way to convey their experiences, intensifying their experimentalism or finding new modes of expression – among the most significant are August Stramm and Giuseppe Ungaretti. However, there are poets who, instead of intensifying experimentalism, in the face of the utter cruelty of war, turned to more traditional forms, some who chose to abandon poetry in favour of prose, and others, who just fell silent.

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