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SILENCE AND WRITING: THE VOICES THAT INHABIT US
(WOOLF, DURAS, PEREC, CELATI)

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Abstract

My thesis investigates the forms, modalities and issues related to the notion of 'silence' in the texts and poetics of Virginia Woolf, Marguerite Duras, Georges Perec and Gianni Celati. This study relates to the 20th century European context and is set within the framework of music-literary studies, since silence is an acoustic phenomenon that concerns the whole word, thus also the written word. The material is structured according to a distribution that firstly involves the construction of a methodological framework that employs music-literary studies, the philosophy of language, the aesthetics of reception and psychoanalytic trauma studies; secondly, an analysis of some of the autobiographical works of the mentioned writers was undertaken, with a particular focus on the notion of trauma associated with silence; thirdly, the focus was placed on the theme of silence in the novelistic and fictional writings of the same authors; finally, a reflection on the poetics and aesthetics of silence was proposed. This study, which brings together several perspectives on silence, aims to shed light, through a comparative and transmedial approach, on the necessity of silence that is inherent in the word, and not a phenomenon opposed to it.

*A mio padre,
che al giardino ancora non l'ha detto.*

*A mia madre,
che invece l'ha già detto a tutti.*

*I have known the silence of the stars and of the sea,
And the silence of the city when it pauses,
And the silence of a man and a maid,
And the silence for which music alone finds the word,
And the silence of the woods before the winds of spring begin,
And the silence of the sick
When their eyes roam about the room.
And I ask: For the depths
Of what use is language?
A beast of the field moans a few times
When death takes its young.
And we are voiceless in the presence of realities—
We cannot speak.*

*A curious boy asks an old soldier
Sitting in front of the grocery store,
"How did you lose your leg?"
And the old soldier is struck with silence,
Or his mind flies away
Because he cannot concentrate it on Gettysburg.
It comes back jocosely
And he says, "A bear bit it off."
And the boy wonders, while the old soldier
Dumbly, feebly lives over
The flashes of guns, the thunder of cannon,
The shrieks of the slain,
And himself lying on the ground,
And the hospital surgeons, the knives,
And the long days in bed.
But if he could describe it all
He would be an artist.
But if he were an artist there would he deeper wounds
Which he could not describe.*

*There is the silence of a great hatred,
And the silence of a great love,
And the silence of a deep peace of mind,
And the silence of an embittered friendship,
There is the silence of a spiritual crisis,
Through which your soul, exquisitely tortured,
Comes with visions not to be uttered
Into a realm of higher life.
And the silence of the gods who understand each other without speech,
There is the silence of defeat.
There is the silence of those unjustly punished;
And the silence of the dying whose hand
Suddenly grips yours.
There is the silence between father and son,
When the father cannot explain his life,
Even though he be misunderstood for it.*

*There is the silence that comes between husband and wife.
There is the silence of those who have failed;
And the vast silence that covers
Broken nations and vanquished leaders.
There is the silence of Lincoln,
Thinking of the poverty of his youth.
And the silence of Napoleon
After Waterloo.
And the silence of Jeanne d'Arc
Saying amid the flames, "Blesséd Jesus"—
Revealing in two words all sorrow, all hope.
And there is the silence of age,
Too full of wisdom for the tongue to utter it
In words intelligible to those who have not lived
The great range of life.*

*And there is the silence of the dead.
If we who are in life cannot speak
Of profound experiences,
Why do you marvel that the dead
Do not tell you of death?
Their silence shall be interpreted
As we approach them.*

Edgar Lee Masters

*Caro silenzio,
aiutami a non parlare di te,
aiutami ad abitarti.
Addestrami. Disarmami.
Tu mi insegna a parlare.
Eccomi, mi lascio rapire.
Non lascio niente a casa, niente di intentato.
Ci sono. In te.
Arte del congedo per ritrovare.
Arte dell'a-capo che insegna a lasciarsi scrivere.
Il silenzio semina.
Le parole raccolgono.
Il silenzio è cosa viva.*

Chandra Livia Candiani

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**SILENCE AND WRITING:
The Voices that Inhabit Us
(Woolf, Duras, Perec, Celati)**

Introduction

*If I were a physician and I were allowed to prescribe
one remedy for all the ills of the world,
I would prescribe silence.*

Søren Kierkegaard

Silence is a concrete experience we all have throughout our lives.

We experience it when we collect our thoughts in solitude or when we approach death. We experience it in spirituality, in reading, between the pauses of a melody. We experience it in the unknown, in the dark, in fear, in sickness, in the night. We experience it in the interstices of a dialogue with a you, as well as in waiting for the word of someone that is late in coming. We experience it in the face of natural phenomena such as snow - which muffles every sound -, plunging into a forest, entering a cave or sinking into the depths of the sea.

Yet, to this day, silence is severely in crisis. We live in a world asphyxiated by noise and saturated by verbal buzz - by *bavardage* - and speech has lost its profound connection with silence, from which it should arise and to which it should return.

Such a crisis affecting the 21st century is the result of experiences of the last century that radically changed humanity's approach to the world, to itself and to the other. The twentieth century, with the terrible and drastic experiences of war and the Holocaust, triggered a crisis of experience that resulted in a crisis of representation and a crisis of language.

One might be tempted to think, then, that the crisis of language only concerns the word, which is the medium that language uses to communicate. Yet, the word is born from silence and is enveloped by it before being produced and after being produced. There is no word without silence. The crisis of language therefore also involves silence, which is on the verge of extinction. One only has to read the reflections that Etty Hillesum recorded in her diary to realise the transformations imposed on language by the history of the last century: "One must do more and more without meaningless words the better to find the few one needs. And in the silence new powers of expression must grow"¹. Hillesum apparently wants to tell us that there are lives, experiences and facts that can only be conveyed by words originated in silence, expressed therefore with the delicacy, the caution and the awareness that choosing to say something is an important responsibility.

¹ Etty Hillesum, *Etty: The letters and diaries of Etty Hillesum 1941- 1943*, Klaas A. D. Smelik (Ed.), Arnold J. Pomerans (Trans.), Grand Rapids, 2002, MI, Eerdmans Publishing Company, p. 512.

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Nowadays, not only are we no longer capable of silence, as we live in a generalised and constant din, but words have also lost their original silence. This means that words today decay, they are no longer born out of silence and have become vacuous, superficial, lacking in resonance: these are the 'breath emissions' that Gianni Celati warns us against, who, faced with the poverty of standardised language and the catchphrases of the 'experts', feels a strong depression and a longing for silence. Etymologically, the Latin language distinguishes between two terms: *tacere*, which is an active verb, the subject of which is a person, and which indicates abstention from or cessation of speech; *silere*, which is an intransitive verb and can also refer to nature and inanimate objects, designating the stillness, the peace of the absence of noise and sound disturbances in an environmental condition. Today we live in the world of noise, which is constantly manufactured by the city, technology, and the industrial landscape. In this landscape, where silence is increasingly rare, the challenge of literature seems to be to *stay in* silence, which does not mean refraining from saying, but rather saying in words drenched in silence, even in the case of the ineffable or its opposite - the unspeakable -, as the contemporary writer Marie Darrieussecq reminds us:

Or, je pense que l'indicible n'existe pas. J'insiste là-dessus : il y a du non-dit, du non-nommé, mais il peut être nommé, et l'indicible peut être dit. On peut toujours grignoter sur l'indicible : c'est le travail de la littérature, qui n'est finalement pas autre chose, et à qui il faut laisser faire ce travail. Mettre des mots où il n'y en a pas, où il n'y en a pas encore, où il n'y en a plus, aussi.²

This is why there is still a need to reflect on silence, which is a topic that has been extensively treated with regard to acoustic and musical phenomena, but little with regard to writing and literature, especially from a transmedial perspective. Indeed, since silence is a phenomenon *in* and *of* the word, and not opposed to it, it is relevant to point out at this stage that it is an element that is also to be investigated in literature, which is the highest expression of the use of the word: it is, in short, its artistic and aesthetically chosen form. Because the word is intimately bound up with silence, it would be wrong to perceive literature as mere word art: literature also includes silence, which permeates the word and gives it depth and substance. Words that are not born of silence lose their exactitude and multiplicity - to borrow two terms dear to Calvino.³ Today, we are accustomed to consuming words as if they were goods ready for use: we spoil them, we wear them out, just as Georges Perec's *homme qui dort* does, in a destructive attempt - not surprisingly - to get rid of language. Instead, we need to envelop words in silence in order to give them their authenticity once again: such is the course of

² Marie Darrieussecq, *Écrire, écrire pourquoi? Marie Darrieussecq: entretien avec Nelly Kaprièlian*, nouvelle édition, Paris, éditions de la Bibliothèque publique d'information, 2010.

³ Cf. Italo Calvino, *Lezioni americane. Sei proposte per il prossimo millennio*, Milano, Oscar Mondadori, 2014.

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Marguerite Duras's writing, who in her writing silently cries out the pains of a life and intimately and solitarily treads a path that seems to lead her progressively towards a wise silence.

The critic Giovanni Pozzi argues that we live in an era in which silence has been banished.⁴ Indeed, today words are no longer born from silence, but from another word, from a constant murmur. Words born from silence, on the other hand, make the opposite movement⁵: they move from silence towards the word and then back to silence, giving rise to a flow of the sentence that is always interrupted and interspersed with silence, which nourishes and regenerates it. Such a flow is that of the rhythm of Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*, whose final image of the undertow reminds us that just as the wave always returns to the sea to draw strength and energy from it, so the word returns to silence to regain its depth.

Thus, the words of the four authors examined in this study – Woolf, Duras, Perec and Celati – are words born from silence. Behind and alongside them, however, we cannot but mention the presence of a number of critics, philosophers, artists and thinkers who have been interested in the subject of silence and have developed ideas and reflections on this phenomenon. These ideas and conceptions historically and intellectually accompany the poetics of the writers we will be analysing and create the context on which our reflections move and on which the texts we will be examining are profiled.

The first among them is certainly John Cage, who with his *Silent Pieces* revolutionised the notion of music in the artistic sphere, making silence perceptible not as a background against which sound develops, but as a musical element in itself. In short, silence becomes not a marginal datum, but the centre of musical composition. Susan Sontag, in turn, in her essay “Aesthetics of Silence” developed reflections on silence in the artistic field, with important consequences for the history of art. One must also consider the discoveries in the domain of psychoanalysis by Freud, Jung and Lacan, who revolutionised humanity's relationship with itself through the exploration of the unconscious and the unspoken, i.e. that which does not appear on the enunciative surface. In the field of literary criticism, mention must be made of Maurice Blanchot, who states in a seemingly contradictory manner: “Garder le silence, c’est ce que à notre insu nous voulons tous, écrivant”⁶. And yet, there is nothing paradoxical about this statement: in fact, this study aims to show how silence is inherent to writing, how it is a *mode* of it, and not its negation.

⁴ Cf. Giovanni Pozzi, *Tacet*, Milano, Adelphi, 2013.

⁵ Cf. Max Picard, *Il mondo del silenzio*, Milano, Servitium, 2017, p. 154.

⁶ Maurice Blanchot, *L'Écriture du désastre*, Paris, Gallimard, 1980, p. 187.

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Le trop célèbre et trop ressassé précepte de Wittgenstein, « Ce dont on ne peut parler, il faut le taire », indique bien que, puisqu'il n'a pu en l'énonçant s'imposer silence à lui-même, c'est qu'en définitive, pour se taire, il faut parler. Mais de quelle sorte de paroles ?⁷

Assuming that Wittgenstein's *diktat* has been surpassed, then, the question becomes *what modes* of speech are suitable for expressing silence: it is, fundamentally, a question of discovering what the *voice* of silence is. Indeed, silence appears both impossible and necessary, in an aporia that initially seems difficult to resolve. The central question we will ask ourselves, then, is: how is a writing capable of remaining silent, while still using the word, to be constituted? Is it maybe a fragmented, neutral, fluid writing? Merleau-Ponty, among others, reflects on this question and writes:

Enfin, il nous faut considérer la parole avant qu'elle soit prononcée, le fond de silence qui ne cesse pas de l'entourer, sans lequel elle ne dirait rien, ou encore mettre à nu les fils de silence dont elle est entremêlée. Il y a, pour les expressions déjà acquises, un sens direct, qui correspond point par point à des tournures, des formes, des mots institués. En apparence, point de lacune ici, aucun silence parlant. Mais le sens des expressions en train de s'accomplir ne peut être de cette sorte : c'est un sens latéral ou oblique, qui fuse entre les mots, — c'est une autre manière de secouer l'appareil du langage ou du récit pour lui arracher un son neuf.⁸

There is thus a new sound to be discovered. Such a manner that language has of suggesting silence is rendered perfectly by Woolf when she uses the metaphor of the broken chrysalis, by Duras when she makes reference to the image of the *fossé noir*, by Perec when he employs the metaphor of the oyster, by Celati when he tells of Baratto's apnoea. The examples are countless and will be dealt with extensively in the chapters following the one on the methodological framework. The thesis is in fact structured according to a tripartition that firstly sees the textual and formal analysis of certain works of autobiographical matrix; secondly, some fictional works will be examined that feature extremely silent and sometimes mute characters as protagonists; finally, a brief section will be devoted to the poetics and aesthetics of silence in the words of the authors cited, who propose metalinguistic reflections of particular interest for this study. On the subject of metalinguistic reflections on silence, the anthropologist David Le Breton writes:

Si la possibilité du langage caractérise la condition humaine et fonde le lien social, le silence, lui, préexiste et perdure dans l'écheveau des conversations qui inéluctablement rencontrent à leur origine et à leur terme la nécessité de se taire. La parole est un fil ténu qui vibre sur l'immensité du silence. Et parfois une parole émise hors de propos, inutile, se dissout d'elle-même dans son insignifiance, elle résonne alors comme un gauchissement du silence, une contrariété à son exigence qui donne justement son prix au langage. Le silence

⁷ Maurice Blanchot, *La Communauté inavouable*, Paris, Les Editions de Minuit, 1983, p. 92.

⁸ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Signes*, Paris, Gallimard, 1960, p. 58.

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interroge les limites de toute parole, il rappelle que le sens est contenu au sein de bornes étroites face à un monde inépuisable qu'il est toujours en retard sur la complexité des choses. Malgré l'impatience de comprendre, de ne rien laisser en friche, toujours à la fin l'homme se heurte au silence.⁹

Although we no longer seem to realise it, therefore, humanity does anthropologically need silence - which belongs to its fundamental structure - and this can occur in many ways and on many occasions. One may be silent within oneself; one may listen to the silence of nature and that of history; one may remain in the silence between human relationships, in love and hatred; one may stumble upon the silence that derives from the inability to say something or from the impossibility of finding the right words; one may experience the silence imposed by a social, political or psychological condition; one may pause in the silence of a spiritual crisis or in that of a prayer, as well as in that of pain and intimacy. It is evident, then, that silence has a great variety and possesses not only a *general* dimension - linked to the environment - but also a *specific* dimension, linked to humanity, who can *be* silent as well as *make* silence, since it is a true linguistic and discursive act.¹⁰

But what does it actually mean to *keep* silent?

If it were just a matter of saying nothing, it would be an abstention from *logos*. Instead, to be silent means not to speak when one could or should speak - something that our writers and their characters clearly do. To be silent therefore means, to a certain extent, to hold back: to withhold something in speech and not let it emerge. To be silent means to subtract something from speech and to use words in a silent way, that is, in such a way that they do not say everything, but suggest *something more* that remains implicit, hidden, subtended, and that precisely because of this becomes particularly relevant, seductive, fascinating and captures the reader's attention and curiosity. Writing, in its own way, knows how to be silent when it avoids saying too much; when, that is, it restrains itself from gibberish and aims at the authenticity of the word and the depth of the content, reducing itself and consenting to a self-suspension. That is, writing must maintain the sound of emptiness within itself so that the nuances of silence can be grasped, as Chandra Livia Candiani clearly expresses:

Il silenzio è un po' come la luce, bisogna affinare i sensi per accorgersi di quante diverse sfumature di luce in una giornata incontriamo. E così per il silenzio. Ci sono infinite varietà di silenzio. Ogni silenzio dice qualcosa. Nello stesso tempo, il silenzio è solo silenzio. Non esiste il silenzio mio o tuo. Fare silenzio insieme è una profondissima comunione. Le diverse esperienze di vita, i diversi stati d'animo possono creare complicità o avversione, il silenzio consapevole unisce. Il silenzio sa. Nel silenzio s'impara.¹¹

⁹ David Le Breton, *Du silence*, Paris, Editions Métailié, 2015, p. 11.

¹⁰ Cf. Daniela De Agostini and Piero Montani (eds.), *L'opera del silenzio*, "Peregre", Collana di studi e di ricerche della Facoltà di Lingue e letterature straniere dell'Università di Urbino, 1999, pp. 9-19, <https://fondazionebo.uniurb.it/figure-del-silenzio/>.

¹¹ Chandra Livia Candiani, *Il silenzio è cosa viva*, Torino, Einaudi, 2018, p. 22.

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The types of silence are thus multiple, but all seem to lead towards a higher awareness, an amplification of perceptions, a capacity to pause and inhabit emptiness and lack. Silence is charged with *pathos*: it is grounded in passion and at the same time produces it. Silence is the land of lack that does not ask to seek remedies, but to dwell in precariousness and suspension, which are nothing but the acceptance of the fragility of existence. William Shakespeare had grasped this when he put his last words into Hamlet's mouth before dying: “The rest is silence”¹². This was also seized upon by Emily Dickinson, who wrote:

Silence is all we dread.
There's Ransom in a Voice—
But Silence is Infinity.
Himself have not a face.¹³

Silence, somehow, is the sound of emptiness and the shadow of fullness.

It is necessary at this point to point out the coordinates that have guided the shaping of the structure of this thesis and its objectives.

This study in fact originated within the curriculum of the DESE doctorate (Doctorat d'Études Supérieures Européennes) at the LILEC department of the University of Bologna, which sees the European context as the central pivot of its reflections. Such is the reason why the corpus of texts and authors examined concerns four European writers. In addition, the theme within which this thesis is set is that of the relationship between music and literature – as required by the DESE curriculum guidelines for the 35th cycle -, which is why the methodological framework was constructed on the basis of the transmedial studies analysing the relationship between sound and word, pause and silence. The choice of the theme of silence finds its reasons in the fact that it is a phenomenon of the word that lies in the interlude of these two disciplines, which have as much to do with orality as with writing. Lastly, I had to consider the need to deal with authors expressing themselves in three European languages, from which Italian, French and English were chosen. The authors I selected, however, are four, as they seemed to fit perfectly with the diachronic axis that traverses the 20th century from its beginnings - with Virginia Woolf - throughout the war and post-war period – with Marguerite Duras and Georges Perec - up to last year, 2022, which sees the passing of Gianni Celati.

¹² William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1987, p. 352.

¹³ Emily Dickinson, *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, ed. by Thomas H. Johnson, Back Bay Books, 1976, n. 1251.

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The choice of two French authors is based on a number of criteria, including: the aforementioned diachronic axis along which a so-called literature of silence is delineated, the diversity in the narrative choices of the two authors examined that merit comparison, and the fundamental distinction between memory and post-memory. In the following chapters, we will look in detail at the reasons for this choice. This investigation, spread over the lands of the United Kingdom (which at the beginning of this journey was still part of the European Union), France and Italy, allows us to gain a perception of the phenomenon of silence over several European territories, providing significant spatial coordinates, in several historical moments, which we will see are interconnected.

The choice of the three European languages has resulted in my deciding to leave the analysed texts - and sometimes also those of criticism - in the original language whenever possible, for reasons of sensitivity to the text. In fact, as the quotations proposed so far suggest, silence is a mode of speech that demands great attention and sensitivity to be grasped: it would therefore have been unproductive and contradictory to work on translated texts.

In this introduction, I have chosen to merely mention the reason for choosing the theme of silence, as well as the central question of the possibility of silent writing, because these questions will be examined at length in the theoretical-methodological chapter of this thesis, which follows the introduction. Suffice it to mention here, lastly, the main difficulties encountered in this research path. First of all, writing a thesis on silence seemed paradoxical from the outset, since it is evident that only a poetic - and not a critical - word can speak *of* and *in* silence. Secondly, the subject of silence is a topic on which the critics have already made a lot of noise and said a great deal, from various perspectives: it was therefore difficult to find new lines of thought and to have the courage to depart from those previously initiated, which were not discarded, but rather considered and questioned, in order to find another way to *read* the silence in the texts examined and, hopefully, to put an end to this long succession of studies. Thirdly, the so-called *contraintes* of DESE imposed certain boundaries within which my research had to emerge, and if they were sometimes narrow borders, it is fair to say that the quality of a research also lies in the limits it imposes upon itself. Connected to this aspect, I also emphasise the fatigue, gratifying in retrospect, linked to the effort of erudition in taking stock of the state of the art, as well as that of disentangling myself in music-literary studies, which, if they have many insights to offer, are also doubly impervious since they require expertise in two artistic spheres, and not only in the literary one, which belongs to me as academic background. In this sense, the greatest initial difficulty was the construction of a tripartite methodology that would take into account the multiplicity of perspectives related to silence. It is also worth mentioning the need to refine one's linguistic knowledge in the two non-mother tongues - English and French - in order to be able to grasp the nuances of silence in the analysed texts and to be able to write this thesis.

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Evidently, such research also imposes epistemological difficulties. At the same time, the European matrix of this work makes it necessary to observe phenomena - literary, philosophical and historical - with a comparative spirit, avoiding the risk of losing the fundamental connections that an overall view can provide. Lastly, I would like to point out the personal difficulty in constantly revising, to the point of reducing, the corpus of authors chosen, as well as the essays on critical literature and philosophy of language: at the end of a doctoral course, in fact, I have become increasingly aware of the inability to deal with everything, the difficulty in delimiting a research field, the evident impossibility of knowing everything, as well as - alongside the objectivity that scientific research imposes - the doubt regarding the inevitable subjectivity imprinted in the investigation of every word permeated with silence.

Theoretical Framework: What Is Silence?

*Il faut apprendre à écrire
avec des mots gorgés de silence.*

Edmond Jabès

I. Subject of the Research

The object of the research is silence.

A research work on silence might dare to present itself as a volume of blank pages, yet the choice in the present work is descriptive, as far as possible. To describe silence would be, *a priori*, to define it. Yet, in an echo of St Augustine attempting to define time, one can also say of silence: what then is silence? If no one questions me, I know; if I wanted to explain it to those who question me, I do not know.

Edmond Jabès, in his *Un Étranger avec, sous le bras, un livre de petit format*, clearly exposes this question through a series of consecutive aphorisms spaced by typographical blanks imbued with silence:

- Il n'y a pas d'histoire de la parole mais, inaltérable, une histoire du silence. La parole la ressasse pour nous.
- Nous ne connaissons, du silence, que ce que la parole peut nous en dire. Que tu le veuilles ou non, c'est la parole seule que nous entérinons.

- Lorsque tu lis, à voix haute, un texte, n'est-ce pas ta voix que tu entends ? L'histoire du silence est un texte. L'écoute du silence, un livre.
- L'instant dit. La durée est dite. La durée est absence et l'instant, trace relevée d'une absence révélée à soi-même.
- La parole n'est, peut-être, qu'une succession de pas sonores dans les pas détronés d'un univers enlisé.
- Épeire diadème.
- L'agonie du mot est muette. Ô gluant infini maillé de la mort. De ce mot-mouche, nous sommes responsables.

Au commencement était le livre à son blanc commencement.¹

If the history of silence is a text and listening to it a book, because only the word can tell us about silence, then we can set ourselves the goal of investigating the forms of silence and its modalities.

¹ Edmond Jabès, *Un Étranger avec, sous le bras, un livre de petit format*, Mayenne, Gallimard, 1989, p. 67.

Theoretical Framework

In the first instance, an attempt has been made to define the state of the art of silence studies written in the last century. Indeed, the 20th century is a fertile period for this phenomenon, from artistic disciplines to philosophy and psychoanalysis.

Secondly, I chose to work on the theme of silence because, from the outset, it seemed an essential point of tangency in both music and literature. In fact, silence apparently seems to be the negation of both arts, because it could be considered as the absence of sound and speech, and therefore as a negative element, of absence, of background. Now, a view that reduces silence to a dichotomy between negative and positive seemed to me very reductive. This is the reason why in the first chapter of this work we will examine both perspectives, held by various critics, but then identify a mode of reception of silence, which is the one I will use for the analysis of the texts examined. This modality has to do with an idea expressed by Pieraldo Rovatti in his volume *L'esercizio del silenzio*, while commenting on Edmond Jabès' book:

Di solito contrapponiamo il silenzio alla parola: consideriamo il silenzio come interruzione della parola. Ma qui, intanto, si tratta di una parola scritta: e se noi cessiamo di scrivere lasciando il foglio bianco, non è propriamente un silenzio, perché quella parola che interrompiamo era già di per sé muta. [...]

Non è questo il silenzio che ha in mente Jabès e che ha tanta importanza nella sua fenomenologia dello Straniero. Il silenzio che intendiamo è infatti un modo di essere della parola o piuttosto un modo di produrre esperienza della parola. Una *dimensione* dello scrivere [...], ipotizzando che la parola sia una declinazione di vuoti e pieni sulla quale possiamo intervenire. Si tratta di attraversare il silenzio: di esperirlo, di tenerne conto, e in qualche modo di produrlo. Di “aprire” la parola.

Tutto è quindi affidato a un tipo di scrittura in cui lo spazio tra una parola e l'altra, tra una riga e l'altra, segna un capovolgimento possibile, una “sovversione”, [...] i cui libri risultano caratterizzati da un ritmo, cesura o spazio bianco, che scandisce gli aforismi [...].²

What is emphasised is not so much the ontology of silence, i.e. the question of what it is, but rather the question of *how* silence operates on words and surrounds them, making them deeper and opening them up, in a certain way, to new meanings that cannot be found on a first superficial reading. Silence is therefore a way of going deeper. This has been known, since ancient times, by oriental cultures and by all those who have approached some kind of spirituality: silence, historically, is what brings us closer to the transcendent, to intimacy with ourselves, to deep dialogue.

Moving away, however, from theology and the spiritual world and approaching literature instead, it is fair to ask what the statement means: “Il faut apprendre à écrire avec des mots gorges de silence”³.

² Pier Aldo Rovatti, *L'esercizio del silenzio*, Milano, Raffaello Cortina, 1992, p. 104.

³ Edmond Jabès, *Un Étranger avec, sous le bras, un livre de petit format*, cit., p. 32

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The first and essential question we ask ourselves is therefore: what role does silence play? Is it merely a pause, a suspension, a space, or can it also be charged with meaning? Silence is often regarded as an empty moment, compared to the fullness of word and sound. On the contrary, in the texts analysed, silence is necessary and the bearer of meaning. Certainly not explicit, but fundamental. Silence, in fact, occurs as form, as content, as place, as *contrainte*, as possibility but also impossibility from which everything starts. Silence somehow transcends content because it is before and beyond the text. This is why I believe it is important to undertake a study that takes into account both the thematic aspect, i.e. the content, and the formal, i.e. stylistic, expression of silence. Finally, in dealing with the 20th century, it is also necessary to address the relationship that exists between silence, writing and trauma. As we know, the last century, with the bombings of the Second World War and the horror of Auschwitz, indelibly marked the collective conscience and portrayed in a brutal and direct manner the 'banality of evil' that potentially lies within each of us. It is therefore essential to reflect on this issue, which permeates our lives, because, as Jabès reminds us: “De ce silence, que le mot sensibilise, nous sommes responsables”⁴.

II. Methodology and Research Questions

First of all, it should be noted that this project stems from a research on words. Thanks to the book *L'esercizio del silenzio*, by Pieraldo Rovatti, I developed a reflection on the terms that are connected to silence and being silent in literature: fragment, unspoken, unspeakable, unutterable, ineffable, discretion, *bavardage*, gap, digging in the word, emptiness, hole, absence, nothingness, lack, loss, pause, renunciation, ellipsis, trauma, mystery, *horror vacui*, aphasia, blank, opacity, unconscious, interruption, negative, deconstruction, failure, impossibility, inner host, shadow, suspension, space, unexpressed, substitution, removed, indefinite, intermittence, interval, enigmatic, implicit, concealment, occultation, disappearance, hushed, unknown, ignored, thought, invisible, scrap, withdrawal, mute, limit, paradox, exactness, visibility, metaphor, reticence, sinking.

Subsequently, I developed research questions from this terminology, which we will see later on and which are the backbone of the thesis.

From a methodological point of view, the thesis conforms to a comparative perspective, examining texts by British, French and Italian authors, thus uniquely European.

⁴ Ivi, p. 68.

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It was also chosen to develop the dissertation by following a diachronic axis, which runs from the end of the British 1800s, through the *entre-deux-guerres* and the French *après-guerre*, and ends in contemporary Italian literature.

It is clear that the critical framework also stretches along this chronological axis: from the 20th to the 21st century.

With regard to the methodological frame of reference, it seemed fundamental to distinguish how silence operates on works. The three categories identified are: works that express themselves through silence from an aesthetic point of view; works that express silence from a thematic point of view; works that express themselves in spite of silence, taking into account the notion of trauma.

First of all, however, we need to ask ourselves some general questions that were the guide to develop the other issues afterwards:

- How to tell the presence of silence in literature?
- How (with what methods) to represent (make appear) silence in a text?
- Is silence a physical space or an implicit structure?
- How can a writer mark silence through words? How does one 'write' silence? And how does one 'read' it?
- How do texts speak of silence?
- How do texts speak through silence?
- How do texts conceal silence through too many words?
- How do texts speak in spite of silence?
- Is silence an absence or a presence in the text?
- Silence belongs to the sense of hearing: how do we transpose it to the page, which is read through sight? What is the link between orality and writing in their relation to silence? Can one 'hear' a page?

Furthermore, since we are dealing with silence and therefore also with something perceptive, I felt it was also important to question the topic of reception:

- Is silence a psychological space for the reader or the writer?
- What are the categories for receiving silence in a work?
- Is there an objective reception of silence in a work or is everything left to the subjectivity of the reader?
- Where is silence: in the reader's experience or in that of the writer?
- Can one listen to silence? Can silence be read?

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From this set of questions, others have developed, which can be divided into three macro-groups that call for different approaches and that catalyse around the formal expression of silence, the telling of silence, and writing despite silence, or writing in a discrete way. And since the writing of silence can be considered according to these three categories, these call for different keys to analysis.

The first category is that of works that express themselves despite silence, that is, works in which the notion of trauma and post-trauma come into play. In particular, I chose to investigate the radical change that took place after Auschwitz, starting from Adorno's provocation that poetry, after Auschwitz, would be barbarism. The research questions that moved me were:

- What is the distinction between inexpressible, ineffable and unspoken? And what is their relationship to silence?
- How is the unspeakable translated into a text?
- Is there a link between lack, loss and silence?
- Is silence the renunciation of speech or the impossibility of saying?
- What is the connection between the notion of trauma and silence? How does silence dissolve and return to the word? Is there a poetic word after trauma?
- Is there a silence of the unconscious? Is there a silent repressed? How is it expressed?
- What has changed after Auschwitz? What is it right to say? What does one not want to say?
- What does silence conceal?
- Instead of looking at what is in a text, would it not be good to look at what is not there? What disappears? What is hidden? What is silent?
- What is the unspeakable?
- Why and on what topics is there a reticence in saying?

With particular attention to the notions of trauma, memory, the unspeakable, autobiography, *récit d'enfance*, *mal de vivre* and the unconscious, texts that present difficulties in expressing traumatic events and are therefore full of gaps, ellipses and blanks will be analysed here. A psychoanalytical approach to the texts will also be followed here, with peculiar reference to trauma studies and post-trauma studies, and with a focus on the dynamics of the unconscious, the inner monologue, and the stream of consciousness.

The second category is that of works that express silence, i.e. those texts that thematise silence, that bring it in as a theme, central or marginal, of narrative. Here again, I started from a series of research questions:

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- How do we thematise silence?
- What is the relationship between the too much said and the unsaid?
- Does silence serve to prevent *bavardage*? Or is *bavarder* a camouflage of silence?
- Is silence the death of dialogue or its perfect culmination?
- What is the relationship between silence and modesty?
- Are there silent or mute characters?
- Is there a relationship between silence and intimacy?
- Is there a connection between mystery, enigma and silence?
- In literature, silence is given as a pause, as an interruption, as a suspension: does writing allow for (self-)suspension?
- When the page is over-saturated with words, is the same effect of emptiness achieved? Between deafening noise and absolute silence, what is the relationship?

Here, there will be an analysis of themes, motifs, topoi according to a thematic criticism and a textual and hermeneutic analysis. In an attempt to overcome a reductive dichotomy between "silence as positive" and "silence as negative", it will be necessary to distinguish among unspeakable, ineffable, unconscious, unspoken, renunciation of saying, impossibility of saying, subversion in not saying. This category is very broad, just think of the presence of silent characters in texts.

Finally, the third category is that of works that express themselves through silence. Here, the aesthetics of silence, i.e. its forms, its structures, will be highlighted. The research questions from which I started are as follows:

- Is there an aesthetics of silence?
- Is there a rhetoric of silence?
- Is there a silent, moderate, discrete writing?
- The gaps, the ellipses, the blanks: what kind of silence do they represent?
- Is silence visually representable? What do the gaps and holes in the text say?
- What punctuation expresses silence?
- What structures express silence? Is there a rhythm (alternation of word and silence) that is slower and therefore more silent?
- Is there a lexicon of silence?
- Is there a connection between fragment and silence? Does silence surround fragments of the unspoken? Can it be investigated and interpreted?
- Does silence have a space in the text? Is it visible?

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- Does silence stand only as a pause in the intermittence of words? Are there meaningful intervals in the spacing?

- Can one 'be silent' in writing? How?

The basic idea is to analyse the text from the point of view of the lexicon, punctuation, structure, syntactic rhythm, spaces and metaphors, in such a way as to highlight the blanks, ellipses, gaps, suspension points: all 'silent' elements in the text, but bearers of more or less important meanings.

The studies on the stylistics of silence are varied, but basically, what is interesting is that there is a common idea of removing something, of stripping something from the text, and thus rethinking what is essential. Among others, Charlotte Lacoste spoke, in this sense, of what can be called an *écriture maigre*. As far as this part is concerned, we will make use of specific articles on each author plus a series of studies on textual analysis *tout court*, such as those of Roland Barthes with his *écriture blanche*.

III. The State of the Art: Literature and Music in 20th Century Critical Theory

Before delving into this area, a premise must be made: it is very complex, if not impossible, to find an exact correspondence between a literary text and a musical one, and it is necessary to maintain a distinction between writer and musician, between whom there is a clear separation of roles: a writer is not necessarily a musician and vice versa, and a literary text, however characterised by a strong musicality, is not a musical piece. Yet, having made this necessary differentiation, it is possible to classify different sequential planes, the musical and the literary, that do not exclude a possible competence in the other discipline and that present reciprocal influences.

Music and literature have shared points of convergence since antiquity, but here it is of interest to limit the research to the last century, in an attempt to elaborate an overview that shows in which areas criticism has yielded the most reliable results. Among those who dealt with music and literature in the 1950s, we can recognise three main texts:

1. *The World's Body*, by John Crow Ransom;
2. *Sound and Form in Modern Poetry*, by Harvey Gross;
3. *Music and Literature: a Comparison of the Arts* by Calvin Brown, who can be considered the progenitor of 20th century music-literary research.

It is precisely from the latter that various contributions derive, of which those of Steven Paul Scher, Carlo Majer and Werner Wolf are fundamental. Starting from these theoretical models and the

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classifications proposed by these scholars, it will be possible to elaborate a textual investigation of the works to be analysed.

Music and Literature is divided into several sections that examine the common elements between literature and music (rhythm, pitch, timbre); the correspondence between vocal music and literary text (novels and opera librettos); the influence of music on literature with the same formal, structural and compositional techniques (variations and leitmotifs); and finally the influence of literature on music and 'programme music'.

In this volume, Brown proposes three types of relationship between music and literature: *combination*, *substitution*, *influence* and *analogy*. *Combination* is the perfect collaboration between the two arts, which corresponds to vocal music. *Substitution*, on the other hand, is the occurrence of one art's attempt to overlap the other through methods and forms typical of each discipline. In the transition from a musical work to a literary text, this category is realised through three different types: *analysis*, *imitation* and *interpretation*. *Analysis* refers to the study of the presence of musicological content within a literary work. Through *imitation*, the text reproduces the effects of music through rhetorical devices. Lastly, *interpretation* is the literary description of a piece of music, the invention of narrative passages that correspond to musical aspects of an aesthetic nature. *Influence*, on the other hand, consists of the combination of the structures and forms of both arts.

Brown's studies subsequently paved the way for modern comparative music-literary research and provided it with an important theoretical foundation. Primarily, it is Steven Paul Scher who continued Brown's legacy with his *Word and Music Studies. Essays on Literature and Music*. Scher proposes a systematisation of the relationship between the two arts in three sections: *Musik und Literatur* (music and literature); *Literatur in der Musik* (literature in music); *Musik in der Literatur* (music in literature). The latter section is particularly interesting because it analyses how music interacts with literature and forms the frame of the narrative. There are two possible levels of interaction at this point: *word music* and *verbal music*. The former concerns the imitation of the acoustic structures of music through literary rhetorical devices, such as onomatopoeia. It is instead the category of *verbal music* that suggests more developments. This corresponds to the way literature uses to represent, display and communicate musical forms, fictitious or existing⁵. By *verbal music* Scher means any literary text (in poetry or prose) that generates or simulates a musical composition and uses a musical piece as its theme. It is here that the category of theme appears for the first time in music-literary studies: it is the first technical musical term invested in literature. Kundera will

⁵ "By verbal music I mean any literary presentation (whether in poetry or prose) of existing or fictitious musical compositions: any poetic texture which has a piece of music as its "theme". [...] Although verbal music may, on occasion, contain onomatopoeic effects, it distinctly differs from word music, which is exclusively an attempt at literary imitation of sound". Steven Paul Scher, *Word and Music Studies. Essays on Literature and Music*, Amsterdam-New York, Rodopi, 2004, pp. 25-26.

return to this at length in his *The Art of the Novel*. If the text also makes use of “artistically structured words” in relation to the music whose “effects or suggestions” it wants to reproduce, verbal music is, according to the scholar, a “literary phenomenon”, its nature is primarily literary⁶. In short, while word music aims at the poetic imitation of musical sound, verbal music aspires to reproduce the suggestions produced by music.

It was later Scher's students, and in particular Werner Wolf, who founded the set of studies called *intermediality*. This is a concept coined in 1983 by Aage Hansen Lowe with regard to German studies, but is currently also in use with regard to English research⁷. Intermediality is the set of relationships between different media. In short, it is an aesthetic phenomenon, a new discipline that brings into play the aesthetic processes of all the arts, with their own expressive and communicative means.

In *The Musicalisation of Fiction. A study in the theory and history of Intermediality*, Wolf argues that the comparison between music and literature stems from their common communicative need⁸ and emphasises how there is a mutual exchange between music and literature, which contaminate each other. In fact, although there is a marked distinction between a text and its possible musical adaptation, for Wolf it is possible to speak of the musicalisation of literature. It is for this reason that terms such as counterpoint or fugue can also be used in a literary text.⁹ This musicalisation represents a case of intermediality.

It is no coincidence that Guy Scarpetta has written that one of the main aesthetic innovations introduced by Milan Kundera is precisely that he has taken the phenomenon of the *musicalisation* of the novel, already inaugurated by Hermann Broch, to its apex, “thus taking part in that 'interaction between the arts' in which the most effervescent areas of artistic invention are today located in the various fields”¹⁰.

What we are interested in exploring, however, is not the musicalisation of the novel in the sense of the reproduction of musical forms within it, which has already been extensively studied by critics in the last century, but rather the opposite phenomenon: silence.

⁶ “[...] verbal music is a literary phenomenon. Its texture consists of artistically organized words which relate to music only in as much as they strive to suggest the experience or effects of music”. Ibidem.

⁷ “I would like to preserve basic elements of Scher’s typology, while integrating it into a larger context. This larger context is constituted by the various relations between the media, regardless of their status as recognized art. The most useful term to designate this larger field is 'intermediality’”. Werner Wolf, *Intermediality revisited. Reflections on Word and Music relations in the context of a general typology of Intermediality*, in AA.VV., *Word and Music studies. Essays in honor of Steven Paul Scher and on cultural identity and the musical stage*, Amsterdam-New York, Rodopi, 2002, p. 16.

⁸ “In both arts finite and intentionally organized works or 'texts' are produced for some kind of communication”. Werner Wolf, *The musicalization of fiction. A study in the theory and history of Intermediality*, Amsterdam-Atlanta, Rodopi, 1999, p. 12.

⁹ Ivi, pp. 12-13. Wolf compares Bach's Fugue IV from the *Art of Fugue* (1750) with William Blake's poetic text *Laughing Song* from the collection *Songs of Innocence* (1789).

¹⁰ Guy Scarpetta, *L'Age d'or du roman*, Paris, Grasset, 1996, pp. 84-85, trans. By Simona Carretta in *Composizione versus combinazione. Kundera e il ritorno alla forma*, in *Il verri* n. 71, Milano, edizioni del verri, ottobre 2019.

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In both music and literature, silence is a fundamental element and is a fundamental, and graphically present, part of both the musical score and the literary text. The first research question I will ask is therefore: is it possible for a work to speak through silence?

This chapter will attempt to draw some parallels between music and literature with regard to the role silence plays in both arts. First of all, it will be necessary to consider the ontological status of silence, and only then its main declinations in music and its way of belonging to literature. In these considerations, an analysis of the role of the reader and listener cannot be missing: a necessarily active and generative role, which not only deciphers the work's silences but also gives them meaning and significance.

With regard to literature in particular, space will be given to the questions: how to give voice to the void? How to say the unspeakable? Silence is in fact often the expression of an impossibility of saying linked to the notion of trauma. Yet it is often precisely the unspoken that is the privileged place to construct meaning: one can say less to mean more.

IV. Silence in Music

Silence, in music, is commonly understood as the absence of sound. Therefore, it is considered a fundamental component of music. Being obviously devoid of tone, timbre and intensity, the only trait it shares with sound is duration. This implication is explicitly emphasised from the 20th century onwards.

Until the twentieth century, in fact, silence was a scarcely discussed topic in aesthetic studies of music. This is not because silence did not have a role and value in music: just think of the function of pauses. However, it is only since the beginning of the 20th century that there has been a radical appreciation of silence, mainly due to three aesthetic currents: modernism, avant-garde and post-modernism.

Why artists, and musicians in particular, only then became interested in silence is an interesting question. First of all, one might think, following the assumption of 'the end of art' announced by Hegel, that since all expressive possibilities had already been exhausted by a rich past, only silence remained as the only option for critical artists. Many aesthetic theorists linked the emphasis on silence in the arts to the advent of an anti-art necessary to claim the autonomy of art¹¹.

¹¹ "As the activity of the mystic must end in a *via negativa*, a theology of God's absence, a craving for the cloud of unknowing beyond knowledge and for the silence beyond speech, so art must tend toward anti-art, the elimination of the 'subject' (...), the substitution of chance for intention, and the pursuit of silence". Susan Sontag, *Styles of radical Will*, Farrar, New York, Straus and Giroux, 1969, p. 5.

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Silence, therefore, comes to be identified as one of the most extreme techniques for the obliteration of art and is the result of a dialectical process in art history. A second hypothesis for the increasing use of silence in art is that the aesthetics of silence is connected to inhuman historical situations such as the Shoah. Theodor W. Adorno stated that it would be impossible to make poetry after Auschwitz, and this could also be applied to music.

However, silence can also have a positive valence: silence is regarded as a musical element. The concept of silence is not merely negative but can also enhance the artist's expressive potential.

In relation to music, there are two opposing ontological theories regarding silence: the first sees silence as the eternal plane of being; the second sees it as a break in the eternal noise of being. As far as post-modernism is concerned, John Cage is the composer who first emphasised silence in music. Breaking all traditional boundaries, he was the first to create a piece by instructing the musician not to play his instrument. In this way, the music commonly conceived by the audience as silence becomes the whole of the sounds of the surrounding environment. Cage sees this piece as emblematic of the idea that any sound can constitute music and that silence does not exist.

What role does silence play in relation to music then? First of all, silence can be seen as a background and a necessary condition for music to occur. As a background, it can be compared to the blank canvases on which painters paint their works. Just as the painter needs a blank canvas and the writer a blank page, in the same way the musician prefers a silent environment to give life to the sounds he intends to create. Music needs silence to be able to emerge. Without silence, the notes of a musical composition, which are time units conceived as separated from incidental background sounds, are very difficult to distinguish. If there were no silence, there would be no music.

In this sense - silence considered as an empty background, and thus as an optimal condition for music to unfold - it is conceived as a kind of nothingness or emptiness. Many musicians reflected on the status of the background on which they played. Among the most famous, Debussy promoted open-air music because he liked the idea of music bonding with the surrounding sounds¹².

Undoubtedly the composer with the most radical ideas in this area is John Cage with his *Silent Pieces*, which aim to create music out of the background, i.e. to create music out of silence, which in the musician's theoretical writings is considered sound: "Music is only a word; silence and music are already sound, and it is sound all over again. Or noise"¹³. In the light of these considerations, silence becomes something, and no longer nothing, and we are constantly subjected to an eternal continuation of sound. This leads to the conclusion that it is impossible for a living being to experience silence.

¹² "It would float from the tops of trees, through the light of the open air, and any harmonic progression that sounded stifled within the confines of a concert hall would certainly take on a new significance". *Debussy on Music: The Critical Writings of the Great French Composer Claude Debussy*, New York, CUP, 1977, p. 92.

¹³ John Cage, *For the Birds*, Boston/London, Marion, Boyars, 1981, p. 39.

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Yet, perhaps there are other ways to empirically experience silence that go beyond Cage's considerations. Eugen Fink for example considers silence as a background and condition for the occurrence of music, as mentioned above:

Silence [...] as the conditioning and releasing space for sound-objects is not simply soundless in the sense of absence of tones, sounds and noise. Silence is the open, the worldly primary heard in every hearing.¹⁴

Fink thus suggests that silence as background in music has nothing to do with the empirical absence of sound: background is not the actual presence of multiple indeterminate sounds coming together in a decomposed sound field. This could only be the case for a passive listener who does not pay attention to what he hears. However, for an attentive listener, it would be possible to hear both the sound that is the object of attention and the silence that precedes and follows it:

Like the hunter on a look-out or the soldier on a vantage point in front of his enemy who are in an alert and a sharp tensed preparedness to hear. They listen and hear – nothing. This hearing-nothing hardly means not hearing anything; it is an extreme form of openness, they hear the silence. And silence is the most hidden, occupied and filled world-space of hearing [...]. It is the void that precedes any filling.¹⁵

This conception of active listening differs from the passive attitude described by Cage towards sound. Fink's idea corresponds to the silence required by the conductor of an orchestra before it begins to play. Thus, every piece of music actually begins with silence, which comes to be the first tone of all music. The music begins before the first notes are played.

There is another conception of silence in relation to music. To understand it, it is necessary to return to Cage and his thesis that the background of every acoustic event in the world always already consists of sound or noise, i.e. silence as such is impossible: what is commonly conceived as silence is in fact already sound. It is precisely from this assumption of constant sound that it is possible to highlight another ontological status of silence: silence conceived as an interruption of this fundamental situation of eternal noise. This perspective is expressed by Jankélévitch:

Le temps nu et abstrait est un temps silencieux, mais le devenir rempli d'événements et d'occurrences, mais le devenir meuble de contenus concrets fait du bruit. Les bruits se succèdent et les sons impliquent une continuation intensive, comme les notes expressément tenues qu'un chanteur fait vibrer : le temps est donc leur dimension

¹⁴ Eugen Fink, "Orphische Wandlung", in *Philosophische Perspektiven 4*, Frankfurt a/M, Suhrkamp, 1972, p. 81.

¹⁵ Ibidem.

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naturelle. Et inversement la mort est le marasme qui, arrêtant le devenir et le mouvement, fait taire les événements bavards.¹⁶

Thus, silence is regarded as a primary condition: first there is an original silence, a situation devoid of sound, upon which the sound of music then comes to life. From an ontological point of view then, silence is the original background of Being. Assuming that every existing object is in becoming and therefore in movement, and that every movement produces an acoustic vibration, Being is nothing but an outgrowth on the original silence that precedes Being. At this point, music and poetry are the last temporal edifices that animate time with their rhythms and melodic noise¹⁷. Furthermore, Jankélévitch introduces a concept of silence as a 'discontinuous pause' that is a cessation of noise and a solution of continuity¹⁸. This is the same kind of silence that writers and philosophers seek, that which leads to rest of the soul and enables creative production. Following this advice from Jankélévitch, silence can be set to music. It is here that we see an opposition between Debussy, who uses silence as an interruption of the eternal silence discussed earlier, and Fauré, whose silence brings peace: it is silence that interrupts noise. Unlike Debussy, the silence that Jankélévitch evokes when speaking of Fauré is not a nothingness that brings anxiety or anguish, it is not Heidegger's nothingness, but rather it is a garden in the desert: "un havre de recueillement et de quiétude"¹⁹.

To conclude, silence understood as the exact absence of sound is an abstraction, an unreachable limit. However, to assert that silence cannot be experienced and therefore does not exist is an assumption that leads to insuperable barriers, because it leads to the connotation of 'existing' only to that which exists in itself. Instead, in the above example, we can consider that the experience of silence is real. Moreover, it should not be forgotten that it has a function within music.

So far, silence has been treated as the absence of sound, as a background for music, as a primary matrix. However, it is clear that silence also has an intrinsic function in music: just as humanity needs silence to breathe in the hustle and bustle of everyday life, music also needs to breathe. Formally, the breaths of music are the pauses. These are essential for the creation of a musical form:

The longer and shorter silences make it possible for music to have interruptions and respirations between the different movements of a cycle, smaller phases such as the curves of periods, phrases, motives or sometimes singular notes.²⁰

¹⁶ Vladimir Jankélévitch, *La musique et l'ineffable*, Paris, Seuil, 1983, p. 146.

¹⁷ Cf. Ivi, p. 147.

¹⁸ Cf. Ivi, p. 150.

¹⁹ Ivi, p. 151.

²⁰ Zofia Lissa, *Aufsätze zur Musikästhetik*, Berlin, Henschel, 1969, p. 162-163.

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These silences are subject to the metric rhythm of music and belong organically to the musical process to which they contribute through exact tempos. As Jankélévitch argues, “la musique ne respire que dans l’oxygène du silence”²¹.

Besides pauses, a further explicit manifestation of silence in music is the *pianissimo*: a musical device that aims to express silence from within the musical process. Through the use of *pianissimo*, composers go to the limit of sound: “Les grands maîtres du pianissimo, Fauré, Debussy et Albeniz se meuvent à la limite du bruit et du silence, dans la zone-frontière [...]”²². Thus, the minimal sound of *pianissimo* gives the composer the opportunity to represent silence, making it audibly perceptible in the midst of other sounds. These functional uses of silence prove that silence is not nothing: it is too important and vital for music and fundamental to the human soul.

The first assumption we can therefore derive, and which will be the starting point for our reflections, is that silence is not an acoustic phenomenon but a social construct. There is no absence of sound in human life, except for those who are deaf, for whom, however, silence does not exist, since they have no sound with which to contrast it.

In short, silence as a phenomenon can only be defined in contrast to sound. Consequently, silence is *de-facto* a type of sound, contrasted with other sounds. The element of contrast is fundamental. In both music and speech, moments of silence are intended and constructed. This leaves room for the so-called 'sounds of silence', the vibrations of the external environment.

John Cage, with his famous composition *4'33''*, intends to demonstrate how distinguishing music from silence is a problem of cognitive framing: what the audience would normally define as silence is instead redefined as sound.

To address this distinction, it is necessary to make a premise and define the concepts of 'ground' and 'figure'. Ground is the disregarded phenomenon against which the figure is presented and shown by contrast. In art, ground is the blank canvas. The phenomenon we label silence has a dual function as both high information content and low information content. Specifically recognised music has a high information content compared to the sound of the environment that precedes and follows it. This environment is consequently designated as silence and has a low information content because it represents the ground against which the music becomes a figure. By contrast, a pause during music has a high information content because it becomes a figure against the ground of the musical expression that is taking place.

²¹ Vladimir Jankélévitch, *La musique et l'ineffable*, cit., p. 151.

²² Ivi, p. 158.

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Music consists of phrases, just like human speech. These phrases are separated from each other by spaces of silence, which serves to mark boundaries between the units of music. There are different types of boundaries. The primary boundary is the one that marks the beginning and end of the piece of music. Secondary boundaries mark sections within a piece of music. Tertiary boundaries mark the pauses in musical phrases.

Another concept fundamental to an aesthetics of silence is that of counterpoint: in counterpoint music, several voices engage in 'conversation' during the unfolding of a work. Musical phrases are followed by a silence during which the other voices produce a response or extension of the original. In this turn-by-turn conversation, the individual voices in the music adopt silence in front of the other voices as the music proceeds.

Another observation for a complete discourse on silence in music is necessary regarding John Cage's *4'33"*. Larry J. Solomon has provided a brief description of it:

The piece lasts for four minutes and thirty-three seconds in which the performer plays nothing. It was first performed by the young pianist David Tudor at Woodstock, New York on August 29, 1952. Tudor placed the hand-written score, which was in conventional notation with blank measures, on the piano and sat motionless as he used a stopwatch to measure the time of each movement. The score indicated three silent movements, each of a different length, but when added together totalled four minutes and thirty-three seconds [30", 2'23", 1'40"]. Tudor signaled its commencement by lowering the keyboard lid of the piano. The sound of the wind in the trees entered the first movement. After thirty seconds of no action, he raised the lid to signal the end of the first movement. It was then lowered for the second movement, during which raindrops pattered on the roof. The score was in several pages, so he turned the pages as time passed, yet played nothing at all. The keyboard lid was raised and lowered again for the final movement, during which the audience whispered and muttered.²³

Cage's conclusion was this: "Try as we may to make a silence, we cannot"²⁴. The point is that the sound of the environment is music. Cage thus redefined the relationship between music, figures and everyday life, which comes to be the ground on which music is played: "What the piece is trying to say is that everything we do is music, or can become music"²⁵. For the sake of accuracy, it should be mentioned that the piece has been played four times: the first time by David Tudor at Woodstock in 1952, the last three by John Cage himself at Harvard Square, in Harlem and in Cologne.

The conclusions after Cage are as follows: the social construction of silence is made clear; the distinctions of information between figure and ground are eliminated: the ground *is* the figure and has a high information content; the boundary between performance and non-performance is blurred;

²³ See Calvin Tomkins, *The Bride & the Bachelors*, New York, Penguin/Viking, 1965.

²⁴ John Cage, *Silence: Lectures and Writing*, Wesleyan Univ Pr., 1961, p. 8.

²⁵ See Richard Kostelanetz, ed., *Conversing with Cage*, New York, Limelight, 1988.

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the contrapuntal nature of silence is brought into play: without any distinct voice, everything in the world is a counterpoint to something else.

According to Giorgio Agamben, interpreting Aristotle, human beings are different from all other animals because they know privation, that is, they are capable of their own powerlessness.

When we do not see (that is, when our vision is potential), we nevertheless distinguish darkness from light; we see darkness. [...] if potentiality were, for example, only the potentiality for vision and if it existed only as such in the actuality of light, we could never experience darkness (nor hear silence, in the case of the potentiality to hear). But human beings can, instead, see shadows (to skotos), they can experience darkness: they have the potential not to see, the possibility of privation.²⁶

If by closing our eyes we can see darkness, it is equally not true that by closing our ears we can hear silence: we are unable to close our ears and we are unable to block out any but the softest external sounds. Conditions of absolute silence can only be experienced in an anechoic chamber by means of elaborate technology. However, Cage, who had this experience at Harvard University, stated that he did not hear silence, but two sounds:

It was after I got to Boston that I went into the anechoic chamber at Harvard University. Anybody who knows me knows this story. I am constantly telling it. Anyway, in that silent room, I heard two sounds, one high and one low. Afterward I asked the engineer in charge why, if the room was so silent, I had heard two sounds. He said, "Describe them." I did. He said, "The high one was your nervous system in operation. The low one was your blood in circulation."²⁷

As Karl Katschthaler²⁸ notes, the experience of the anechoic chamber shows that there is no silence in psychoacoustic terms. This does not mean, however, that silence does not exist in psychological terms. Moreover, this experience told Cage that there is no silence in terms of the absolute absence of sound. Consequently, his intention with *4'33"* was not to show the absence of music as the presence of silence, but rather to make us hear a vast amount of sounds that are absent when we listen to the presence of music. Katschthaler adds:

Nevertheless there obviously is a potentiality of silence. Just like sound, silence too has the potential to be and the potential to not-be. Silence has the potential to be even when there is sound. This kind of silence occurs when nobody is listening. It is the absence of the perception of sound. In Woodstock in 1952, people do not listen to

²⁶ Giorgio Agamben, *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy*, Stanford, CA Stanford UP, 1999, p. 180.

²⁷ John Cage, *A Year from Monday*, Middletown, CT Wesleyan UP, 1969, p. 134.

²⁸ Cf. Karl Katschthaler, *Absence, Presence and Potentiality: John Cage's 4'33" Revisited*, in Werner Wolf and Walter Bernhart, *Silence and Absence in Literature and Music*, Leiden | Boston, Brill Rodopi, 2016.

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the ambient sounds of nature but regard 4'33" a bad joke. In Harlem in 1973, teenagers do not listen to the urban soundscape but break the silence and ask questions. Finally, in Cologne in 1986, the people at the exhibition opening do not even realize that there could have been something to listen to. Silence in terms of not-listening occurs in all these performances of Cage's silent piece. Probably against his intentions John Cage did not only show us that there is *no* silence, he also showed us that there *is* silence.²⁹

John Cage therefore attempted to remove the conscious intentions of the composer from the process of creating music. This was because he believed that the composer's responsibility was not about self-expression, but about opening a window for other sounds to be perceived. This means that music is not, according to him, about creating beautiful sounds, but rather about altering the listener's perception: bringing silence into his compositions was aimed at this.

Cage's aesthetics of non-intentionality was later pursued by composers such as Lucifer, Reich and Riley, who, in different ways, used random processes to construct music in a way that went beyond conscious production and introduced repetitive elements and structural innovations to add emotional depth and energy in the listener.

Still on the subject of silence, it will be useful to delve into the thought expressed by Jankélévitch in his volume *La musique et l'ineffable*, the last part of which is entirely dedicated to the relationship between music and silence.

The important initial observation that opens the essay is as follows: "Il y a dans la musique une double complication [...]. D'une part la musique est à la fois expressive et inexpressive, sérieuse et frivole, profonde et superficielle; elle a un sens et n'a pas de sens"³⁰. Unlike words, therefore, music does not carry an unambiguous meaning: "La musique n'exprime pas mot à mot, ni ne signifie point par point, mais suggère en gros"³¹. Or, as will be written a few pages later: "La musique signifie donc quelque chose en général sans jamais rien vouloir dire en particulier"³². This can also be said of silence, an integral part of music.

There are various ways in which music knows how to be silent, and Jankélévitch writes that decency is also one of them, which will also help us in the analysis of the literary texts we will see:

La marque de la pudeur n'est pas seulement de dire *autre chose*, mais aussi et surtout d'en dire *moins* ; et par le mot « moins » il faut entendre ici non pas une simple diminution quantitative, ou une intensité atténuée, mais une certaine qualité intentionnelle et pneumatique du discours. L'esprit de litote est celui de l'homme non plus

²⁹ Ivi, p. 177.

³⁰ Vladimir Jankélévitch, *La musique et l'ineffable*, cit., p. 9.

³¹ Ivi, pp. 65-66.

³² Ivi, p. 71.

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secret, mais discret et qui, réprimant en lui-même la furie expressive de l'*appassionato* et du *disperato*, reste constamment en retrait par rapport à l'émotion.³³

Saying less, that is, not only quantitatively but also in terms of intensity, is also a characteristic of music. A particular case is that of the litotes:

La litote prouve déjà l'indépendance de la qualité par rapport à la quantité, et manifeste paradoxalement l'efficacité expressive d'une expression contenue : l'inexpressif, et *a fortiori* la moindre expression suggèrent le sens, et parfois plus puissamment que l'expression complète et directe ; car comme le mieux est l'ennemi du bien, ainsi le trop se détruit lui-même dialectiquement. Chacun le sait, ce n'est pas en disant tout qu'on s'exprime le mieux : la fin du Socrate de Satie atteste la force convaincante de la réticence, la force d'une émotion soustraite, et qui ne doit rien à la gesticulation. On sait à quelle profondeur d'émotion chez Fauré, à quelle puissance d'évocation chez Debussy l'esprit de litote peut atteindre... Car le superlatif est ordinairement plus faible que le positif ! La véritable éloquence ne se moque-t-elle pas des adjectifs de l'éloquence ?³⁴

To say it all is not to say it better, and to say too much is not to say thoroughly: this is as true in music as it is in literature, where we begin to perceive that the spaces we habitually assume as empty or as silent are in fact fundamental and not only allow the text and the music to breathe, but are also places of indeterminacy that allow us to read other meanings, beyond the surface of the text or score.

With regard specifically to silence in relation to music, Jankélévitch considers various philosophies, but his starting point is as follows: “La musique tranche sur le silence, et elle a besoin de ce silence comme la vie a besoin de la mort et comme la pensée, selon le *Sophiste* de Platon, a besoin du non-être”³⁵. However, the musicologist states, the relationship between silence and noise can also be conceived in the opposite way:

Selon la continuation empirique, au contraire, c'est le silence qui est une ‘pause’ discontinue dans la continuité d'un bruitage incessant : le bruit n'est plus un silence suspendu, mais à l'inverse le silence est une cessation du bruit et une solution de continuité [...]. Le silence était la toile de fond sous-tendue à l'être : et maintenant c'est le bruit qui est le fond sonore tendu sous le silence.³⁶

In short, our life would be immersed in a background of constant noise, and not silence to be filled. Silence, according to this view, especially in the contemporary era, in which humanity tends

³³ Ivi, p. 61.

³⁴ Ivi, p. 64.

³⁵ Ivi, p. 147.

³⁶ Ivi, p. 147.

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towards *divertissement* to ward off the anguish of loneliness, would rather be an island in the middle of an ocean of noise. Looking for musical examples, Jankélévitch writes:

C'est plutôt chez Debussy que la musique surgit du silence, que la musique est un silence interrompu ou provisoirement suspendu. Tout entière en sourdine, la musique de Fauré, à l'inverse, est elle-même un silence et un bruit interrompu, un silence interrompant le bruit.³⁷

Whether music arises from silence or the opposite, in any case Jankélévitch concludes by stating that:

les silences et soupirs intramusicaux, qui sont des pauses nombrées, chronométrées, minutées, aèrent la masse du discours selon une exacte métronomie : car la musique ne respire que dans l'oxygène du silence. Et inversement la musique ambiante filtre, par osmose, à l'intérieur de la mesure vide pour en colorer et en qualifier le silence. De même quelles micro-silences, silences minutés à l'intérieur du silence, ventilent la mélodie continue, de même les plages de silence sont au milieu du bruitage universel un asile de repos et de rêverie. Au lieu de s'étourdir de bavardage pour meubler à tout prix le pesant silence, l'homme recherche maintenant les nappes et les flaques de silence pour couper court au bavardage ; son propos n'est plus le divertissement, mais le recueillement.³⁸

From this brief paragraph, we can draw the conclusion that in music, pauses represent possible silence and are its breath, and that man, at the same time, needs silence to collect his thoughts.

However, absolute silence as such does not exist: "le silence absolu est, comme l'espace pur ou le temps nu, une inconcevable limite"³⁹. On this, many philosophers including Bacon, Kant, Leibniz, Schelling and Bergson have already spent words. Consequently, the most common silence to which humanity is accustomed is the silence of words:

le silence nous repose du bavardage assourdissant comme la parole nous repose du silence accablant. Le silence n'est donc pas non-être, puisqu'il est simplement *autre* chose que le bruit des paroles. S'il est vrai que la *loquela*, comme disent les prédicateurs, est le bruit humain par excellence, le mutisme qui supprime ce bruit sera un silence privilégié. La musique est le silence des paroles [...]. La musique, présence sonore, remplit le silence, et pourtant la musique est elle-même une manière de silence.⁴⁰

³⁷ Ibidem.

³⁸ Ivi, pp. 151-152.

³⁹ Ivi, p. 152.

⁴⁰ Ivi, pp. 154-155.

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Between words and silence there is thus a relationship very similar to that between music and silence. Music comes to be conceived as the silence of words because it imposes silence and at the same time fills that silence:

La musique, qui fait elle-même tant de bruit, est le silence de tous les autres bruits, car lorsqu'elle élève la voix, elle prétend être seule, occuper seule l'espace vibrant [...]. La musique est une espèce de silence, et il faut du silence pour écouter la musique ; il faut du silence pour écouter le mélodieux silence; [...] la musique impose silence au ronron des paroles, c'est-à-dire au bruit le plus facile et le plus volubile de tous, qui est le bruit de bavardages.⁴¹

Music is understood as a form of silence that prevents the *bavardage* of speech, so it is itself a suspension of useless noise and useless speech, it is itself a pause. Moreover, the silence of music is also constitutive of music:

Et non seulement la musique est le silence du discours, mais le silence de la musique est lui-même un élément constitutif de la musique audible. Non seulement la musique a besoin du silence des paroles pour chanter, mais encore le silence l'habite et l'assourdit. Le laconisme, la réticence et le *pianissimo* sont ainsi comme des silences dans le silence.⁴²

The three modes that music uses to create silence are silences within silence. These reticences are considered, by Jankélévitch, privileged silences, since "*ne pas dire* est souvent plus persuasif que *tout dire*"⁴³. Finally, in a speech that can also be used in literature, Jankélévitch writes:

Et la musique elle-même, on l'a vu, s'exprime parfois non point exhaustivement, mais allusivement et à demi-mot : le logos suspendu chez Plotin, la "sérénade interrompue" chez Debussy sont deux manières d'étrangler l'éloquence et deux formes de la pudeur humaine devant l'indicible. Ce qui nous disent, les points de suspension de sous-entendu ? ils nous disent : complétez vous-mêmes.⁴⁴

Places of suspension in music are as significant as those in literature: they are faults in the text that invite the listener/reader to fill them with meaning, to complete the text. Jankélévitch concludes his reflections by writing:

Le silence, qui n'est pas un moindre être, une dégradation ou raréfaction du bruit, un caractère privatif ou négatif du milieu sonore [...] n'est pas davantage une positivité à l'envers. Il est plénitude à sa manière et, à sa manière,

⁴¹ Ivi, p. 155.

⁴² Ivi, p. 156.

⁴³ Ibidem.

⁴⁴ Ivi, pp. 156-157.

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véhicule de quelque chose d'autre : par-dessous la plénitude banale et affairée de la vie quotidienne, il nous découvre une plénitude plus dense, une plénitude inspirante, autrement peuplée, habitée par des voix : il renverse ainsi le rapport vulgaire du plein et du vide.⁴⁵

Silence therefore becomes a form of fullness that conveys other meanings and gives access to other voices that inhabit us.

V. Silence and Philosophy of Language

Among the volumes devoted to silence, of particular interest for our research is *Silence in Philosophy, Literature, and Art* by Steven L. Bindeman, which proposes an interdisciplinary reflection on this phenomenon ranging from the philosophy of language to literature and art. Bindeman starts from the premise that silence is absence and presence, emptiness and fullness, negative and positive space, all at the same time. This is because silence transcends logic and is independent of reason. What Bindeman intends to demonstrate, with many examples, is that “silence, as a form of indirect discourse, can provide us with access to important and hitherto inaccessible aspects of human experience”⁴⁶.

In philosophy, those who have dealt most with silence are Kierkegaard, Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Blanchot, Foucault, Merleau-Ponty. In psychology we find Carl Rogers, Milton Erickson and Eugene Gendlin. Finally, for an analysis of silence in the artistic field, we will have to tackle Susan Sontag's essay. In the course of this study, of course, we will also employ the ideas expressed by Steiner, Freud, Jung, Lacan, Winnicott, Kristeva, Derrida, and others.

A philosophical discourse on silence and its connection to language is needed as a methodological premise to define what silence in language is and is therefore indispensable in a study dealing with literature. In the following pages, therefore, a quick excursus will be proposed on the most relevant conceptions of silence that can be used in the analysis of the chosen authors.

For Kierkegaard, silence is “the demon's trap” because it can cut an individual off from society, but it is also a “leap of faith”, because it allows transcendence from the modern worldly world, in which one would otherwise live only in pain and boredom.

Wittgenstein, in his *Tractatus*, shows how silence can act as a creative function at the limits of language. As he wrote to his architect friend Paul Engelmann:

⁴⁵ Ivi, p. 170.

⁴⁶ Steven L. Bindeman, *Silence in Philosophy, Literature and Art*, Leiden | Boston, Brill Rodopi, 2017, p. 3.

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And this is how it is: if only you do not try to utter what is unutterable then nothing gets lost. But the unutterable will be – utterably – contained in what has been uttered.⁴⁷

Wittgenstein's distinction between “showing” and “saying”, rendered in his *Tractatus*, is useful in this context: “if we are careful in limiting our statements to what can be said clearly, then those experiences about which we cannot speak clearly (the unsayable) get shown”⁴⁸. The experience of silence understood as the tension between silence and words can then create a space for creativity and for other meanings that lie outside the boundaries of language. Silence only reveals itself at the limits of language, and yet we cannot know silence, because we cannot describe what it is. We can only describe the effects of silence: silence takes on meaning because it affects our lives.

Heidegger was interested in what happens when the limits of language are reached. It is necessary to reflect on the concept of 'breaking up words' in order to understand his theory: “An 'is' arises where the word breaks up. To break up here means that the sounding word returns into soundlessness... This breaking up of the word is the true step back on the way of thinking”⁴⁹. Breaking up a word for Heidegger means going beyond the surface of the word and surrounding it with silence in order to approach authentic saying. Similarly, Tetsuaki Kotoh, in his essay *Language and Silence* writes: “The true relationship between self and language is restored when the framework of everyday language breaks down to let silence emerge and give rise to creative language”⁵⁰. This exploration of the breaking of language into silence becomes for Heidegger the foundation of an authentic exploration of self. In *Being and Time*, the discourse continues:

Only in keeping silent does the conscience call; that is to say, the call comes from the soundlessness of uncanniness, and the Dasein which it summons is called back into the stillness of itself, and called back as something that is to become still. Only in reticence, therefore, is this silent discourse understood appropriately in wanting to have a conscience. It takes the words away from the common-sense idle talk of the ‘they’⁵¹.

Blanchot was concerned with what happens beyond the limits of thought, particularly in reference to madness and death, so that the call to silence for him evokes the ancestral fears of losing reason and losing life. His basic statement is: “Le silence est impossible. C’est pourquoi nous le désirons”⁵². Silence according to Blanchot is impossible for a number of reasons. Firstly, although it

⁴⁷ Paul Engelmann, *Letters from Ludwig Wittgenstein, With a Memoir*, L. Furtmuller, tr. B. McGuinness, Ed. Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1967 p. 7.

⁴⁸ Steven L. Bindeman, *Silence in Philosophy, Literature and Art*, cit., p. 47.

⁴⁹ Martin Heidegger, *On the Way to Language*, P. Hertz, tr. NY, Harper and Row, 1971, p. 108.

⁵⁰ Tetsuaki Kotoh, *Language and Silence*, in Graham Parkes, *Heidegger and Asian Thought*, University of Hawaii Press, 1987, p. 204.

⁵¹ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson, tr. NY, Harper and Row, 1962, p. 296.

⁵² Maurice Blanchot, *L'Écriture du Désastre*, Paris, NRF Gallimard, 1980, p. 23.

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cannot be separated from language, it is outside time, whereas language is not. Secondly, although silence is the space in which one writes, we still cannot preserve it, since the very act of writing breaks the silence that inspired it in the first place. However, “the call of silence reverberates within language itself”⁵³. In the short story *Death Sentence*, Blanchot writes:

Mon unique point fort fut mon silence. Un aussi grand silence, quand j’y réfléchis, m’apparaît incroyable, non pas un mérite, car parler, d’aucune manière je n’en eus l’idée, mais justement, que jamais le silence ne soit dit à lui-même : prends garde, il y a là quelque chose dont tu me dois compte, que ni ma mémoire, ni ma vie de chaque jour, ni mon travail, ni mes gestes, ni mes paroles, ni les mots sortis du bout de mes doigts n’aient de près ou de loin, fait allusion à quelque chose dont toute ma personne était physiquement occupée, cette réserve, je ne la puis comprendre, et moi qui, maintenant, parle, je me retourne amèrement vers ces journées, ces années silencieuses comme vers un pays inaccessible, irréel, fermé à tous et d’abord à moi-même, et où pourtant je suis demeuré pendant une grande part de vie, sans effort, sans tentation, par un mystère qui à présent m’étonne. Avoir perdu le silence, le regret que j’en éprouve est sans mesure. Je ne puis dir quel malheur envahit l’homme qui une fois a pris la parole.⁵⁴

In this passage we read an extreme fondness for silence, the paradox of which lies in the fact that speaking can be a way of maintaining silence, and even the will to do so is an affirmation of silence, as Bindeman claims: “Not only can silence speak louder and more effectively than words, but even with the right words we often say far less than if we hadn't said anything in the first place”⁵⁵.

Foucault focuses on the purely political and social aspect of silence, reasoning on power relations: he does not see a distinction between what one says and what one does not say, but rather between which speeches are authorised and which are not, historically.

Le mutisme lui-même, les choses qu'on se refuse à dire ou qu'on interdit de nommer, la discrétion qu'on requiert entre certains locuteurs, sont moins la limite absolue du discours, l'autre côté dont il serait séparé par une frontière rigoureuse, que des éléments qui fonctionnent à côté des choses dites, avec elles et par rapport à elles dans des stratégies d'ensemble. Il n'y a pas à l'aire de partage binaire entre ce qu'on dit et ce qu'on ne dit pas ; il faudrait essayer de déterminer les différentes manières de ne pas les dire, comment se distribuent ceux qui peuvent et ceux qui ne peuvent pas en parler, quel type de discours est autorisé ou quelle forme de discrétion est requise pour les uns et les autres. Il n'y a pas un, mais des silences et ils font partie intégrante des stratégies qui sous-tendent et traversent les discours.⁵⁶

⁵³ Maurice Blanchot, *The Step Not Beyond*, L. Nelson, tr. Albany, SUNY Press, 1992, p. 7.

⁵⁴ Maurice Blanchot, *L'Arrêt de mort*, Paris, Gallimard, 1948, pp. 56-57.

⁵⁵ Steven L. Bindeman, *Silence in Philosophy, Literature and Art*, cit., p. 136.

⁵⁶ Michel Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité*, Vol. 1, Paris, Gallimard, 1976, pp. 38-39.

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Hence, for Foucault, silence is a form of oppression and a key element in power relations. Furthermore, Foucault shows us how our silence is never only personal, but necessarily linked to a particular social context.

Merleau Ponty sees the dialogue between discourse and silence as a mirror of the dialogue between humankind and the world, since in dialogue each one connects with the meanings of the other. In this way, knowledge is a form of silence because silence surrounds discourse, becoming complementary to it rather than its opposite. In his book *La Prose du monde* we read:

Il nous faut considérer la parole avant qu'elle soit prononcée, sur le fond du silence qui la précède, qui ne cesse pas de l'accompagner, et sans lequel elle ne dirait rien ; davantage, il nous faut être sensible à ces fils de silence dont le tissu de la parole est entremêlé.⁵⁷

Thus, since in his system of thought I am not only subject to the world but also engaged in the activities of speaking and listening, then both speaking and listening require a number of modes of silence: being is then constantly in tension between silence and speech.

Le langage réalise en brisant le silence ce que le silence voulait et n'obtenait pas. Le silence continue d'envelopper le langage ; silence du langage absolu, du langage pensant.⁵⁸

Silence continues to be something that surrounds language and gives it density and depth. A further consideration regarding this philosopher is that “Merleau-Ponty notes that what is taken as an inner silence is in fact 'filled with words' in the form of what will here be characterised as 'inner speech'. Focally, a central form of auditory imagination is thinking as and in a language”⁵⁹. This means that the ear is a part of the mind because what we hear are words, and not sounds: “meaning in sound embodies language”⁶⁰. In fact, our mind is now trained to translate certain sounds in such a way that they take on meaning. An interesting further consideration by Merleau-Ponty is the following:

Il faudrait un silence qui enveloppe la parole de nouveau après qu'on s'est aperçu que la parole enveloppait le silence prétendu de la coïncidence psychologique. Que sera ce silence ? [...] ce silence ne sera *pas le contraire* du langage.⁶¹

⁵⁷ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *La Prose du monde*, Paris, Gallimard, 1969, p. 64.

⁵⁸ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Le visible et l'invisible*, Paris, Gallimard, 1964, p. 230.

⁵⁹ Don Ihde, *Listening and Voice: A Phenomenology of Sound*, Athens, Ohio University Press, 1976, p. 120.

⁶⁰ Ivi, p. 152.

⁶¹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Le visible et l'invisible*, cit., p. 233

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Sontag wondered how silence could contribute to the possibilities of art as a spiritual force in contrast to an increasingly secular culture. She came to the conclusion that the best art form was minimalism, because it resists interpretation and cannot be reduced to mere meaning. Indeed, silence can be liberating when it separates the mind from its intellectual limitations and points to new ways of thinking and feeling. In her essay *The Aesthetics of Silence*, which generates connections between art and silence, she suggests how art is not awareness, but its antidote:

As an activity of the mystic must end in a via negative, a theology of God's absence, a craving for the cloud of unknowingness beyond knowledge and for the silence beyond speech, so must art tend toward anti-art (the elimination of the "subject", the "object", the "image"), the substitution of chance for intention, and the pursuit of silence.⁶²

This conception of silence owes much to John Cage. Literal silence, as already shown, does not exist in nature: something always produces sound. Similarly, empty space does not exist. Silence is dialectical: we perceive emptiness only in contrast to fullness, and vice versa. Similarly, silence never ceases to imply its opposite: "As Oscar Wilde once pointed out, people didn't see the fog until certain 19th century artists taught them how. In this way, silence teaches us how to pay attention to the world around us. This was certainly the effect Cage hoped to attain with his music"⁶³. Sontag concludes by stating that in a world saturated with images that constantly devalue all sorts of meaning, when "the prestige of language falls, that of silence rises"⁶⁴. In response to this, the artists of modernity must revisit language in order to decontaminate it. At this point, there is a twofold problem: on the one hand, the lack of words; on the other, the fact that there are too many of them. Many artists then create silence as a form of cultural therapy: "what emerges is the incentive to peel back language and allow the things themselves to speak, in order to get away from false, language-clogged consciousness"⁶⁵.

In psychology, Rogers, Erickson and Gendlin used silence as part of their therapeutic techniques to great effect. The mechanisms of silence and repetition form the basis of their approach. Rogers listened to his patients and then repeated what they said to him without interpreting it, so that the patient corrected and redefined the speech more and more until silence was achieved, resulting in a deep understanding of the patient's condition. Erickson used the technique of mirroring the patient's behaviour to enter his world invisibly. Gendlin inserted spaces of silence into the dialogue with the patient so that the patient, after feeling heard, felt that there was nothing more to say. This allowed,

⁶² Susan Sontag, "The Aesthetics of Silence", in *Styles of Radical Will*, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1969, p. 3.

⁶³ Steven L. Bindeman, *Silence in Philosophy, Literature and Art*, cit., p. 21.

⁶⁴ Susan Sontag, "The Aesthetics of Silence", cit., p. 21.

⁶⁵ Steven L. Bindeman, *Silence in Philosophy, Literature and Art*, cit., p. 23.

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at a later stage, the experience of emptiness, which is the result of a silence that heals, where individual unity is reconstructed.

Within psychoanalysis, another essential contribution on silence is that of Jung, who reasoned on the concept of the shadow, *der Schatten*. Jung's shadow defines the set of psychic dispositions that are incompatible with the consciously chosen form of life:

By shadow I mean the “negative” side of the personality, the sum of all those unpleasant qualities we like to hide, together with the insufficiently developed functions and the contents of the personal unconscious.⁶⁶

The shadow is a moral problem that challenges the whole ego-personality, for no one can become conscious of the shadow without considerable moral effort. To become conscious of it involves recognizing the dark aspects of the personality as present and real. This act is the essential condition for any kind of self-knowledge, and it therefore, as a rule, meets with considerable resistance.⁶⁷

For Jung, the shadow is thus a decisive psychological function that is perceived by the subject as a dangerous, unpleasant zone that offers resistance and thus a reticence to be put into words. It is often an unconscious zone, which lends itself to being described by poets.

What is interesting, however, the following: “[Jung] ci avverte degli effetti straordinariamente negativi che conseguono alla decisione di ‘tagliare’ l’ombra da noi stessi o solo alla leggerezza con cui possiamo ‘calpestarla’, e ci rivolge l’interrogativo su quale tipo di esperienza sia in grado di ‘custodire’ l’ombra”⁶⁸. The answer is that the shadow has a close connection to language and must retain its metaphorical nature. The shadow is essential, as dualism and as ambivalence that inhabits us, and must be assimilated.

If it has been believed hitherto that the human shadow was the source of evil, it can now be ascertained on closer investigation that the unconscious man, that is, his shadow, does not consist only of morally reprehensible tendencies, but also displays a number of good qualities, such as normal instincts, appropriate reactions, realistic insights, creative impulses, etc.⁶⁹

One does not become enlightened by imagining figures of light, but by making the darkness conscious. The latter procedure, however, is disagreeable and therefore not popular.⁷⁰

⁶⁶ Carl Gustav Jung, *Selected Writings, 1875-1961*, London, Fontana Paperbacks, 1983, p. 87.

⁶⁷ Carl Gustav Jung, *Aion. Researches into the Phenomenology of the Self*, Vol. 9 of the *Collected Works*, second edition, Bollingen Series XX, Princeton, New York, Pantheon Books, 1953, p. 8.

⁶⁸ Pier Aldo Rovatti, *L’esercizio del silenzio*, cit., p. 50.

⁶⁹ Carl Gustav Jung, *Aion. Researches into the Phenomenology of the Self*, cit., p. 266.

⁷⁰ Carl Gustav Jung, *Alchemical Studies, Collected Works*, Volume 13, translated by R. F. C. Hull, Princeton, New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1967, p. 265.

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The meeting with oneself is, at first, the meeting with one's own shadow. The shadow is a tight passage, a narrow door, whose painful constriction no one is spared who goes down to the deep well. But one must learn to know oneself in order to know who one is.⁷¹

How can I be substantial without casting a shadow? I must have a dark side too if I am to be whole; and by becoming conscious of my shadow I remember once more that I am a human being like any other.⁷²

A dim premonition tells us that we cannot be whole without this negative side, that we have a body which, like all bodies, casts a shadow, and that if we deny this body we cease to be three-dimensional and become flat and without substance.⁷³

The shadow is what gives depth to the subject. Similarly, shadow is perceived as negative space, as is absence or silence. Yet without the shadow and without silence, the subject and words become empty, flat, insubstantial. Just as it is necessary then to preserve the shadow in the subject, it is necessary to preserve silence in language. The shadow, as well as silence, gives corporeity: without them we remain empty, sterile. Just as the shadow is a modality of light ("l'ombra è una modalità della luce"⁷⁴), so silence is a modality of speech. The experience of shadow, Jung tells us, requires suffering and therefore challenges us because it has to do with all dimensions of our existence. More than a change, it is a recognition, which occurs through the metaphor of language: "La distanza linguistica, che la metafora indica e trattiene, equivale alla 'prudenza' suggerita da Jung: introduce un pudore nella e della parola, uno scarto immaginale, un indebolimento della verità come referente oggettuale"⁷⁵.

For all these philosophers, in short, silence is a modality of the *word*. We return to the concepts expressed by Jabès and Rovatti according to which:

bisogna *imparare a scrivere* introducendo il silenzio. Far sì che le parole, da parole piene o miranti alla pienezza, si trasformino in parole *riempite* di silenzio.

Il contromovimento, iniziato con la sospensione, si realizza nella parola: è nella parola che va ora effettuata un'operazione di scavo.⁷⁶

Paradoxically, then, silence exists within a word, which produces sound. Silence exists, however, not as a phenomenon opposed to the word, but as a phenomenon within it. If silence is

⁷¹ Carl Gustav Jung, *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious, Collected Works*, Volume 9, cit., p. 21.

⁷² Carl Gustav Jung, *Modern Man in Search of a Soul*, London, Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co, 1933, p. 40.

⁷³ Carl Gustav Jung, *Two Essays on Analytical Psychology*, Princeton University Press, 1953, p. 35.

⁷⁴ Pier Aldo Rovatti, *L'esercizio del silenzio*, cit., p. 60.

⁷⁵ Ibidem.

⁷⁶ Ivi, p. 103.

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constitutive of the word, this means that Jabès is right: “Le silence est incontournable. Nous ne pouvons que le traverser”⁷⁷.

At the same time, Rovatti writes, silence also lies in the text: “Lo spazio vuoto che si ha bisogno di produrre è il modo con cui si cerca un avvicinamento, un’intensificazione dell’ascolto”⁷⁸. In reference to this, he adds a comparison with music:

Dorfles si riferisce soprattutto all’ambito dell’esperienza musicale. Per “ascoltare” l’esperienza occorre riconoscere l’importanza del silenzio, diminuire il rumore di fondo, allentare il troppo delle voci quotidiane. Il tempo dell’*epoché* sarebbe allora la riconquista del tempo nullo del silenzio.⁷⁹

It is no coincidence that Dorfles insists on a particular type of consciousness that he calls *intervallare*, which re-establishes pauses, stops, intervals and spacing. This time of suspension, which is null time of silence, is another time:

Poiché in questo tempo della sospensione c’è qualcosa di eminentemente soggettivo (addirittura un possibile ritrovamento), è proprio il soggetto a esperire in se stesso un rivolgimento radicale e rischioso: revoca di ogni difesa, spaesamento. Bisognerà dire allora che questo tempo è una sporgenza del soggetto al di là della sua abituale coscienza di sé. Il silenzio comporta un “meno”, ma questo allentamento, se è reale, non può essere agito in sicurezza. Eppure, se ci teniamo al di qua, sembra che manchiamo proprio la capacità innovativa e costitutiva di senso del pensiero.⁸⁰

Silence, once again, is a time of depth, as is the shadow in Jung.

The *epoché* Rovatti refers to is Husserl's problem. If we reason about the origin of this word, we note that in Greek *epéchein* means precisely to withhold, to suspend, to interrupt. Aristotle, in the *Poetica* (1458th, 26-30; but see also *Retorica*, 1405b, 3-5, and 1412th, 19-26), associates *enigma* with metaphor. *Enigma* means saying what one has to say by putting together impossible things: which of course cannot be achieved by joining together words in their ordinary signification, but by using their metaphorical substitutes. Rovatti then explains: “Enigma è un ‘parlare coperto’ (da *ainíssomai*), un ‘accennare oscuramente’ (da *ainigmós*). Ma c’è anche una parentela tra l’enigma e la favola (*aīnos*: cfr. Esopo): la favola è un impianto metaforico in cui bisogna leggere un significato senza che la risposta venga esplicitamente richiesta”⁸¹. Once again, it is a suspension that adds depth of meaning. Plutarch also reasons about this halt, which is the *epoché*, and for him it can be linked to the eclipse

⁷⁷ Edmond Jabès, *Un Étranger avec, sous le bras, un livre de petit format*, cit., p. 128.

⁷⁸ Pier Aldo Rovatti, *L’esercizio del silenzio*, cit., p. 88.

⁷⁹ Ibidem.

⁸⁰ Ivi, p. 89.

⁸¹ Ivi, p. 72.

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of the Moon. *Epoché* in fact measures the shadow, that is to say, it is a 'pause of light'. Hence the hypothesis that Rovatti makes regarding Husserl's phenomenology:

L'ipotesi, brevemente, è che il trattenersi abbia a che fare con l'ombra e che il risultato del trattenersi (che per Husserl è una modificazione radicale di tutto il nostro atteggiamento) corrisponda a un'apertura di senso che non è una semplice illuminazione, ma che può darsi soltanto nel registro metaforico dell'enigma, in una costellazione metaforica (o anche in un racconto, come ha suggerito Ricoeur) in grado di "misurare" l'ombra.⁸²

Epoché, the withholding of oneself, like the shadow, is not a reassuring act. It is a continuous exit from the self that involves repatriation, but which allows the discovery of otherness in the self. Husserl, regarding the language of *epoché*, states: "We lack names". Rovatti explains: "L'enigma non può essere sciolto con un atto di padronanza categoriale: può solo essere *percorso* (e dunque raccontato come si racconta una favola) introducendo una pausa, un silenzio, nella rappresentatività del linguaggio medesimo"⁸³.

Silence *in* and *of* the word, likewise, is not reassuring:

« Il m'arrive de ne voir dans le mot évidence que le vide qu'il récuse.

« Et ce vide, tragiquement, de l'aborder comme vide de toute existence », disait-il.⁸⁴

Les sachant, souvent, fatales nous taisons les paroles qui font mal.

Ainsi, tout aveu de souffrance est silence d'un mot.

Écrire, écrire ce silence.

Il n'y a pas de mots pour l'adieu.⁸⁵

Mais on ne peut tout raconter de sa souffrance.

« Il y a, disait-il, une part endurée de la douleur, que nous ne saurons jamais exprimer. »

Impuissance de la pensée.⁸⁶

Et si le blanc intervalle entre les mots écrits n'était que la voix étouffée de l'écrivain, l'imprenable espace laissé libre dont le vocable a besoin pour régner ?⁸⁷

Le rejet de la langue - ô désert. Le refus de parler, d'écrire, - ô faillite du livre.

Déchirer la page blanche pour ne plus être la proie de sa blancheur.

Le vocable est le bourdonnant insecte pris dans la toile d'une araignée laborieuse.

⁸² Ivi, p. 73.

⁸³ Ivi, p. 81.

⁸⁴ Edmond Jabès, *Un Étranger avec, sous le bras, un livre de petit format* cit., p. 77.

⁸⁵ Ivi, p. 79.

⁸⁶ Ivi, pp. 90-91.

⁸⁷ Ivi, p. 107.

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La page blanche est l'espace réservé à l'agile et vorace animal arthropode du silence.

« Prenez garde à la blancheur - disait-il. Elle cache un monstre avide.

« Dévorer est sa devise. »⁸⁸

The Stranger who inhabits us, according to Jabès, drops our defences and exposes us: “Ci espone a un gioco ambivalente, perché, mentre abitando l’estraneità che è in noi e che noi siamo a noi stessi, ‘diventiamo’, arricchiamo il nostro essere soggetti, lo possiamo fare, e lo facciamo, solo aprendoci e scoprendoci: dando piuttosto la parola al *nulla* e al *silenzio*. Correndo il rischio della perdita”⁸⁹.

Nous n’écrivons que la blancheur où s’écrit notre destin.

L'insupportable, avons-nous tendance à l'effacer, avant même de le dire et puis en le disant ?

Cet effacement nous engageant, justement, à mettre en mots ce qu'aucune phrase ne saurait, a priori, exprimer.

Vocables d'effacement plus que vocables effacés.

C'est que l'on ne peut jamais dire que le commencement de l'intolérable, le commencement, Ô tonique ingénuité, d'une parole qui se refuse à elle-même ; qui se tait pour être captée tue.

« Auschwitz - avait-il noté - échappe à ce commencement, restera toujours antérieur à lui ; blessure d'un indicible nom, plutôt que nom d'une inguérissable blessure. »⁹⁰

Le mal est dans le mot.

Mot qui fait mal et qui, étrangement, console.

Le mystère est dans son étrangeté.⁹¹

The Stranger, that is, the other, in his distance from me, says my distance from myself, points me to the modest 'nothingness' and invites me to silence. Thus the book, with its words permeated with silence, is the medium of the *modesty operation* in which becoming a foreigner consists (“è il tramite dell’operazione di pudore in cui consiste il diventare Stranieri”⁹²):

Aborder le silence avant le signe silencieux.

Aborder le livre avant la page.

Attendre les mots qui réveilleront nos pensées en nous écrivant.⁹³

⁸⁸ Ivi, p. 141.

⁸⁹ Pier Aldo Rovatti, *L'esercizio del silenzio*, cit., p. 97.

⁹⁰ Edmond Jabès, *Un Étranger avec, sous le bras, un livre de petit format* cit., p. 95.

⁹¹ Ivi, p. 43

⁹² Pier Aldo Rovatti, *L'esercizio del silenzio*, cit., p. 100.

⁹³ Edmond Jabès, *Un Étranger avec, sous le bras, un livre de petit format* cit., p. 126.

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Rovatti, cleverly, draws these conclusions from his reading of Jabès:

Potremmo allora ipotizzare che il diventare Stranieri, questo cominciare ad avere un'esperienza di noi stessi che muova dall'*ombra* che siamo piuttosto che dalla *luce* che pretendiamo di essere, consiste nell'avviare un movimento oppositivo in noi stessi: un movimento che non cerchi più e solo di saturare i silenzi tra le parole [...] ma che, all'opposto, tenti di scavare il silenzio nelle parole allo scopo innanzi tutto di salvaguardarlo. Si tratta di abbassare la voce. Il vedere contro la vista è un imparare a tacere: e questo tacere non è (e non può essere) un tranquillo contemplare noi stessi e il mondo, perché è semmai una battaglia contro noi stessi.⁹⁴

A ogni pensiero il suo racconto: scansione, battito, pausa del linguaggio, ma anche aggiunta, interruzione, incursione, cambiamento di registro. Attraversare il silenzio significa per Jabès trovare il *movimento* della parola contro la retorica claustrofobica della riflessione: racconto come scavo nella parola, che si fa porosa, costellazione di pieghe, alla lettera molteplice⁹⁵.

Digging into words, learning to be silent, crossing the silence are all aspects that are part of an attitude of depth and enquiry: what one searches for is between the folds of the words, between the lines of the pages, between the white spaces around the text. If there is a superficial attitude when standing in front of a piece of music or a literary text, there is also a profound search that goes beyond a first level. Speaking of levels, Rovatti comes in handy when he writes:

A un primo livello, il silenzio si esercita nei confronti del linguaggio che adoperiamo comunemente, lingua e parole saturate cui non prestiamo quasi più ascolto perché ci si presentano come oggetti e strumenti, segni senza margine, parole-cose prive di intervallo, informazioni, rete chiusa di istituzioni verbali, parole-stimolo che chiedono parole-risposta. [...]

Ma a questo, che già addita qualcosa come un "meno", si accompagna un secondo livello il silenzio *nelle* parole. Arresto del rumore del discorso: ma poi si tratta pure di usare le parole, di guardarsi anche da una condizione di silenzio assottigliato, da un semplice ritiro dinanzi al rumore.

Il silenzio apre, ma ciò che si dà nell'apertura è forse ineffabile? O ricade, forse, con necessaria ripetizione, nell'ovvia visibilità del dire, cioè subito assorbe il precario intervallo per ritrovare la propria funzionalità nella macchina del linguaggio? Oppure quel pensiero che si mette in movimento nell'intervallo, e che potrebbe propriamente corrispondere al pensare, non ha parole? Si esce, e come, da questo dilemma?

Il problema sembra quello di individuare un linguaggio silenzioso, una lingua che paradossalmente scaturisce e si articola dal silenzio e grazie a esso.⁹⁶

The two levels of silence, that which is opposed to saturated words, that which is opposed to the 'too much' of language, and that in words, thus present a dilemma: how to leave the spaces opened

⁹⁴ Pier Aldo Rovatti, *L'esercizio del silenzio*, cit., p. 101.

⁹⁵ Ivi, p. 105.

⁹⁶ Ivi, pp. 125-126.

up by silence disclosed? How to avoid saturating them? The answer lies in the search for a silent language.

Restituendo loro la pausa, l'intervallo, l'attesa, il vuoto, le parole che normalmente usiamo cominciano a perdere la loro durezza di cose: possono flettersi, attenuarsi, riacquistare la mobilità, la polisemia, la nomadicità di un dire che certo i poeti ci indicano.⁹⁷

This silent language, punctuated by pauses, intervals and gaps, is closely reminiscent of what Calvino wrote in *Lezioni americane*:

penso che siamo sempre alla caccia di qualcosa di nascosto o di solo potenziale o ipotetico, di cui seguiamo le tracce che affiorano sulla superficie del suolo. [...] La parola collega la traccia visibile alla cosa invisibile, alla cosa assente, alla cosa desiderata o temuta, come un fragile ponte di fortuna gettato sul vuoto.⁹⁸

The search for such a word, such a language, is evocative of Derrida's *hedgehog*⁹⁹ and of his famous claim: “Il faut trouver une parole qui garde le silence”¹⁰⁰. Similarly, Rovatti states:

Introdurre o reintrodurre il silenzio nelle parole, scoprirle vuote, scavate, porose, instabili, è piuttosto dell'ordine di questa umile terrestrialità. Mortalità della parola: cioè usura, intenibilità, inessenzialità. Un ritiro che è un ritracciarsi, appunto, in un compromesso sempre precario rilanciato. Questa parola-istrice assomiglia piuttosto, nel suo realizzarsi tutto terreno, alla variazione sempre compromissoria del racconto, che si apre e si chiude continuamente, che articola la realtà nella finzione, non può presumere alcuna verità ultima ma dar luogo solo a ulteriori possibili aperture; che al tempo stesso ha già da subito indebolito la parola in modo che non possa risuonare da un altro luogo e torni a camminare sulla terra, qui.¹⁰¹

This is reminiscent of the lesson on Multiplicity expressed by Calvino in *Lezioni americane*, which speaks of variation, of potential, of continuous metamorphosis and exit from the self:

magari fosse possibile un'opera concepita al di fuori del *self*, un'opera che ci permettesse d'uscire dalla prospettiva limitata d'un io individuale, non solo per entrare in altri io simili al nostro, ma per far parlare ciò che non ha parola [...].¹⁰²

⁹⁷ Ivi, pp. 126-127.

⁹⁸ Italo Calvino, *Lezioni americane. Sei proposte per il prossimo millennio*, Milano, Oscar Mondadori, 2014, p. 76.

⁹⁹ Cf. J. Derrida, M. Ferraris, “Istrice”, in *Aut aut*, 1990, p. 235; cf. J. Derrida, “Che cos'è la poesia”, in M. Ferraris, *Postille a Derrida con due scritti di Jacques Derrida*, Rosenberg & Sellier, Torino 1990, pp. 238-247; Jacques Derrida, Maurizio Ferraris, “Ick bünn all hier”, in M. Ferraris, *Postille a Derrida con due scritti di Jacques Derrida*, cit., pp. 249-272.

¹⁰⁰ Jacques Derrida, *L'Écriture et la Différence*, Paris, Seuil, coll. « Tel quel », 1979, p. 29.

¹⁰¹ Pier Aldo Rovatti, *L'esercizio del silenzio*, cit., pp. 127-128.

¹⁰² Italo Calvino, *Lezioni americane. Sei proposte per il prossimo millennio*, cit., p. 122.

The silence that Rovatti seeks to introduce into words aims to make voids visible: “Non una saturazione degli spazi [...], bensì un’apertura o una maggiore visualizzazione degli effetti metaforici”¹⁰³, or what can be called a *modesty operation* (“un’operazione di pudore nella scrittura”¹⁰⁴).

What matters, in the final analysis, is that writing is an ambivalent place:

in ogni caso è anche la possibilità che le parole si aprano e producano intorno a sé orizzonti [...]. Il far silenzio nella scrittura, tutto è tranne che un possesso di questa apertura e degli orizzonti che si liberano. Posso ben dire che, introducendo il silenzio nelle parole, scopro che sono parlato dal linguaggio.¹⁰⁵

In conclusion, we can say that silence has been a crucial point of reflection in the last century. The essential and most radical turning point in the artistic field is probably the one brought about by John Cage with his *Silent Pieces*. Along with this, it is evident that the historical factor of the Holocaust brought necessary changes in perspectives and developed the use of silence to the maximum in every artistic discipline, first and foremost literature. Philosophers have attempted to open a reflection on silence precisely in view of the importance it has assumed: in all cases, silence becomes a modality of speech, a depth to be pursued, an opening of language, a membrane that surrounds thought and words and gives them depth. Lastly, the development of psychoanalysis, in the last century, comes to the aid of philosophy to explore the most intimate and unconscious areas of the subject and to interpret its silences: the shadow, the *epoché*, the Stranger are part of a dualism that inhabits us and is given through the dialectic between word and silence, between presence and absence, between light and shadow.

VI. Silence and Absences in Literature and Music

That silence has a fundamental importance in music-literary studies is also evident from the fact that Werner Wolf, the leading scholar in this field, dedicates an entire volume¹⁰⁶ to the subject of silence and absence, recognising that this has a particular relevance, especially in modern and contemporary art. Indeed, these so-called 'negative' phenomena are encountered not only in music and literature, but in a variety of artistic fields and in everyday experience.

¹⁰³ Pier Aldo Rovatti, *L'esercizio del silenzio*, cit., p. 130.

¹⁰⁴ Ivi, p. 129.

¹⁰⁵ Ivi, p. 131.

¹⁰⁶ Werner Wolf and Walter Bernhart, *Silence and Absence in Literature and Music*, Leiden | Boston, Brill Rodopi, 2016.

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Wolf states that in everyday life we perceive absence and silence in many areas: the silence that surrounds us in forests or deep caves, the feeling of loss of a loved one, the silence of meditation, the silence dedicated to someone. Furthermore, during the 20th century, many philosophers and artists became interested in silence and absence and made philosophical discourses about it, as mentioned above. Just think of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus logico-philosophicus* or Derrida's studies, especially *Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences*.

What is of interest in Wolf's volume, however, is the exploration of silence and absence in music and literature as "meaningful signifying practices"¹⁰⁷. Indeed, within a framework of communication, silence and absence can take on functional meaning, following Watzlawick's theory that "One cannot not communicate. Activity or inactivity, words or silence all have message value"¹⁰⁸.

While there are many forms of presence in music and literature, one might be tempted to think that the opposite of presence in music is simply silence and in literature the absence of text. However, there is a rich variety of forms of absence and silence that, in semiotics, can be applied at the level of the signified or at the level of the signifier, or on both levels.

The most extreme case is the aforementioned 4'33" "anti-composition" by John Cage: while this seems to stage a totality of absence, as there is no music in the conventional sense of the term, it actually allows the experience of certain forms of presence: the surrounding ambient incidental sounds, the pianist's body and his movements.

In both literature and music, silence and absence can take different forms, from the classic musical pause to the classic blank or white pages in literature. What is important to emphasise, as a premise to this study, is that in all the forms of silence and absence that will be discussed, it is possible to assume that this 'negativity' actually possesses 'positive' effects of meaning. Silence, in short, speaks and takes on meaning. Of course, a question must first be asked: under what circumstances can we allow ourselves to think and believe that absence and silence have meaning? That is, Wolf asks "under what conditions are we allowed to assume such a meaningfulness of what is actually not 'full' but empty"¹⁰⁹, which leads to the question: "how is it that absences can become significant parts of works or performances of literature and music in the first place?"¹¹⁰. The answer, according to the scholar, lies in so-called "significance triggers"¹¹¹.

¹⁰⁷ Ivi, p. vii.

¹⁰⁸ Paul Watzlawick, Janet H. Beavin, Don D. Jackson, *Pragmatics of Human Communication: A Study of Interactional Patterns, Pathologies, and Paradoxes*, New York, NY, Norton, 1967, p. 49.

¹⁰⁹ Werner Wolf and Walter Bernhart, *Silence and Absence in Literature and Music*, cit., p. 10.

¹¹⁰ Ivi, p. 5.

¹¹¹ Ibidem.

Theoretical Framework

When we read a text or listen to music, we are sometimes aware of the absence of something in these texts and performances. Two questions arise from this: “how can one become aware of something that is not there?”¹¹² and “under what circumstances are we inclined to regard an absence in the context of literature or music as significant that is, as contributive to the meaning or functions of given texts, compositions of performances?”¹¹³.

As for the first question, it will suffice to answer that absence can only be perceived as a function of a real or expected presence, hence of an expectation. With regard to the second question, it is evident that there will be cases in which absence is not deliberately significant, but accidental or perceived and desired as insignificant. Katrin Meise argues that for absence to become a significant “constitutive element” of an artistic work, “it is at least necessary to presuppose a *communicative situation*”¹¹⁴. It is only within a communicative situation, therefore, that an absence can be perceived. Indeed, in communication, we tend to perceive absence and silence not as accidental effects, but as intentional. In this work, as well as in Wolf’s volume, “significant absences of the kind that are in focus here can therefore be conceived of as encoded by the composer or the author on purpose so that they are loaded with intentional meaning or with at least one intended function. Consequently, such absences will not be perceived as mere chance occurrences, which have no ‘message’”¹¹⁵.

In terms of semiotics, there is a further type of absence that interests us: in both literature and music there are absences in ‘chains of signifieds’ and absences in ‘chains of signifiers’. The first case, in literature, undoubtedly includes ellipses as a rhetorical figure but also what Iser called *Leerstellen*, or textual gaps, i.e. holes of meaning in the text.

Returning now to the question of significance triggers, it will be necessary to recall that in artistic communication we tend to understand everything we are presented with as significant, in all its parts, i.e. also silences and absences. This premise, to be attributed to art by default, leads to the question: when does artistic communication begin? Indeed, if in musical performance it begins in the silence that precedes the start of the music (or silence, as in the case of Cage), in literature it begins when there is an interaction between reader and text or paratext.

Within this artistic communication, some significance triggers in literature may be large empty spaces in poetic verse, entirely white pages in prose, the sudden absence of text at a crucial moment in the narrative; in music, on the other hand, there are extended pauses between the movements of a symphony or partial silences of instruments and voices.

¹¹² Ibidem.

¹¹³ Ivi, p. 6.

¹¹⁴ Katrin Meise, “On talking about Silence in Conversation and Literature”, Gudrun Grabher, Ulrike Jessner, eds. *The Semantics of Silences in Linguistics and Literature*, Heidelberg, Winter, 1996, 45-66.

¹¹⁵ Werner Wolf and Walter Bernhart, *Silence and Absence in Literature and Music*, cit., p. 7.

Theoretical Framework

In printed literature, there are very significant cases where absences are used to give additional meanings to the text. For recent examples, just think of the book published in 2012 *What every MAN thinks about apart from SEX*, which consists of 196 blank pages. Less recent, less radical and more imaginative is Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, where instances of silence and absence are varied and manifold: there are pages where the traditional print is absent and replaced by maps illustrating the (non-)progress of the narrative; pages that are completely black or blank; pages indicated as missing, even in the layout (Volume IV); entire chapters omitted (Volume IX). In general, all modernist and post-modernist literature plays on absence and silence. Some examples are Flann O'Brien's *At Swim-Two-Birds*, Samuel Beckett's *Molloy*, B.S. Johnson's *Albert Angelo*, Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*.

In conclusion, if in music we clearly perceive the so-called aural absences, with the pauses that are conventionally marked in the scores, in literature there are both aural absences and visual absences, depending on whether the text is performative or not. What must now be taken into account, therefore, is that “not only presence but also absence and the interplay between both forms contribute to the richness of these media and the overall meaning of individual texts or compositions”¹¹⁶.

VII. Silence and Reception Between Literature and Music

We will now see how silence is a common element in music and literature, indispensable to give meaning to the work and to involve the reader/listener, who has an active role in the aesthetics of the reception of a piece of music and a literary text and in the interpretation of the pauses and silences in the works.

The renowned music director Daniel Barenboim draws, in his book *La musica è un tutto. Etica ed estetica*, a parallelism between interpretation in music and literature and writes:

The score, after all, is still not music; the score is made of black marks on white paper. Music only comes to life when a person or a group of people start playing it. The performer is the only essential element of a piece of music that is not indicated on the printed page and without whom music cannot be music.¹¹⁷

The reader performs the same hermeneutic function within a literary work as the interpreter: words are inert until we make them resonate within us. Furthermore, Barenboim writes:

¹¹⁶ Ivi, p. 21.

¹¹⁷ Daniel Barenboim, *La musica è un tutto. Etica ed estetica*, Milano, Feltrinelli, 2012, p. 13 [my translation].

Theoretical Framework

The score of a great opera contains more 'solutions' in its pages than the performers with their personal viewpoints, because each individual performer is capable of finding more than one solution.¹¹⁸

This consideration can be juxtaposed with the ideas of the aesthetics of reception proposed by Iser and Jauss, who give the reader-interpreter an active role, since he or she is the one who imaginatively interrogates the text. Similarly, Barenboim describes the activity of the musical interpreter as follows:

The interpreter's job [...] begins where the musicologist's stops, that is, to recreate the work in the present, returning to the state of chaos that existed before a single note was written. The interpreter endeavours to enter the composer's mind, wondering at each step why he chose that solution and not another, what reasons lie behind a certain modulation, and asking himself a thousand other questions.¹¹⁹

Recreating the work in the present is exactly what the reader, who has a creative and generative role in it, is responsible for. It is no coincidence that the performer in music does not coincide with the listener, but with the musician: the reader comes to be, in short, the musician of the text, who is "an active participant in the process of creating or recreating"¹²⁰, playing with the inert and silent words on paper, making them become alive and communicative, or to quote Lacan, full.

VIII. Silence in Literature

How can silence, which is a category of orality, belong to the domain of writing? What rhetorical figures express it? Besides these, are there other ways of expressing silence in the text? Can a literary work make use of silence to express something? What is the role of the reader in a rhetoric of silence?

First of all, it must be said that silence manifests itself through certain rhetorical figures, famously: the ellipsis and the litotes, which are like suspensions in the text, synesthesia, synecdoche, euphemism, negation and periphrasis.

Yet, silence also and above all manifests itself through the implicit, the blank spaces purposely left as such by the author, which consequently create holes, faults, which the reader will have to 'fill in' through his or her own interpretation: silence is thus, in literature - as in music -, a hermeneutic exercise. The unspoken is the literary site of silence par excellence.

¹¹⁸ Ivi, p. 14 [my translation].

¹¹⁹ Ivi, p. 17 [my translation].

¹²⁰ Ivi, p. 24 [my translation].

Theoretical Framework

In a certain sense, grasping silence and reading its hidden meanings is a task for the reader, just as in music the listener is required to play an active role (and an active listening) in grasping the sounds of the environment - as taught by Cage - and being sensitive to the intentional pauses in a piece of music.

Before delving into this aspect, a brief introduction will be necessary as a theoretical framework. According to Wolfgang Iser, the central point in the analysis of a text lies in the interaction between text and receiver, and thus between author and reader: this whole process represents the fulfilment of the potential, unexpressed reality of the text¹²¹. There is thus a dialectical relationship between reader, text and their interaction: the reader is invested with the constructive role of filling in the blank spaces, the voids that Iser calls blanks, i.e. places of indeterminacy in the literary text¹²². This leads to two consequences: the first is that there is no meaning of the text without reading; the second is that the blanks can never be completely filled by the reader. This second point was extensively discussed in literary hermeneutics by Roland Barthes and Gilles Deleuze in their treatment of Proust's *Recherche*. Indeed, Barthes asserted that the text is inexhaustible material, not because it is always new, but because it always comes back out of place, so that everything is exhausted in the spectre of research¹²³. In this sense, literary works make the search for meaning possible. In the words of Merleau-Ponty, reading is the means given to me to be absent from myself¹²⁴: reading involves stepping outside oneself, entering the text, elaborating an interpretation and re-entering oneself. It was Iser himself who coined the concept of the *implicit reader*, meaning an undefined subject envisaged as the receiver of the text and thus the set of all possible interpretative orientations of the reader.

But what is the role of the reader according to Iser's aesthetics of reception? The reader himself defines a reference code during the reading, which cannot disregard the author's intentions but which will necessarily be different from his own. It is here that a fault is created: it is impossible to define the author's intention with certainty. In this way, the reader is invested with an active role, namely that of interpreting and thus re-generating¹²⁵ the text. Indeed, it is precisely the complexity of the textual fabric that allows for various subjective readings, to varying degrees. The reader's way of

¹²¹ Cf. Wolfgang Iser, *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose from Bunyan to Beckett*, Baltimore and London, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974; Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response*, Baltimore and London, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978.

¹²² Cf. Iser, *Lacan e l'ermeneutica del testo letterario come riempimento degli spazi bianchi. Un'applicazione in Tommaso Landolfi e Georges Perec*; Matteo Moca; Université Paris Nanterre, Università di Bologna: <https://riviste.unimi.it/index.php/enthymema>.

¹²³ Cf. Gilles Deleuze, *Deux régimes de fou. Textes et entretiens 1975-1995*, trans. Deborah Borca, Torino, Einaudi, 2010, pp. 18-19.

¹²⁴ Cf. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *L'Oeil et l'Esprit*, trans. Anna Sordini, Milano, SE, 1989; p. 56.

¹²⁵ “un testo è un prodotto la cui sorte interpretativa deve far parte del proprio meccanismo generativo”. Umberto Eco, *Lector in fabula. La cooperazione interpretativa nei testi narrativi*, Milano, Bompiani, 2010, p. 54.

Theoretical Framework

responding is not univocal, just as the questions the text poses are multiple and varied. However, not only the questions posed by the text are a place for dialogue with the reader, but also the gaps. The text is often silent. So what are the places in the text where the reader most actively intervenes? Mainly it is the empty spaces, the gaps, the blanks that are filled in by his projections: “Communication in literature [...] is a process set in motion and regulated, not by a given code, but by a mutually restrictive and magnifying interaction between the explicit and the implicit, between revelation and concealment”¹²⁶. In these cases, the reader must fill the gaps in the textual communication with something that exceeds a mere act of responsiveness. In the presence of blanks - defined by Iser as the gaps left *by* the textual dictation and *in* the textual dictation - the reader is required to formulate the text himself. Thus, even the absence of a sign becomes a sign: the absence contains every possible birth, and the blank becomes the opening space of the text.

Le blanc n'est pas un simple espacement immédiatement sensible. Il détache les traits pertinents des phonèmes, et est indispensable au découpage des mots et des phrases. C'est lui qui permet l'articulation entre les différents niveaux du langage. Surtout, il joue un rôle *implicite* extrêmement important. Non seulement pour la poésie où il fait fonction de rythme, mais aussi comme porteur de *non-dit*. Le blanc [...] c'est ce qui empêche le langage d'être intégralement décryptable. Le blanc ou interstice, c'est le vide que le lecteur vient combler, en faisant rebondir la lecture, en y introduisant du sens [...]. Le blanc est comme le lieu d'une *réserve de sens* que le texte recèle. Il permet les ouvertures par où se faufilent les transformations. Le blanc est une invitation à l'interprétation par le non-dit qu'il suggère.¹²⁷

Precisely with regard to these blanks and in response to the indeterminacy of the text, we can state that blanks are both empty spaces and vital propellants to initiate communication: “Whenever the reader bridges the gaps, communication begins. The gaps function as a kind of pivot on which the whole text-reader relationship revolves”¹²⁸. In the space of the blanks, the reader creates a field of vision and interpretation for his or her “wandering viewpoint”¹²⁹, that is, his or her ability to recognise in the plurality of the segments of the text a signifying unity and, in the unity of the text, a possible interpretative plurality. Thus, not only does the reader respond, but also constantly formulates the text by filling in the spaces of the text that would not be readable, since they are empty, without an interpreting subject.

The work is thus the link between author and reader, and the absences are the handles for the latter. Therefore, the unspoken becomes precisely that which is to be understood and actualised: “un

¹²⁶ Wolfgang Iser, “Interaction between Text and Reader”, *The Reader in the Text: Essays on Audience and Interpretation*. Eds. Suleiman, Susan R. and Inge Crosman, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1980, pp. 106–119, p. 111.

¹²⁷ David Banon, *La Lecture infinie: les voies de l'interprétation midrachique*, Paris, Seuil, 1987, pp. 200-201.

¹²⁸ Wolfgang Iser, “Interaction between Text and Reader”, cit., p. 111.

¹²⁹ Cf. Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response*, cit.

testo postula il proprio destinatario come condizione indispensabile non solo della propria capacità comunicativa concreta ma anche della propria potenzialità significativa”¹³⁰. The gaps are the nexus between author and reader, whose interpretative activity starts precisely from the white spaces, the silent clues, the silent parts of the text.

The reader can, in a way, be compared to the psychoanalyst, following Jacques Lacan's theory of language. Firstly, Lacan argues that language is not a mere property of humanity but a superstructure that determines its life and legitimises its relationship with the Other: there is no such thing as an unanswered word, even if it only meets with silence, as long as it has a hearer¹³¹. The text follows the same principle. The word is a means of realising the self, which requires the legitimisation of the receiver. Furthermore, Lacan proposes a distinction between *full word* and *empty word*: the full word is that which is capable of resolving the formations of the unconscious, as theorised by Freud; the empty word, on the other hand, is deprived of this power, and is therefore designated as negative, with the consequent impossibility of realisation in the Other. The full word, on the contrary, is intersubjective and allows the relationship between one subject and another. Finally, the full word can be interpreted, and this is the interesting fact for the purposes of this study.

Lacan states that there is no word without a response; Iser argues that there is no text without a reader. Applying Lacanian theory to the text, we can then deduce that the full word is the one that gives the reader the coordinates to be understood, while the empty word is the one that opens faults and interstices in the text, which the reader will have to fill through his hermeneutic activity. The reader's function will be precisely that of filling the blanks because, as Barthes argues, “toute la petite monnaie logique est dans les interstices”¹³².

The privileged genre for the interpretation of the empty word, and thus of the blanks of the text, is autobiography. In fact, within autobiographical novels, spaces of doubtful status open up where the reader plays a decisive role: the writer entrusts the reader with the role of reconstructing the narrative puzzle through the fragments he hands over to him, investing him with an interpretative function. Philippe Lejeune, in *Le Pacte Autobiographique*, insists on the implicit pact between narrator and reader, whereby the latter is invested with a particular role as the interpreter - albeit following a certain tradition - of the work and thus the creator of a certain horizon of expectation. Then there is a particular version of this, namely the *pacte fantasmatique*:

¹³⁰ Umberto Eco, *Lector in fabula. La cooperazione interpretativa nei testi narrativi*, cit., p. 51.

¹³¹ Cf. Jacques Lacan, *Ecrits*, tr. Giacomo B. Contri. Torino, Einaudi, 2012, p. 241.

¹³² Roland Barthes, *Le plaisir du texte précédé de Variations sur l'écriture*, tr. Lidia Lonzi and Carlo Ossola, Torino, Einaudi, 1999, p. 80.

Theoretical Framework

Le lecteur est invité à lire les romans non seulement comme des fictions renvoyant à une vérité de la "nature humaine", mais aussi comme des fantasmes révélateurs d'un individu.¹³³

In this kind of pact, it is sometimes impossible to distinguish between autobiography and literary fiction. It is precisely here that the blanks and mute spaces of the text allow the reader to construct the interpretation of the text.

Finally, returning to Adorno's assumption that can be summarised in "No poetry after Auschwitz", it seems appropriate to consider the question of silence in literature in works that specifically dealt with the theme of the Holocaust, and thus faced one of the highest challenges posed to language: that of saying the unspeakable and trauma. We will then see how, paradoxically, silence is precisely the place par excellence for preserving memory. Faced with the impossibility of saying, is silence the defeat of language or its highest expression?

IX. Writers of Silence

In the field of music-literary studies, many volumes have been written that attempt to trace the relationship between these two arts. Some, in particular, have been devoted to the theme of silence, which lies on the borderline of both arts and has points of tangency between the two.

The volume *Ecriture et Silence au XXe siècle*¹³⁴ seems particularly interesting because it places an interesting hypothesis at the centre of the collective research of the essays gathered there:

L'un des signes distinctifs du xx siècle est l'émancipation du silence dans l'écriture, le désir de comprendre l'écriture hors de la domination du logos. Il y va donc d'une métamorphose du silence dans l'écriture du xx siècle et d'une métamorphose de l'écriture du xx siècle par la densité nouvelle du silence. L'enjeu est celui d'une critique de l'écriture par le silence en vue d'une façon neuve de penser l'écriture.¹³⁵

Indeed, the 20th century is characterised by a constant tension between word and silence. A great many writers can be taken as a reference, just think of Le Clezio, Beckett, Kafka, Joyce, Levi, Antelme, Millet, Quignard, Des Forêts, Wiesel, Celan and others who, in different ways, have approached the question of silence both thematically and aesthetically.

¹³³ Philippe Lejeune, *Le pacte autobiographique*, Paris, Editions du Seuil, 1975, p. 42.

¹³⁴ *Ecriture et silence au XXe siècle*, textes réunis par Yves-Michel Ergal et Michèle Finck, Presses Universitaires de Strasbourg, 2010.

¹³⁵ Ivi, p. 5.

Theoretical Framework

The research questions we can ask ourselves are numerous, and from a methodological point of view we have chosen to divide this work into three sections: one dedicated to the relationship between trauma and silence; one to the theme of silence; the last to the formal or aesthetic aspect in which silence emerges in the literary texts examined.

First, however, it is necessary to ask what the ontological and historical origin of the presence of silence in twentieth-century literature is. Next, what is the nature of this silence and what is its function? Furthermore, why is silence, in the last century, a limitation with which writing is constantly confronted? Finally, how is silence embodied in the text?

As Yves-Michel Ergal and Michèle Finck write in the introduction to the volume, “l’élargissement de la réflexion à la musique et à la danse s’impose de lui-même tant le silence acquiert au xx siècle une valeur et une fécondité musicales et choréographiques fondamentales”¹³⁶. It is evident that a discourse that considers the theme of silence cannot therefore disregard a methodological premise that crosses both music and literature. In this study, however, even though the interest can also move into the spheres of cinema, theatre and dance, we have chosen to use methodological premises that refer to music-literary studies and then use these tools in the service of the textual analysis of the literature examined.

From a diachronic point of view, the history of juxtapositions between music and literature is very ancient. Here, we are not interested in covering the whole of antiquity up to the present day, but rather in focusing on the last century, in which the authors examined in this work lived and wrote. However, it may be interesting to note that not only these writers were interested in the theme of silence. In fact, there are numerous cases of writers, some of whom were also musicologists, who exploited this ambiguous position of silence.

In 1967, J.M.G. Le Clézio published a long text entitled *Le Silence*¹³⁷ in which, of the apparent disaster of the word, he sought the fullness of silence, because “le silence n’était pas vide”:

On parlait pour se taire.

On écrivait ce qu’on n’écrivait pas.

On faisait pour ne pas faire, on créait pour ne pas créer.

On peignait l’absent, le mystérieux absent terriblement présent.

This conception is very reminiscent of Duras's poetics as expressed in *Écrire*, which we will see later.

¹³⁶ Ivi, pp. 5-6.

¹³⁷ Pages numérotées 385 à 418 du numéro 171 de *La Nouvelle Revue Française*, le 1er mars 1967.

Theoretical Framework

If the question of writing and silence becomes central in the 20th century, one of the best known and most studied examples is certainly that of Samuel Beckett, who asks whether or not it is possible to say and whether saying is not simply keeping silent. Yves-Michel Ergal argues that there are two main movements in this silence: “le premier liant le silence à la naissance de l’autobiographie, le second fusionnant le silence à l’écriture même, conférant à celle-ci un caractère sacré, tandis que l’écriture atteint son point culminant et paradoxal, celui qui pose au même moment l’idée de sa disparition, ou, pour reprendre un terme de Beckett lui-même, son ‘innommable’, ce qui semble à la fois sorti du silence et rentré dans celui-ci”¹³⁸. These two movements identified by Yves-Michel Ergal in Beckett's writing are the same as those identified in the present study for the authors chosen: on the one hand, the silence inscribed in autobiographical writing, often linked to the notion of trauma; on the other hand, the silence that permeates fictional writing, sometimes with mute characters. Regarding the first category - the autobiographical - Yves-Michel Ergal writes:

Le silence tapi au cœur de l’écriture dissimule le lien étroitement autobiographique qui unit l’auteur à son roman. Le silence écrit un second roman, invisible, plus poignant et place sous le signe du temps et de l’effacement, en parallèle à celui de la parole et des gesticulations tragi-comiques. Dès lors, il existe deux livres : celui qui se lit, et celui qui est à déchiffrer par le lecteur [...].¹³⁹

This is in accordance with what Iser and Eco theorise in their concept of the aesthetics of reception: all the more so in the specific case of autobiographical writing, it is up to the reader to fill in the gaps in the text, to interpret its silences, in order to decipher the full silence of which it is composed. Silence thus appears not as a negative element, but as a fullness to be deciphered.

Beckett gave voice to the language of silence. In the trilogy of romances *Malloy*, *Malone Dies* and *The Unnamable*, Beckett revolutionises the very concept of narrative and undermines language from within: he uses words to highlight the inefficiency of language itself. For Beckett, the only action that seems to make sense is remaining silent, which requires courage:

There could be no things but nameless things, no names but thingless names... the world dies too, foully names. All I know is what the words know, and the dead things, and that makes a handsome little sum, with a beginning, a middle, and an end as in the well built phrase and the long sonata of the dead.¹⁴⁰

It's to go silent that you need courage, for you'll be punished for having gone silent, and yet you can't do otherwise than go silent, than be punished for having gone silent.¹⁴¹

¹³⁸ *Ecriture et silence au XXe siècle*, textes réunis par Yves-Michel Ergal et Michèle Finck, cit., p. 20.

¹³⁹ Ivi, p. 23.

¹⁴⁰ Samuel Beckett, *Malloy*, NY, Grove, 1994, p. 41.

¹⁴¹ Samuel Beckett, *The Unnamable*, NY, Grove, 1978, p. 151.

Theoretical Framework

Earlier, in the 1957 novel *Murphy*, Beckett had defined silence in these terms: “that frail partition between the ill-concealed and the ill-revealed, the clumsy false and the unavoidable so”¹⁴². Finally, in *Texts for Nothing*, he expounds a profound meditation on the impact of words on silence and vice versa:

Only the words break the silence, all other sounds have ceased. If I were silent I'd hear nothing. But if I were silent the other sounds would start again, those to which the words have made me deaf, or which have really ceased. But I am silent, it sometimes happens, no, never, not one second. I weep too without interruption. It's an unbroken How of words and tears. With no pause for reflection. But I speak softer, every year a little softer. Perhaps. Slower too, every year a little slower. Perhaps. It is hard for me to judge. If so the pauses would be longer, between the words, the sentences, the syllables, the tears, I confuse them, words and tears, my words are my tears, my eyes my mouth.¹⁴³

There are various parallels in this excerpt: tears represent emotions, and the absence of emotions is a form of silence; tears made of water represent life, and the absence of water is a form of death, hence silence; when the pauses between words become longer, we lose the sense of language, resulting in another form of silence.

James Joyce also makes use of silence in *Dubliners*, particularly in the short story *The Dead*, with a final metaphor of snow covering the Dublin cemetery, crystallising everything under a blanket of frozen silence.

Among the writers who are characterised by an extensive use of silence, mention must also be made of Franz Kafka, who uses it as an enigma in *Amerika ou le Disparu*, but also as the last possible writing experience. Kafka uses silence to give voice to the unresolved contradictions of modern life, and most of his texts concern a search for affirmation through negation. In his essay on silence, Bindeman writes: “The very fact that Kafka posed his radical question about the possibility, or even the necessity, of silence with regards to his remarkable vision of an impending future of atrocities that hadn't even occurred yet, earns his central place in modern literature. His work can even be seen as an examination of whether literate speech is even possible concerning these events”¹⁴⁴. Obviously, the events referred to are the Second World War and the Holocaust. The tension of silence in Kafka was such that he doubted publishing his work after his death. One text in which the writer speaks again about the power of silence is *The Silence of the Sirens*, which is a rewriting of the Homeric myth where the Sirens are silent. In his version of the story, silence is much

¹⁴² Samuel Beckett, *Murphy*, NY, Grove, 2011, p. 257.

¹⁴³ Samuel Beckett, *Stories and Texts for Nothing*, NY, Grove, 2007, p. 131.

¹⁴⁴ Steven L. Bindeman, *Silence in Philosophy, Literature and Art*, cit., p. 123.

Theoretical Framework

more powerful than song and the narrator states that even if it were possible to escape the power of the sirens' song, it would certainly be impossible to survive their silence. The implication is that “the unspoken word, the possibility of the ‘perfect song’, is far more enticing than the reality of the sirens’ voices could ever be”¹⁴⁵. The focus on silence in this story is quite similar to the conception John Keats expressed in the poem *Ode to a Grecian Urn*, where he wrote: “Hard melodies are sweet, but those unheard are sweeter”.

In the second half of the 20th century, beginning with the conclusion of the war, everything is called into question and something seems irretrievably destroyed, as Adorno put it. The West is terrified by the discovery of genocides and concentration camps, and silence takes the form of the novels of some survivors, such as Primo Levi and Robert Antelme, Duras's husband, who in *Se questo è un uomo* and *L'Espèce humaine* ask how it is possible to speak: “Nous voulions parler [...] Et cependant c'était impossible. [...] A nous-mêmes, ce que nous avions à dire commençait alors à nous paraître inimaginable”¹⁴⁶. What results from these historical events is often a hole-ridden writing, full of silences, which become the place of the unimaginable and unnameable.

George Steiner, in his book *Language and Silence*, writes:

The world of Auschwitz lies outside speech as it lies outside reason. To speak of the unspeakable is to risk the survivance of language as creator and bearer of humane, rational truth. Words that are saturated with lies or atrocity do not easily resume life.¹⁴⁷

Wiesel, Adorno and Celan also confronted the problem left by the Holocaust, namely: how to speak of the unspeakable? Would silence be more eloquent than words? Would it be more right to remain silent or to speak?

Wiesel, in his novels, deals with the destructive effects of silence and states that it is not words that kill, but silence. As we can read in *The Testament*:

Silence acts on both the senses and the nerves; it unsettles them. It acts on the imagination and sets it on fire. It acts on the soul and fills it with night and death. The philosophers are wrong: it is not words that kill, it is silence. It kills impulses and passion, it kills desire and the memory of desire. It invades, dominates, and reduces man to slavery. And once a slave of silence, you are no longer a man.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁵ Ivi, p. 124.

¹⁴⁶ Robert Antelme, *L'Espèce humaine*, Gallimard, coll. “Tel”, 1957, p. 9.

¹⁴⁷ George Steiner, *Language and Silence: Essays on Language, Literature, and the Inhuman*, NY, Atheneum, 1967, p. 123.

¹⁴⁸ Ellie Wiesel, *The Testament: A novel*, NY, Schocken, 1999, p. 209.

Theoretical Framework

The character Kossover is, in this passage, experiencing the connection between silence and the freedom that comes with the responsibility to testify, which is the only way to overcome the silence that kills.

In the novel *Dawn*, Wiesel returns to silence and writes:

Why are we silent? Because silence is not only our dwelling place but our very being as well. We are silence. And our silence is us. You carry us with you. Occasionally you may see us, but most of the time we are invisible to you. When you see us you imagine that we are sitting in judgment upon you. You are wrong. Your silence is your judge.¹⁴⁹

One comes to the conclusion that neither words nor silence are acceptable responses in the face of the Holocaust. As David Patterson writes in *The Shriek of Silence: A Phenomenology of the Holocaust Novel*: “The silence of the other that cuts into me becomes the judgment I pronounce on myself... The sentence for the failure to respond is the death that lurks into silence”¹⁵⁰.

Adorno wrote: “to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric”¹⁵¹ for any writing would only perpetuate the kind of thinking that made such horror possible. Later, he modified his position by stating that constant suffering had as much right to be expressed as a tortured man has the right to scream¹⁵².

Celan attempted, after Auschwitz, to resurrect poetic language in response to Adorno and introduced a language of dead things that would be able to bear the burden of witnessing. Adorno wrote about the poems by Celan that “they articulate unspeakable horror by being silent... They emulate a language that lies below the helpless prattle of human beings – even below the level of organic life as such. It is the language of dead matter, of stone and stars”¹⁵³. Celan continues to write poetry because he believes in the healing power of words. However, the crisis of language experienced by Celan together with his memories of the Holocaust make him eventually choose suicide. Nonetheless, his poems remain an attempt to save words and surround them with silence: “His poems are utterly surrounded by silence, the silence of the mass grave, the silence of the vast distances between worlds that he felt compelled to elucidate to the world”¹⁵⁴.

Other authors worth mentioning in a discourse on silence are Louis-René Des Forêts, Pascal Quignard and Robert Millet. Des Forêts, who published *Le Bavard* in 1946, shows how, while

¹⁴⁹ Ellie Wiesel, *Dawn*, F. Frenaye, tr. NY, Hill and Wang, 2006, p. 68-69.

¹⁵⁰ David Patterson, *The Shriek of Silence: A Phenomenology of the Holocaust Novel*, Lexington, University of Kentucky Press, 2014, p. 34.

¹⁵¹ Theodor Adorno, “Cultural Criticism and Society”, in *Prisms*, Weber Nicholson, S. and Weber, S., tr. Cambridge, M.I.T. Press, 1983, p. 34.

¹⁵² Cf. Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, Ashton, E. B., tr. NY, The Seabury Press, 1973, p. 362.

¹⁵³ Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, Hullot-Kentor, R., tr. Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1998, p. 477.

¹⁵⁴ Elizabeth Myhr, *A Haunted Silence*, web, 9/26, no pagination.

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aspiring to silence, it is nevertheless not possible to approach it through language. In 1985, Quignard published *Le voeu du silence* in homage to Des Forêts's *Le Bavard*, and Millet in turn evoked Des Forêts's influence on him in *Le sentiment de la langue* in 1993. Moreover, it was in the same years, in 1961 to be precise, that Jankélévitch published his *La Musique et l'ineffable*, which was to be followed up in 1974 with *De la musique au silence*. These texts are in communication with each other and have as their pivot an interest in silence.

Pascal Quignard, among them, works on the theme of silence in numerous texts, including *Vie secrète*, where from the very name of the chapters (“Le piano silencieux”, “Le silence”, “Le Secret”) we sense a thematic centre. This book links love, music and writing around the theme of silence. One sentence in particular is emblematic:

Je doute d'avoir autant aimé le silence que je n'ai été entièrement enivré par la musique. Mais je suis de plus en plus attiré par le silence. Ce n'est pas que tous les musiciens s'éloignent de moi ; ils suivent je ne sais quel carrosse de loin. Il est vrai que quelque chose en moi dès l'aube n'a pas pu s'éprendre du langage du groupe. [...] Musicien, j'ornais peut-être ce qui ne s'était pas assagi en langage.

Enfin je suis revenu au silence comme les saumons viennent mourir dans leur aube.¹⁵⁵

In the same book, Quignard also writes: “Je doute d’avoir autant aimé le silence que je n’ai effectivement été enivré par la musique. Mais je suis de plus en plus attiré par le silence”¹⁵⁶. This propensity for silence is thus increasingly evident, and as we have seen, it is not an isolated characteristic peculiar to Quignard alone. Certainly, Quignard particularly insists on this theme and writes:

Je n'écris pas par désir, par habitude, par volonté, par métier. J'ai écrit pour survivre. J'ai écrit parce que c'était la seule façon de parler en se taisant. Parler mutique, parler muet, guetter le mot qui manque, lire, écrire, c'est le même.¹⁵⁷

Writing as a personal necessity is thus intimately linked to silence, to the mute word, to speaking in silence, as for Duras. In this same book, Quignard explains what the role of music is in writing and why it cannot be its horizon: “la musique participe de cette mémoire obscure qui se tient derrière le langage, renvoyant à l'origine car, pour Pascal Quignard, elle est antérieure au langage, elle le précède”¹⁵⁸. At the same time, Quignard proposes an interesting comparison between the

¹⁵⁵ Pascal Quignard, *Vie Secrète*, [1998], Paris, Gallimard, coll. “Folio”, 2005, p. 360.

¹⁵⁶ Ivi, p. 361.

¹⁵⁷ Pascal Quignard, *Le nom sur le bout de la langue*, Gallimard, coll. “Folio”, 1995, p. 62.

¹⁵⁸ *Écriture et silence au XXe siècle*, textes réunis par Yves-Michel Ergal et Michèle Finck, cit., p. 50.

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silence of the work and that of reading, evaluating the writer as a phonoclast, that is, as the one who breaks the voice: “Le phonoclaste est l’écrivain; c’est celui qui brise la voix et le cercle oral [...]”¹⁵⁹. So what voice does the writer possess? In *La Leçon de musique*, Quignard asks himself fundamental questions, which not surprisingly closely resemble the research of the writers we will discuss:

Où est mon enfance ? Où est ma voix ? Où suis-je – ou du moins où est-ce que je fus ? Je ne me connais même plus par ouï-dire. Comment me rejoindre dans ma voix ?¹⁶⁰

The voice that Quignard seeks is what he called the “voix interne”, or the “voix de gorge”¹⁶¹, which is none other than the voice of writing: “Tout ce qui est littéraire présente alors quelque chose de guttural (d’imprononçable, d’incisif, d’asocial)”¹⁶². Indeed, according to Quignard: “La langue non prononcée de la littérature ne s’adresse pas à la voix de bouche mais à la voix de gorge. La langue chez ceux qui lisent se transporte directement de gorge à gorge, d’intérieur à intérieur”¹⁶³. This aspect of the reception of the text, i.e. of reading, is fundamental and helps us to emphasise that the place of the silent orality of literature is the 'gorge'. As Isabelle Soraru points out, “La définition d’une voix comme ‘voix interne’, ou ‘gutturale’ correspond au vœu que nous avons dû percevoir tout au long de notre parcours: celui d’être au côté du silence, c’est-à-dire de tout ce qui précède la langue”¹⁶⁴. Quignard also returns to the theme of silence connected to writing in *Le Salon du Wurtemberg*, where we read:

Ici je ne fais plus de musique. Je me tais. Je prête toute mon attention au bruit léger et doux du crayon à papier sur des bouts d’enveloppes, des bandes de journaux, le revers de programme de concert. J’écris.¹⁶⁵

Millet's texts, both *Le sentiment de la langue* and *Musique secrète*, published in 2004, deal with the French language and music in a parallelism that resolves itself in silence, which is a response, as in Quignard, to the undifferentiated noise of modern music. Timothée Picard, in his essay, supports this hypothesis:

Dans une partie de la littérature mélomane contemporaine, le thème de la musique du silence prend la forme assez évident d'une posture de retrait. Chez les écrivains mélomanes, la revendication du silence musical inhérent à l'écriture solitaire est en effet très souvent présentée comme constituant une attitude de résistance contre cette

¹⁵⁹ Pascal Quignard, *Une gêne technique à l'égard des fragments*, Saint-Clément-de-Rivière, Fata Morgana, 2001, p. 34.

¹⁶⁰ Pascal Quignard, *La Leçon de musique*, Paris, Hachette Littératures, 1987, p. 29.

¹⁶¹ Cf. Pascal Quignard, *Les Paradisiaques*, Paris, Grasset, 2005, p. 108.

¹⁶² Ibidem.

¹⁶³ Ivi, p. 107.

¹⁶⁴ *Écriture et silence au XXe siècle*, textes réunis par Yves-Michel Ergal et Michèle Finck, cit., p. 57.

¹⁶⁵ Pascal Quignard, *Le Salon du Wurtemberg*, Paris, Gallimard, coll. “Folio”, 1988, p. 423.

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agression sonore qui serait propre à la contemporanéité. Autrement dit, la revendication de la modernité musicale française se double désormais d'une position assez nettement antimoderne.¹⁶⁶

As is evident, connections with silence during the 20th century were not only a prerogative of music, philosophy or psychoanalysis, but also of literature. Silence seems to be a nucleus of reflections that stands at the crossroads of various disciplines, artistic and otherwise, and that has proved indispensable for understanding not only the limits of language, but also the potential hidden in its folds and gaps.

X. The Reasons for the Choice

After this series of examples of writers in Europe who have dealt with silence in different ways, it is time to focus on the four authors I have chosen to analyse: Virginia Woolf, Marguerite Duras, Georges Perec and Gianni Celati. If I have chosen to propose a reflection on the silence of these four authors, there are a number of reasons that justify this research.

First of all, although they are well-known authors, little has been written about them in relation to the theme of silence, which, however, on an in-depth reading, is fundamental to their poetics.

Secondly, from Virginia Woolf to Gianni Celati, there is a diachronic axis that runs through the entire 20th century and up to 2022, passing through the First World War, the Second World War and the horror of the Shoah, all the way to contemporary times. These different eras, within the same span of a hundred years, offer different insights into silence and its modalities, as well as its meanings. The other reasons for our choice can be found in the particularities of the individual authors.

Virginia Woolf is characterised by stylistic choices with a heavy presence of ellipses, suspension points, and almost cinematic fades. Moreover, she dwells heavily on the aspect of interiority, psychology, and the intimacy of the characters, all areas in which silence, both as theme and form, plays a fundamental role. Rich in significant silences are also the female characters in Woolf's novels, who manifest both a critique of a strongly male-dominated society and an expression of active femininity even in the absence of speech and thus in the expression of silence.

On the French side, I have chosen to focus on Marguerite Duras and Georges Perec. The duality in the choice of these French authors is primarily linked to the fundamental distinction between memory and post-memory. In fact, while Duras lived through wartime while waiting for her husband and her writings can therefore be ascribed to the category of memory, Perec, on the other

¹⁶⁶ *Écriture et silence au XXe siècle*, textes réunis par Yves-Michel Ergal et Michèle Finck, cit., p. 45.

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hand, lived through the post-war period and, as the orphan of two parents who died during the war, writes about post-memory. Central to these authors is the notion of trauma, as well as that of decency or modesty. Both trauma and modesty are extremely linked to the concept of silence: trauma often prevents words from flowing, imprisoning the person in a deadly silence; modesty, on the other hand, is characterised as a more or less conscious choice not to say something relevant. The autobiographical writings will be examined here in order to later analyse the presence of structures of silence in the authors' own fictional novels. Other key themes in Duras and Perec are the presence of silent characters, subversive or protesting figures who use silence to express dissent or lack of participation. Duras writes, for example, *Moderato Cantabile*, where the relationship with music is even explicit, as a child refuses to learn to play and serves as a figure of contestation and silence. In addition to this, silence can be considered a stylistic feature of this author, and as we shall see, it gradually amplifies in her work over the years, culminating in *La Douleur*, the ultimate expression of the unspeakable and the horror of war.

Perec writes *Un homme qui dort*, where silence plays a key role, but this time in the guise of indifference and a widespread *mal de vivre* that grips the main character. Evidently, in Perec, the main chapter concerns the aspect of trauma or rather post-trauma, considering his personal history as an orphan of parents who died in Auschwitz and in the war. This theme undoubtedly ties in with the novel *W ou le souvenir d'enfance*, all dedicated to this and all steeped in ellipses, gaps, blanks. The same can be said of Duras, who experiences the trauma of seeing her husband Antelme return from the concentration camp and describes it in *La Douleur*. Speaking of Perec, whose writing is characterised entirely by the concept of lack (from all points of view, especially the linguistic one, as seen in *La Disparition*), why not also consider what is missing in the texts, thematically?

Finally, as far as Italian literature is concerned, the study on silence applied to Gianni Celati is interesting and new. Silence in Celati is the silence of modernity, more related to the notion of nostalgia than to that of trauma. Nostalgia for places - particularly the Po valley - gives rise to a silent, slow, descriptive writing of sounds and absence of sounds, which is perceptive as if the page were listening. Moreover, Perec's *Un homme qui dort* was translated into Italian by his contemporary Gianni Celati, who is the last author I will discuss in this research and who concludes the temporality on the diachronic axis. Gianni Celati who wanders Italian the plains writing and recording the ordinariness of everyday life (from which *Narratori delle Pianure* will spring) resembles Perec's sleeping man, who wanders aimlessly through Paris. Indeed, both Perec and Celati share a fundamental trait: that of the *infra-ordinary* (to use Perec's term) or the *qualunque* (to use Celati's term), i.e. recording banal objects and events. Just think of *TELEPI* or *Récits d'Ellis Island*. This travelling and walking along the paths of personal and collective memory while recording everything

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that passes in front of one's eyes is a characteristic common to both writers, just as common is the use of the medium of photography: Perec takes Polaroids during his journey to Ellis Island, and Celati, in his association with Ghirri, gives voice to the silence of places through pictures.

There is also an important relationship with photography in the work of Duras (just think of *L'Amant*), who with her *Hiroshima Mon Amour* strongly influenced and impressed the young Perec. It is no coincidence that both authors also devoted themselves to the cinematographic aspect and the transposition of some novels into films, the most significant of which are precisely *Hiroshima Mon Amour* and *Un Homme qui dort*, where the staging of silence is particularly relevant and is rendered through multiple techniques, not least the *voix off*.

Silence can therefore ultimately be represented not only by textual pauses and infratextual blanks, but also by paratextual elements such as photographs. In Celati's *Verso la foce* we find an intermediality that no longer involves only orality and writing, but also invests the plane of the image: not only sounds, therefore, but also photographs. In these texts and photographs, the emotion that we hear resonating in the silence is that of nostalgia or melancholy, where the longing for what is missing is the very engine of the narrative. The aspect of nostalgia is also dealt with extensively by Celati in *Conversazioni del Vento Volatore*. Both *Verso la Foce* and *Ellis Island* are two journeys towards silence, accompanied by photography: they are places of absence and places of exile, where the narrating self seeks, for different reasons, its origins and roots.

Narratori delle Pianure are instead polyphonic tales of silence, where Celati learns to follow the infinite mobility of the other, in an attempt to give voice to what we do not normally observe, what we have stopped noticing and therefore remains mute.

Lastly, in *Quattro Novelle sulle Apparenze*, the text opens with a character who, tired of the falseness of words, stops speaking, with a solemn and funny muteness. This character, who lets himself live and let himself go, is closely reminiscent of Perec's sleeping man and, not surprisingly, at the end of the story only begins to speak again in his sleep.

The silence of these latter characters is extremely different from the silence of those who have no words to say the trauma of the Shoah, but it is perhaps a silence that spans the modern era, it is the silence of today: marked by a saturation of images, words and possibilities, the only escape route is perhaps abstention, renunciation, silence, of which Celati paradoxically becomes the spokesman. Although they have two very different histories behind them, Perec and Celati share many traits, among which certainly stand out a taste for the tragicomic, but also an awareness of the radical fragility of existence, which can be cured in a sort of *narrative therapy*, in the words of Celati.

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Chapter 1.
Trauma and Silence:
Forms and Expressions of the Self in Autobiographical Writings

*The wound is a source
of stories.*

Arthur W. Frank

Silence, Trauma and Autobiography

In this chapter, as indicated in the introduction, we will deal with works that intertwine the notions of silence and trauma, between which there are profound connections. In order to analyse this aspect, it is imperative to rely on psychoanalytically oriented trauma studies to investigate the link between writing, trauma, the unconscious and silence. For this section of the research, four autobiographical works were chosen: for Woolf, “A Sketch of the Past”; for Duras, *La douleur*; for Perec, *W ou le souvenir d'enfance*; and for Celati, *Verso la foce*.

The bond between trauma and autobiography is evident: in the accounts of one's own life, transfigured by memory - a fallacious instrument par excellence - and by language - which clashes with the attempt to represent reality -, there are confessions, affirmations, subtexts that have to do with the most traumatic events in life. Writing is often used by these authors as a means to investigate within themselves, yet at the same time it becomes a web of sayings and unsaid within which the reader must disentangle himself more to discover what has been removed than to read what has actually been written.

In these works, which express themselves and convey meanings in spite of silence, the insistence in particular will be on the theme of the unspeakable, that is, that which is so horrible and monstrous that it has no words to be expressed.

It should be pointed out that the four works analysed are not all autobiographies *tout court*: in the course of the 20th century, in fact, autobiographical writing abandoned traditional tracks and paths and underwent considerable innovations. What is of interest here is not so much a characterisation of the works in this sense, but rather the investigation between the writing of the self - be it autobiography, autofiction, diaristic writing, *témoignage* - and the trauma that seems to compel silence.

It will therefore be necessary to ask what distinction there is between the unspeakable and the unspoken; how these can be translated into a literary text; how lack and loss - in psychological terms

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- are linked to silence; what difference there is between renouncing the word and the impossibility of accessing the word; how it is possible to dissolve the silence of trauma and return to the word; how the unconscious operates on words and leaves spaces for the unspoken. In short, it is necessary to ask what silence conceals, what is unspoken, what disappears from the text and why and on what themes there is a reticence to say. Basically, instead of looking at what is in a text, the attempt will be to look for what is *not* there.

These themes, in a research that develops over the course of the 20th century, are ultimately closely connected with Auschwitz, which disrupted all patterns of thought and induced a crisis of representation that also involved language. We will therefore ask ourselves, in line with our writers, what is possible to say and what is instead unspeakable in relation to the Holocaust.

Dealing with our authors in particular, we can recognise different types of trauma.

“A Sketch of the Past”, by Woolf, recounts a series of episodes from the writer's childhood including, related to this theme, the death of her mother, the death of her father, the death of her sister, and sexual abuse.

La douleur, by Duras, narrates the nerve-wracking wait for her husband deported to the concentration camps. What is interesting here is that we experience not only the trauma of Duras, who lives on the edge of madness, but also indirectly that of Antelme, who experienced deportation. In a way, there are two traumas, of two different subjects, that are intertwined. Duras's trauma is linked to the constant fear of the death of her beloved, which is transformed, over time, into an oscillation between moments of lucidity and moments of delirium, complete with nervous breakdowns, insomnia, visions and hallucinations.

W ou le souvenir d'enfance, by Perec, recounts in fragments and shreds a childhood broken by the death of his parents in Auschwitz and in the war. Perec's trauma, however, is not only that of having been an orphaned child, but also that of the silence that hovers around the deaths of his parents, of being the son of Jews but without memories and, in essence, without roots and belonging.

Verso la foce, by Celati, departs from the important traumas listed above to leave room for a tone of suspension and nostalgia that reveal the sense of emptiness of the modern era. The real question here is: is there trauma? Or is the trauma of the present the sense of emptiness and melancholy that afflicts the contemporary subject, who lives in a world saturated with meaningless images and words?

Before delving into a psychoanalytic framework, it is worth pointing out, as Rachel Boué notes, that if from the late 19th century doubt became part of the literary field by showing how language had become an obstacle to self-expression, it is from the 20th century that there is a real crisis of representation that leads to the theme of silence. Boué writes:

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De ce dilemme entre dire et taire, naît une littérature, non pas tant préoccupée d'elle-même et en proie au doute, mais plutôt capable de dire ce qu'elle n'arrive pas à être. Ce sont ces postures paradoxales de la parole que nous appelons *silence*. Le paradoxe tient à ce que l'exploration des limites du dicible ne conduit pas à l'extinction de l'écriture mais au contraire à sa confirmation littéraire. Le *silence*, c'est-à-dire ce que l'écriture ne peut pas être, est bien ce qui fonde la parole littéraire, animée d'un désir de surpassement.¹

Silence is thus absolutely linked to writing as a desire to transcend the very limits of language and so also of the concept of the unspeakable. Thus, if in music silence is what allows sound to exist, “pour l'écriture il représente l'impossible achèvement en ce que celle-ci est à la fois son antidote et son porte-parole”². Writing therefore becomes a contradictory act because it requires saying and being silent at the same time. And yet, this syllogistic tension is the generator of a creativity that permeates the entire 20th century. Boué distinguishes, in this case, between “les écrivains qui cherchent à dire le silence et ceux qui en parlent, en d'autres termes ceux pour qui le silence se dit dans la matérialité même de l'écriture et ceux pour qui il est objet de discours”³. This distinction may also come in handy for us in this chapter with regard to the four chosen writers. Indeed, it appears that they simultaneously belong to both categories in their autobiographical writings: while silence formally permeates their pages, they also deal with the theme of silence explicitly.

a. Trauma and the Challenge of Literature

In psychoanalytic terms, trauma is defined as “as an individual's response to an event or a series of events that completely overwhelm that individual's ability to cope with the experience and, subsequently, to integrate it into their life's narrative. Prototypically, the event that triggers trauma is some kind of threat to life (including serious injury or a threat to physical integrity) of the subject or others, and engenders feelings of intense fear, helplessness and horror”⁴.

This leads to feelings of insecurity, distrust of others, fear of the unknown. The extensive literature on trauma tells us that a natural reaction to a traumatic event is to banish it from our awareness. In fact, trauma is such because there are no words to describe the traumatic experience. Trauma has to do with something that appears, in the first instance, unspeakable and unrepresentable.

¹ Rachel Boué, *L'éloquence du silence. Celan, Sarraute, Duras et Quignard*, Paris, L'Harmattan 2009, p. 10.

² Ibidem.

³ Ivi, p. 12.

⁴ American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, DSM-IV, 4th ed. Text Revision, Washington, DC, American Psychiatric Association, 2000.

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The unrepresentable, whose presence does not refer to any link with anything, refers to absolute inadequacy and questions the limits of language and words that reach it neither literally nor metaphorically. Words and things are de facto disconnected. Thus, it consists in an active obstacle, preventing word and thing from being linked or existing for one another. There is no immediate equivalent between what is representable and what is unrepresentable. What kind of links can be made between representation and what is unrepresentable? Indeed, the problem would seem to be: how to move from the traumatic real to a symbolic register? Therefore, we can assert first that the unrepresentable is what can only be shown without being seen, what can be said without being clearly understood.⁵

Trauma, therefore, is not immediately in the sphere of representation and is something that, at least initially, exceeds language. Psychologists call *dissociation* the removal of the experience from the conscious areas of the psyche. However, healing cannot take place unless there is a putting into words of the traumatic event. The silence and secrecy that often surround trauma must be broken so that the recovery process can take place.

The word trauma comes from the Greek τραῦμα and means ‘wound’. The pain of a traumatic experience is such that it disrupts the identity of the individual, creating, in the words of Arthur W. Frank, “a wounded storyteller”⁶. Our four authors can be defined in these terms.

Trauma often leads to posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Many victims experience the paradox of needing to deny the traumatic event and at the same time needing to talk about it and remember it. Nevertheless, it is only when the trauma finds the words to be said that there is healing. In order to be able to integrate the traumatic event into the life narrative, however, it is necessary to find a language that can tell it. What is of interest is what is written by the editors in *The Unspeakable: Narratives of Trauma*: “Sometimes the unspeakable *can* be put into words but often it may be communicated through silences and omissions. [...] The act of witnessing requires an honest effort to *listen* to a story that may be disturbing beyond our imagination. But it is a story that has to be told in order for healing to begin”⁷. It is precisely these silences and omissions that we will try to listen for in the words of the texts we approach to analyse.

Researchers often point out that “trauma theory is [...] a discourse of the unrepresentable, of the event that destabilizes language and demands a vocabulary and syntax in some sense incommensurable with what went before”⁸. Indeed, in these writings we see a lexicon that we might

⁵ Yaelle Sibony-Malpertu, “A possible way to represent the unrepresentable”, in *Psychoanalysis and the Unrepresentable, from Culture to the Clinic*, edited by Agnieszka Piotrowska and Ben Tyer, New York, Routledge, 2017, p. 40.

⁶ Cf. Arthur W. Frank, *The Wounded Storyteller: Body, Illness, and Ethics*, Chicago: University of Chicago press, 1995

⁷ *The Unspeakable: Narratives of Trauma*, Magda Stroinska / Vikki Cecchetto / Kate Szymansky (eds.), PL Academic Research, 2014, p. 18.

⁸ James Berger, “Trauma and Literary Theory”, in *Contemporary Literature* 38, no. 3 (Autumn): 569-582, 1997, p. 573.

call part of a rhetoric of silence and a syntax, often fragmented and full of gaps, that is intermittent and broken, like the subject.

Wajnryb suggests that there are a number of factors that prevent the victim from being able to communicate the traumatic experience. A linguistic constraint on expressing trauma prevents the victim from describing trauma “in a way that authentically or even adequately captures its horror”⁹. For most trauma survivors, words may be inadequate descriptions of their experiences because the victim is not sufficiently able linguistically to describe it¹⁰. Another determining factor in the struggle to express trauma is the lack of the right context: according to Wajnryb, appropriate contexts include a group of people with the same experience or therapy¹¹. Trauma victims use language in their need to “process the event, make sense of it” and in their need to escape from the isolation of trauma in order to heal¹². Herman argues, in this regard, that the first accounts of the traumatic experience are usually “repetitious, stereotyped, and emotionless”¹³. Certainly, in the characteristics of repetitiveness and lack of emotionality we recognise the writings of Perec and Duras, characterised precisely by neutral writing. Duras's diary, even, is repetitive because it reports on an obsession, thus, by its very nature, cannot but repeat itself constantly.

One element to be considered in a theoretical premise dealing with trauma is the body. This is especially the case in writings dealing with concentration camps, where the body was severely tested: “Surviving meant primarily countering the supreme threat to the body by being clever and smart”¹⁴. The camp experience is in fact predominantly a bodily experience: “It is the body that is the text; it is the body that communicates what is happening to a human being, and it says more than words can”¹⁵. This is true in relation to our texts, especially if we think of the paragraphs in which Duras recounts, to the tiniest detail, Antelme's gaunt and ravaged body in the days immediately following his return. The *body* tells what it was, not Robert L.. Moreover, “the body includes excrement. Taking care of physiological functions was a very important aspect of camp life, latrines were one of the problems, and corporeal ‘embarrassment’ was non-existent”¹⁶. Just as there was no modesty of the body in the camps, in Duras's writing, especially in the passages describing Antelme's excrement, there is no modesty in words either. There is no shame in the descriptions of the tortured body of the deportee, there is an overcoming of all linguistic taboos. Moreover, the connection to the body in the camps is evident because: “The only information the camp functionaries wanted from a

⁹ Ruth Wajnryb, *The Silence: How Tragedy Shapes Talk*, Crows Nest, Allen and Unwin, 2001, p. 84.

¹⁰ Cf. Ivi, pp. 85-86.

¹¹ Cf. Ivi, p.p. 97-98.

¹² Cf. Ivi, p. 104.

¹³ Judith Lewis Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, New York, Basic Books, 1997, p. 175.

¹⁴ *The Unspeakable: Narratives of Trauma*, Magda Stroinska / Vikki Cecchetto / Kate Szymansky (eds.), cit., p. 61.

¹⁵ Ivi, p. 62.

¹⁶ Ivi, p. 64.

prisoner was to see his body working. The basic communication process between a prisoner and the system was one-sided and had a corporeal character. Beating is a way of communicating commands, prohibitions and displeasure, but it is also naturally limited to a one-way action”¹⁷. The direct consequence is that “words are of little use in such a relationship”¹⁸.

Still on the subject of the body, it is worth, as it concerns Virginia Woolf's experience as a child, reasoning about the trauma represented by sexual abuse. What is normally emphasised in reading in this area is that every traumatic experience alters the victim's perception of the world, but this effect is all the greater in children and adolescents, whose sense of reality, authority and social hierarchies is still under construction. Baird states that “one of the foremost needs of survivors of sexual abuse is to regain a sense of control over their lives. Control was taken from them when they were abused. The symptoms they suffer continue to take away their control”¹⁹. This leads to the further consideration that “self-destructive behaviors usually perpetuate negative effects of sexual abuse and assault and prevent the victim from establishing meaningful and trusting relationships. And yet, in order to continue with their life and regain some form of control, victims need to process and integrate their trauma and find a meaningful narrative through which to relate their story”²⁰. Again, the trauma is overcome through the narration of it, which helps to redistribute blame to the perpetrator.

The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-IV-TR) of the American Psychiatric Association (APA 2000) defines trauma as “an extreme traumatic stressor” that is related to direct personal experiencing, witnessing or learning about “an event that involves actual or threatened death or serious injury, or other threat to one's physical integrity” or that of another person²¹. The *Comprehensive Textbook of Psychiatry* identifies “intense fear, helplessness, loss of control, and threat of annihilation” as common features in all types of psychological trauma²². Sexual assault is defined as “all incidents of unwanted sexual activity, including sexual attacks and sexual touching”²³. Sexual activity referred to in the definition of sexual assault may range from rape to any

¹⁷ Ivi, p. 62.

¹⁸ Ibidem.

¹⁹ Frank Baird, “A Narrative Context for Conversations with Adult Survivors of Childhood Sexual Abuse”, in *Progress – Family Systems Research and Therapy*, Volume 5, pp. 51-71, Encino, CA: Phillips Graduate Institute, 1996, p. 53.

²⁰ *The Unspeakable: Narratives of Trauma*, Magda Strojnska / Vikki Cecchetto / Kate Szymansky (eds.), cit., pp. 183-184.

²¹ Cf. American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 4th ed. Text Revision, Washington, DC, American Psychiatric Association, 2000.

²² Cf. Harold I. Kaplan, *Comprehensive Textbook of Psychiatry*, University of California, Williams & Wilkins, 1985, pp. 918-924

²³ Shannon Brennan and Andrea Taylor-Butts, *Sexual Assault in Canada 2004 and 2007*, Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics 19th floor, R.H. Coats Building, Ottawa, K1A 0T6, December 2008, Catalogue no. 85F0033M — No. 19, ISSN 1496-4562, ISBN 978-1-100-11163-6, p. 7

unwanted sexual contact and involves a person who does not or cannot (due to physical or psychological factors) consent. Sexual assault is always an act of power²⁴.

Sexual assault is therefore a trauma for the victim and Judith Herman argues that domestic and sexual violence is the last of the major traumas on which attention was drawn in the 20th century. According to Herman: “traumatic events are extraordinary, not because they occur rarely, but rather because they overwhelm the ordinary human adaptation to life”²⁵. The damage caused to the psyche by sexual abuse can lead to PTSD, having flashbacks, experiencing fear, anxiety, inability to cope with stress and self-destructive behaviour. All of the above fits perfectly with Woolf's personality as we know it from her diaries and letters.

In addition, victims of sexual abuse often use the tool of metaphor to describe the trauma: metaphor, in this sense, is used as concealment and in some ways it says veiledly, uses other words to express what cannot be expressed directly. Metaphors are products of conceptual synthesis, a skill that is often compromised by trauma. This means that, in using conceptual metaphors, the trauma has been integrated into the individual's experience. Does Woolf use metaphors to describe the event of sexual abuse by her brother? In the first instance no, but then she speaks of fingers on lips which, in not saying anything else, become very telling and can signify the imposition of silence on the victim of the abuse and the inability to cry out, ask for help, and recount the trauma. One of the metaphors most often used is that of illness. As Sontag writes in *Illness as Metaphor*, illness can be seen as a metaphor for certain psychological or physical conditions, and the physical violence associated with abuse can easily be represented as a disease that attacks the body²⁶. It is no coincidence that the etymology of trauma, which is wound, can also be defined as a physical injury. This metaphor is used to transpose a psychological wound, which the person may not be able to relate, into a physical wound, which is more acceptable to social taboos and less stigmatised. On closer inspection, the metaphor transposing a psychological wound into a physical wound is also used by Perec when he tells of breaking his shoulder and speaks of *thérapeutiques imaginaires*. In this case, it was not even Perec who had injured himself, but a companion. We note, however, how the mechanism of transposition and metaphor on the physical plane can be used to say, covertly, something deeper and belonging to the psychological regime.

Recounting a traumatic experience often involves a great deal of fragmentation: “trauma is experienced in a highly fragmented way, as a collection of sensations and images, which must be

²⁴ Cf. *The Unspeakable: Narratives of Trauma*, Magda Strojinska / Vikki Cecchetto / Kate Szymansky (eds.), cit., p. 184.

²⁵ Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: the aftermath of violence – from domestic abuse to political terror*, New York, Basic Books, 1997, p. 33.

²⁶ Cf. Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor*, New York, Anchor Books, Doubleday, 1967.

actively placed together to create a coherent narrative”²⁷. This fragmentariness is also due, scientifically, to a cerebral impairment of the Broca's area, which shuts down during the recollection or recall of the traumatic event, making it literally incommunicable²⁸. Herman, in turn, presented trauma as an inherently fragmenting experience which fractures identity. Trauma, by its definition, is that which damages the sense of the self, and impacts one's life narrative²⁹. If trauma and fracture are so intertwined, Perec's symbolic, and never actually occurring, shoulder fracture comes to mind once again: it is no coincidence that a physical fracture stands in place of an inner fracture, to narrate, in silence, an unspeakable pain.

It may be useful in this context to return to a valuable concept expressed in Derrida's *Demeure*, which deals with the context of relations between fiction and truth which is also to say, between literature and death³⁰. Derrida points out that it is only through fictional stories, which offer a distance to unrepresentable pain, that we can experience the essence of the question in an ethical manner. In this there is an echo of Lacan, who states that the notion of truth has a structure of fiction³¹: it is often simply too painful and impossible to deal with facts just as sheer facts. Thus, it often becomes necessary to fictionalise that account to make it 'representable' at all, however imperfectly.

George Lakoff and Mark Johnson introduced the concept of *conceptual metaphor* in their 1980 volume *Metaphors We Live By*. These are not so much rhetorical figures to create artistic effects, but tools that allow us to give concreteness and understanding to abstract ideas. Whenever a metaphor is used, the meaning of the words changes from literal to non-literal (e.g. “I went through hell”). This implies that the reader seeks an interpretation that is not explicitly written but understood. In traumatic experiences, the use of metaphors is common precisely because of this ability of metaphors not to speak directly about the experience but to approach it through other images. One need only think, again, of Woolf or even, more simply, of *W ou le souvenir d'enfance*, where W's island can be read, in these terms, as a huge conceptual metaphor that allows one to speak of the trauma, experienced indirectly, of life in the concentration camps. This metaphor will only be dissolved and made explicit on the last page of the novel.

As for the sexual abuse of children, it is certainly more serious because, as Baird writes: “The event of child abuse quickly introduces concepts and emotions that are intense, difficult and in

²⁷ Cf. Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: the Aftermath of Violence – from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*, cit; van der Kolk and van der Hart, “The Intrusive Past: The Flexibility of Memory and the Engraving of Trauma”, in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, ed. Cathy Caruth, Baltimore, John Hopkins UP, 1995.

²⁸ Cf. Bessel A. Van der Kolk, “The Body Keeps the Score: Approaches to the Psychology of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder”, in *Traumatic Stress: The Effects of Overwhelming Experience on Mind, Body, and Society*, ed. Bessel A. van der Kolk, Alexander C. McFarlane, and Lars Weisaeth, New York, The Guilford Press, 1996.

²⁹ Cf. Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: the Aftermath of Violence – from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*, cit.

³⁰ Cf. Maurice Blanchot and Jacques Derrida, (1994), *The Instant of My Death, Demeure: Fiction and Testimony*, tr. E. Rottenberg, Paolo Alto, Stanford UP, 2000, p. 15.

³¹ Cf. Jacques Lacan, *Écrits*, tr. B. Fink. New York, Norton, 2006, p. 684.

conflict with the child's understanding and expectations of the world"³². The dissonance between what the world should be and the experienced reality of abuse, often committed by close people who should have protected the child instead of exposing him or her to trauma, is devastating to life because it has to do with the sense of safety in the world. Moreover, it is well known that most victims of sexual violence blame themselves for what happened. Returning to Woolf, we note how guilt is a constant element in her life and how her sexual life, if we want dysfunctional, and her conception of sex were certainly influenced by this experience.

Furthermore, Baird writes that "one of the foremost needs of survivors of sexual abuse is to regain a sense of control over their lives"³³. Indeed, abuse deprives the subject of control over his or her own body. As far as the need for control is concerned, we can say that Woolf's perfectionism in writing probably also responded to a need for order that would not have been possible in the real world. Cases of sexual abuse are often not recounted by the victims: Woolf did not do so initially either. The only account of it is later in *Moments of Being*. In his book *The Wounded Storyteller: Body, Illness, and Ethics*, Arthur W. Frank writes about the importance of finding a language that the person can use to tell his illness narrative³⁴. In fact, telling one's own story corresponds to putting one's own thoughts and emotions into words: *narrative therapy*, a concept coined in the literary sphere by Gianni Celati with a value all its own, helps to restore meaning to the traumatic experience and to regain a sense of agency.

Knowing the perpetrator of the abuse provokes in the victim a sense of shame, guilt and responsibility. To this day, domestic violence is somewhere still a taboo: Woolf acknowledges that in the Victorian age it certainly was. This imposed social censorship prevents the victim from embarking on a path of healing. Indeed, as sociolinguist Jerzy Bralczyk argues in dealing with trauma, if we can express something in words, the world becomes more bearable³⁵. In addition to this, it is studied that victims of abuse are not comfortable with their bodies, that they feel dirty and that they feel violated. The body is in fact a source of pain, hence the distancing from others in search of comfort and safety. This feeling of alienation, in psychology, is called *dissociation*. Woolf certainly felt a strong discomfort with her own body and the bodies of others, particularly the male body. The sexual act was seen as an unpleasant duty. The literature on trauma also considers that "victims of trauma experience disruptions to their need for *independence* and personal autonomy. They also report feeling alienated from other people and the world and, as a result, develop an impaired sense

³² Frank Baird, "A Narrative Context for Conversations with Adult Survivors of Childhood Sexual Abuse", in *Progress – Family Systems Research and Therapy*, cit., p. 52.

³³ Ivi, p. 53.

³⁴ Cf. Arthur W. Frank, *The Wounded Storyteller: Body, Illness, and Ethics*, cit.

³⁵ Cf. Jerzy Bralczyk, "Słowa moga nam pomogac", in *Portal Informacyjny Tokfm*, pl. 13 april, 2010.

of *intimacy*”³⁶. Herman, on this subject, writes that trauma changes self-perceptions which in turns manifests itself in a sense of helplessness, shame, self-blame and a belief that others cannot understand the nature and impact of the traumatic event. Trauma also affects the individual’s view about relationships with others resulting in a sense of isolation and withdrawal³⁷. Woolf’s isolated life and her constant struggle in social situations, often expressed in her diaries and letters, might not be a simple personality characteristic, but result from a series of traumas experienced by the writer. The strong hostility towards male authority, both in her private and public life, could also be the result of a strong need for control and independence, which translates into both the aspect of intimacy and defiance of patriarchal social hierarchies.

Lastly, “victims of trauma may try to dissociate from their experience by placing themselves not in the role of the experiencer, but in the role of an outside/dispassionate observer (depersonalization). One then sees and hears and feels what is happening from a third person point of view, as if one were watching a movie; thus terms such as ‘screen memory’ (introduced by Freud 1899)³⁸ or ‘screen image’ are sometimes used to describe this phenomenon”³⁹. This phenomenon is very reminiscent of the dissociation experienced by Duras in *La douleur* when she begins to speak of herself in the third person, writing “elle”, as if she were a spectator of her own painful waiting and not an active subject in it. This seems to be a way of putting the pain at a distance, but it causes an internal split in the subject.

Finally, it seems important that although people who have experienced trauma are often silent because it is too difficult to talk about it, Bruner reminds us that a primary way people make sense of any experience, particularly of trauma, is by casting it in a narrative form. Personal narratives are not merely a way of describing our lives. They are the means by which we organize our experiences and the information we encounter⁴⁰. From this point of view, we can consider that our identity is formed around the narratives we construct. It is precisely this self-narrative that is destroyed by trauma. “A number of research findings have demonstrated that keeping a journal (a written narrative) in the face of traumatic episode facilitates physical and mental recovery”⁴¹. This could be what Duras did while keeping a diary, which she said she found years later, while waiting for Antelme.

³⁶ *The Unspeakable: Narratives of Trauma*, Magda Strojinska / Vikki Cecchetto / Kate Szymansky (eds.), cit., p. 235.

³⁷ Cf. J. Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: the aftermath of violence – from domestic abuse to political terror*, cit.

³⁸ Cf. Sigmund Freud, 1899 “Screen memories”, Vol. 3, *Standard Edition of Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey, Anna Freud, Alix Strachey, Alan Tyson, and Angela Richards. Trans. James Strachey et al. 299-322. London, Hogarth Press, c. 1953-1974.

³⁹ *The Unspeakable: Narratives of Trauma*, cit., pp. 193-194.

⁴⁰ Cf. Jerome Bruner, *Acts of Meaning*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1990.

⁴¹ *The Unspeakable: Narratives of Trauma*, cit., p. 265.

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Yet, when we come to the concept of the unspeakable around the notion of trauma, there are conflicting views in the literature. One of these is expressed by Garbus, who sees the unspeakable as the engine that starts literature⁴². Quoting Barthes:

La seconde force de la littérature c'est sa force de représentation. Depuis les temps anciens jusqu'aux tentatives de l'Avant-Garde, la littérature s'affaire à représenter quelque chose. Quoi ? Je dirai brutalement le réel. Le réel n'est pas représentable. Et c'est parce que les hommes veulent sans cesse le représenter par des mots, qu'il y a une histoire de la littérature. Que le réel ne soit pas représentable — mais seulement démontrable — peut être dit de plusieurs façons : soit qu'avec Lacan on le définisse comme l'impossible, — ce qui ne peut s'atteindre et échappe au discours — soit qu'en termes topologiques, on constate qu'on ne peut faire coïncider un ordre pluridimensionnel (le réel) et un ordre unidimensionnel (le langage).

Or, c'est précisément cette impossibilité topologique à quoi la littérature ne veut pas, ne peut jamais se rendre. De ce qu'il n'y a point de parallélisme entre le réel et le langage, les hommes ne prennent pas leur parti et c'est ce refus, peut-être aussi vieux que le langage lui-même, qui produit, dans un affairément incessant, la littérature. On pourrait imaginer une histoire de la littérature, ou, pour mieux dire : des productions de langage, qui serait l'histoire des expédients verbaux, souvent très fous, dont les hommes ont usé pour réduire, apprivoiser, nier, ou au contraire assumer ce qui est toujours un délire, à savoir l'inadéquation fondamentale du langage et du réel. Je disais à l'instant, à propos du savoir, que la littérature est catégoriquement réaliste, en ce quelle n'a jamais que le réel pour objet de désir ; et je dirai maintenant, sans me contredire, parce que j'emploie le mot ici dans son acception familière, qu'elle est tout aussi obstinément : irréaliste ; elle croit sensé le désir de l'impossible.⁴³

This paradox is exactly our starting point, what Boué also proposed as a reflection: literature, rather than annulling itself in the unspeakable, rises from it and challenges it.

b. The Holocaust: Words Charged with Silence

If we can make a distinction between personal trauma and collective trauma, Auschwitz certainly falls into the second category, yet it was experienced in a unique way by those who experienced the concentration camp or by their loved ones. Since this work deals with 20th century authors and works, it seems only right to devote a separate paragraph to what the Holocaust represented, although not all the writers examined deal with this theme in the texts analysed. In fact, it is only Duras and Perec, among others in indirect and different ways, who deal with it.

⁴² Cf. Lisa Garbus, "The Unspeakable Stories of Shoah and Beloved", *College Literature* 26 (1999): pp 52-68, pp. 53-54.

⁴³ Roland Barthes, *Leçon inaugurale – Sémiologie littéraire*, Collège de France, 7 janv 1977, Paris, Editions de Seuil, 1978, pp. 21-22.

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Adorno said that after Auschwitz no poetry could be written, just as Elie Wiesel stated that “there is no such thing as a literature of the Holocaust, nor there can ever be”⁴⁴. For some critics, the Shoah is both a historical and a narratological limitation and art has no means to express it. Current thinking when it comes to this historical event might be as follows: “A description of the Holocaust is doomed to fail because it will be a violation not only of moral character, but also of epistemological character: an offense that moves away from what Wittgenstein states can be talked about in this world. To nominate the real is not possible. This was disproved because poetry also represents a truth outside that which can be said”⁴⁵. Evidently, however, contrary to dogma, the Holocaust can be told. One need only think of the texts we are going to examine by Duras and Perec. Yet, in these cases, the situation has no words or, as Lacan would say, the subject meets the Real. Connected to the Real is fiction: “Fiction makes the semblance of word, a semblance connecting for example a name to that which is named, while fiction about the Real is an impossible attempt to represent: what cannot be represented and what is unbearable in the life of the subject. Fiction in a discourse prevents language from shaking too much. Fiction about the Real is fiction about what shakes any discourse”⁴⁶. This use of fiction resembles that made by Perec in *W ou le souvenir d'enfance*, which uses an imagined tale to describe the unspeakable and the unrepresentable. This means that whatever we say about the Real, it is never the truth, but only an impossible representation of the Real. According to this perspective: “Language can never describe the Real. The trauma connected to meeting the Real will forever shake language, although it may shake less, the more distant the trauma is”⁴⁷. Therein also lies the paradox, already evoked by Boué and Barthes, of literature, in Lacanian terms: “not only are there not enough words, but words fail to grasp and maintain the Real”⁴⁸, yet all literature is aimed at grasping and understanding what cannot be understood.

Returning to Adorno, we can argue that his evocation of silence after Auschwitz stems from a historical and aesthetic-philosophical objection. This sees the Holocaust as the final product of Western civilisation. The philosophical objection, on the other hand, is related to the idea that if and when art speaks, it ends up speaking about itself. However, if Adorno represents a general cultural marker for the first generation of Holocaust victims, it is useful to point out that the second generation, like Perec's, used other means to narrate the horror and postulates a break with the paradigm expressed by Adorno. The two texts we examined were published in 1975, for Perec, and 1985, for Duras. This

⁴⁴ Elie Wiesel, “The Problematics of Holocaust Literature”, in *Confronting the Holocaust*, ed. Elie Wiesel, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1978.

⁴⁵ Pia Hylén, “Presenting the unrepresentable in presentable ways”, in *Psychoanalysis and the Unrepresentable, from Culture to the Clinic*, cit., pp. 125-126.

⁴⁶ Cf. René Rasmussen, “Is poetics a fiction about truth – in a poem?”, in *Psychoanalysis and the Unrepresentable, from Culture to the Clinic*, cit., p. 112.

⁴⁷ Ibidem.

⁴⁸ Ivi, p. 116.

fact forces us to reflect not only on the temporal distance from Adorno, but also on the cultural distance.

Many volumes have been dedicated to the literature of the Shoah, among which the following should be mentioned: *Messengers from the Dead: Literature of the Holocaust* (1970) by Irving Halperin; *Escape into Siege: A Survey of Israeli Literature Today* (1974) by Leon Yudkin; *The Holocaust and the Literary Imagination* (1975) by Lawrence Langer; *The Resonance of Dust: Essays on Holocaust Literature and Jewish Fate* (1979) by Edward Alexander; *Encountering the Holocaust: An Interdisciplinary Survey* (1979) by Josephine Knopp; *By Words Alone: The Holocaust in Literature* (1980) by Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi; *A Double Dying: Reflections on Holocaust Literature* (1980) by Alvin Rosenfeld; *The Holocaust in Hebrew Literature: From Genocide to Rebirth* (1983) by Alan Yutler; *Hurban: Responses to Catastrophe in Hebrew Literature* (1984) by Alan Mintz; *Against the Apocalypse: Responses to Catastrophe in Modern Jewish Literature* (1984) by David Roskies; *Le génocide dans la fiction Romanesque* (1986) by Charlotte Wardi; *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust: Narrative and the Consequences of Interpretation* (1988) by James Young.

The most interesting volume for the purposes of this research, however, is *The Shriek of Silence. A Phenomenology of the Holocaust Novel* by David Patterson, since it focuses, as per its title, on the element of silence. Patterson's idea of the Holocaust novel stems from what he calls, right from the title, the shriek of silence. Starting from Wiesel's assumption that: "At Auschwitz, not only man died, but also the idea of man"⁴⁹, Patterson argues that in Holocaust literature, the writer seeks the lost soul of the human being through words. The writer's initial concern is thus not aesthetic, literary or historical, but existential, ontological. Indeed, Rosenfeld writes that the position of the Holocaust writer is:

analogous to that of the man of faith, who is likewise beset by frustration and anguish and, in just those moments when his spirit may yearn for the fullness of Presence, is forced to acknowledge the emptiness and silence of an imposed Absence. The life centers of the self-intelligence, imagination, assertiveness-undergo paralysis in such moments, which, if prolonged, have the effect of a total detachment or the profoundest despair. Yet to indulge in silence is to court madness or death. At just those points where, through some abiding and still operative reflex of language, silence converts once more into words - even into words about silence - Holocaust literature is born. Its birth must be seen as a miracle of some sort, not only an overcoming of mute despair but an assertion and affirmation of faith.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Elie Wiesel, *Legends of Our Time*, New York, Avon, 1968, p. 230.

⁵⁰ Alvin Rosenfeld, *A Double Dying: Reflections on Holocaust Literature*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1980, pp. 14-15.

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The consequence, according to Patterson, is that in the creation of the Holocaust novel the concern is with the *word*, since Auschwitz represents a profound loss of speech. André Neher writes: “Aushwitz is, above all, silence”⁵¹. But what kind of silence? Patterson writes:

Let it be said, then, at the outset, that the Holocaust novel is not primarily an attempt to recount the details of a particular occurrence, to depict a reality that transcends imagination, or to describe a horror inaccessible to a limited language. It is, rather, an event and an endeavor to fetch the word from the silence of exile and restore it to its meaning; it is an attempt to resurrect the dead soul or self of the human being.⁵²

On the relationship between identity and silence, Jerzy Josinsky writes:

Perhaps this silence is also a metaphor for dissociation from the community and from something greater. The feeling of alienation floats on the surface of the work and manifests the author’s awareness, perhaps unconscious, of his break with the wholeness of the self.⁵³

It is no coincidence that dissociation, the sense of alienation and the fragmentation of identity return as recurring elements of trauma. In a similar vein, Wiesel writes:

You write about what you do not have. It is absence that makes literature. It is what you miss that becomes present.⁵⁴

Before I write, I must endure the silence, then the silence breaks out. In the beginning there was silence – no words. The word itself is a breaking out... it breaks the silence. We cannot avoid the silence, we must not. What we can do is somehow charge words with silence.⁵⁵

This implies that absence, lack, the breaking of identity consist of silence. At the same time, the idea of “charging words with silence” is quite similar to Rovatti's proposal and Jabès's writing proposed at the beginning of this work. Patterson writes:

the novelist struggles to impart a voice to silence – and to hear a voice from within that silence. In the Holocaust novel silence is always a character, and the word is always its subject matter [...].

⁵¹ André Neher, *The Exile of the Word: From the Silence of the Bible to the Silence of Auschwitz*, trans. David Maisel, Philadelphia, Jewish Publication Society, 1981, p. 141.

⁵² David Patterson, *The Shriek of Silence. A Phenomenology of the Holocaust Novel*, Lexington, The University Press of Kentucky, 1992, pp. 4-5.

⁵³ Jerzy Kosinski, *Notes of the Author on the Painted Bird*, New York, Scientia-Factum, 1965, p. 17.

⁵⁴ Elie Wiesel, *Against Silence: The Voice and Vision of Elie Wiesel*, 3 vols., Ed. Irving Abrahamson, New York, Holocaust Library, 1985, Vol. 3, p. 286.

⁵⁵ Elie Wiesel, *Against Silence*, cit., Vol. 2, p. 119.

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The Holocaust novel is not set in one period or another but in the space between the voices of encounter, in the dialogue between word and word, word and silence, silence and silence. The form of the novel is the form of this between-space as it takes shape in the dialogic relation that ties the author to character, to reader, and to his own soul. Passing through these levels of relation, word and meaning may once again find their intersection and their resurrection – in the shriek of silence.⁵⁶

The issue of voice is fundamental: “The lost self is a self drained of voice, and the process of redemption – what Rosenzweig calls personalization or humanization – is a process of regaining a voice. It is in the voice and through the voice that the word is returned to its meaning”⁵⁷. This not only concerns the writer, but soon also the reader. Indeed, it is about learning to listen to the silence in the word, sharing both the word and the silence with the author: “The word itself must take man to the point of learning how to share silence. His preparation begins with learning to hear”⁵⁸. If we take Martin Buber's theory, expressed in *I and Thou*, according to which “I require a You to become; becoming I, I say You”⁵⁹, the novel about the Holocaust becomes a succession of relationships that extend to where the novel begins, namely silence. When the reader receives the author's word, the silence, Patterson argues, may itself become the answer. Buber writes:

Spirit is not in the I but between I and You. It is not like the blood that circulates in you but like the air in which you breathe. Man lives in the spirit when he is able to respond to his You. He is able to do that when he enters into this relation with his whole being. It is solely by virtue of his power to relate that man is able to live in the spirit. Only silence toward the You, the silence of all tongues, the taciturn waiting in the unformed, undifferentiated, prelinguistic word leaves the You free and stands together with it in reserve where the spirit does not manifest itself but is.⁶⁰

According to Patterson, the discourse on spirit is profoundly linked to that on silence: “The novel's dialogic dimensions, born out of silence, are its spiritual dimensions. This makes the existential concern with the novel, on the part of both author and reader, a matter of life and death”⁶¹. Clearly, this raises a problem of response or reception: the novel of the Holocaust requires a you, that is, a presence, which is a responsibility. Holocaust survivor Emmanuel Levinas writes: “Saying is already a sign made to another, a sign of this giving of signs, that is, of this non-indifference, a sign of this impossibility of slipping away and being replaced, of this identity, this uniqueness: here I

⁵⁶ David Patterson, *The Shriek of Silence. A Phenomenology of the Holocaust Novel*, cit. p. 5.

⁵⁷ Ivi, p. 13.

⁵⁸ Franz Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption*, tr. William H. Hallo, Boston, Beacon, 1972, p. 309.

⁵⁹ Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, tr. Walter Kaufmann, New York, Scribner's, 1970, p. 62.

⁶⁰ Ivi, p. 89.

⁶¹ David Patterson, *The Shriek of Silence. A Phenomenology of the Holocaust Novel*, cit. p. 16.

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am”⁶². In this way, the novel implies a reader and the responsibility of the reader as well. Bakhtin writes: “I must experience – must see and discover – what he experiences. I must take up his position as though I were coincident with him”⁶³. The reader thus becomes a reader of the voice he has encountered in the novel and must allow himself to be penetrated by what he has read until he feels it as his own experience. But how to hear the silences? The answer is provided to us by Elie Wiesel: “If I use words, it is not to change silence but to complete it”⁶⁴. Neher writes that in Wiesel's work - but this observation can be used for all Holocaust novels - silence has three functions: phenomenological, scenic and theological. Briefly, silence is the counterpoint of thought because the word that forms thought derives from silence; it is the backdrop of action because Auschwitz pervades the Holocaust novel regardless of time and space; it has a theological aspect because the one who is silent is God, or rather, God is silence, present with absence. The act of uttering, writing and reading a novel changes the human being. There is a transformation, both in the writer and in the reader: “The thing that summons the reader’s response is not just the word but the silence conveyed by the word [...] Silence is possible only when something must be said, when a witness must be born – else the soul would die”⁶⁵. Patterson's conclusion is as follows, which I support:

The silence that shrieks in the Holocaust novel is not the silence of the inability to describe events that elude language; nor is it the silence of the gap between the familiar and the absolutely alien. Rather, it is the silence of meaning lost and yet to be regained, the silence of a soul lost and yet to be reborn in a future forever yet to be.⁶⁶

It is therefore not a silence that has to do with what cannot be expressed, but rather a silence of words to be re-signified, as in traumatic experiences. In order for man to regain unity in identity and build a future, a silence with a new meaning must be regained.

⁶² Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being; or, Beyond Essence*, tr. Alphonso Lingis, The Hague, Nijhoff, 1981, p. 145.

⁶³ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Esthétique et théorie du roman*, Paris, Gallimard, coll. Tel, 1999, pp. 24-25.

⁶⁴ Elie Wiesel, *Against Silence*, cit., Vol. 3, p. 267.

⁶⁵ David Patterson, *The Shriek of Silence. A Phenomenology of the Holocaust Novel*, cit. p. 21.

⁶⁶ Ivi, p. 27.

I. “A Sketch of the Past”: “We are the words; we are the music; we are the thing itself”

“A Sketch of the Past” is an autobiography about Virginia Woolf’s childhood and adolescence, a period before the caesura represented by her move to Bloomsbury. It was written at the end of her literary career, which began in 1939 and ended on 17 November 1940, a few months before her death, with the financial intention of finding relief from taxing literary commitments and from the burden of World War II.

The text is divided into ten sections corresponding to the two periods in which it was composed in 1939 and 1940. While the former deal with strictly autobiographical and personal elements relating to Woolf and her family, the latter entries in 1940 are characterised by an insistence on current social or historical themes. In fact, Woolf rediscovered the manuscript in June 1940 and completed it at a time when the Germans were flying over England every night and the Woolfs were contemplating suicide.

The text lies on the borderline between private and public writing, as it is neither written for publication nor a personal diary. Woolf herself refers to this writing as “memoir”⁶⁷ and “notes”⁶⁸. John Mepham, taking the length of the text as a reference, calls it both an autobiography and a diary, and contextualises Woolf’s urgency to write in this way:

In this “sketch”, the writing is not so much designed to record or recall an already established history, as to attempt to create a coherent identity, by holding together in a pattern the various parts of herself, or different identities, that she feels are all authentically part of who she is.⁶⁹

“A Sketch of the Past” is contained in the collection entitled *Moments of Being*, which includes three separate autobiographical texts.

The first, “Reminiscences”, was begun in 1907, eight years before the publication of *A Voyage Out*, her first novel. It therefore belongs to a period of the writer’s apprenticeship. It was written with the intention of depicting the life of her sister Vanessa, but it is in fact an insight into the childhood and adolescence that the two sisters shared.

The second, which we will deal with in this chapter, is “A Sketch of the Past”.

The third, “The Memoir Club Contributions”, is divided into three sections: “22 Hyde Park Gate”, “Old Bloomsbury”, “Am I a Snob?”. These texts are articles that appeared between 1920 and 1936 in the context of the Memoir Club, a small circle of friends who gathered to share

⁶⁷ Virginia Woolf, “A Sketch of the Past”, in *Moments of Being*, New York, Mariner Books, 1985, p. 64, 98.

⁶⁸ Ivi, p. 75, 95, 100, 117.

⁶⁹ John Mepham, *Virginia Woolf: A Literary Life*, New York, St. Martin’s P, 1991, p. 182.

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autobiographical writings, hence the intimate tone that pervades these texts and contrasts sharply with the earlier sections of the collection.

I have chosen to analyse “A Sketch of the Past” here because it consistently stands out within the study I am conducting. Indeed, it is the text that presents the most interesting reflections on childhood trauma, the theme of loss and death, the lucid, honest and psychological gaze with which parents are portrayed, and the theme of memory and self-writing.

In particular, what is striking is the view of the self that emerges from the very first pages. Individual identity is seen as an eternal flux that changes shape at every moment depending on the influences of the outside world and the participation, in this, of the inner world. In this fluctuating world, which is very reminiscent of the poetics of *The Waves*, not even the past is static, but is subject to the alterations and variations of self-consciousness in the present.

2nd May . . . I write the date, because I think that I have discovered a possible form for these notes. That is, to make then include the present - at least enough of the present to serve as a platform to stand upon. It would be interesting to make the two people, I now, I then, come out in contrast. And further, this past is much affected by the present moment. What I write today I should not write in a year's time.⁷⁰

This incessant transformation of the self is expressed in an overlapping of past and present: the past is always deformed and filtered by the gaze of the present. The fluctuating identity is thus the true subject of this autobiography. Not only is the present moment enriched by the past, but also vice versa. This vision of the changing identity is central to Woolf's poetics and returns not only in the characters of Mr and Mrs Ramsay in *To the Lighthouse*, but in an even more preponderant and seductive manner in *The Waves*, a novel emblematic of the perpetual flux that is our lives and our subjectivities.

For there is nothing to lay hold of. I am made and remade continually. Different people draw different words from me.⁷¹

Another reason to reflect on this text over the others is Woolf's view of the mother figure. The considerations of the writer, who writes here about her mother Julia after the cathartic experience of writing *To the Lighthouse*, are much deeper and more nuanced and shadowy than the portrait made of her mother in *Reminiscences*, which is a juvenile piece of writing. The same can be said of Virginia Woolf's father, Leslie Stephen. In this later autobiography compared to the previous one, reflections

⁷⁰ Virginia Woolf, “A Sketch of the Past”, cit., p. 75.

⁷¹ Virginia Woolf, *The Waves*, London, Vintage Classics, 2016, p. 94.

emerge that also take Freud's suggestions into account and allow for a deeper and more transparent understanding of the feelings and thoughts addressed to parental figures. In particular, the death of her mother turns out to be a traumatic event that will forever change the dynamics between Woolf's family relationships and her own personality.

Writing, finally, seems to represent for Woolf a cathartic experience to save herself, to record the continuous inner and outer changes, to take hold of the world and to reach a more authentic understanding of herself and the world, through what the writer calls *moments of being* and *non-being*.

It will be interesting then to ask what form trauma takes in these writings: how Woolf talks about it and, equally important, how she does *not* talk about it; what is removed from the text; what is indicative of the unspoken; how the traumas of childhood and adolescence are reflected not only in the writer's life, but also in her works; what connection, if any, exists between the fictional and autobiographical works; what is unspeakable and only appears in fiction and not in the autobiographical and self-narrative; how silence, thematically and formally, is present in this work and how and where it is contrasted with the word, which for Woolf is music.

From a formal point of view, "A Sketch of the Past" is characterised by a style that resembles, in some ways, a stream of consciousness. One suggestion recalls another, and the autobiography proceeds by means of associations and juxtapositions of memory, which translate a very self-conscious and equally free thought that does not force itself to follow a pre-established pattern in the narrative.

So without stopping to choose my way, in the sure and certain knowledge that it will find itself – or if not it will not matter – I begin: the first memory.⁷²

What punctuates the narrative are in fact the so-called *moments of being*, i.e. moments of deep intuition, susceptibility and individual sensitivity that allow one to achieve an epiphany. However, the writer argues that our days include many more *non-being* than *being*, as much of the time is not experienced consciously. The *moments of being*, on the other hand, present themselves as "a sudden, violent shock"⁷³. This, Woolf argues, is what makes her a writer: shocks are in fact followed by the desire to explain them, and "it is only by putting it into words that I make it whole; this wholeness means it has lost its power to hurt me; it gives me, perhaps because by doing so I take away the pain, a great delight to put the severed parts together"⁷⁴. In this, Woolf is reminiscent of Wordsworth's

⁷² Virginia Woolf, "A Sketch of the Past", cit., p.64.

⁷³ Ivi, p. 71.

⁷⁴ Ivi, p. 72.

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poetics, with which an affinity is evident with regard to what he called “emotion recollected in tranquillity”. “A Sketch of the Past” is thus a mixture of facts and thoughts, of events and epiphanies, of actions and revelations. The *moments of being* are set, like precious stones, between scenes of everyday life, descriptions of places, social constructs. The poetics based on *moments of being* that we find in “A Sketch of the Past” is the same as in her later novels, such as *To the Lighthouse* and *The Waves*. Certain images and sensations are even recurrent in these three writings. One need only think of the sound of crashing waves or the colour of the flowers on her mother's dress. “A Sketch of the Past” is therefore valuable not only because it traces Woolf's poetics and her thoughts on identity, but also because there are numerous traces of elements that also appear in the fictional writings. This can only enrich the reading of the novels, which can be read in the light of associations that also appear in the autobiography. Indeed, it is evident from *A Writer's Diary* that Woolf's personal relationships are an integral part of her fiction. For instance, in *To the Lighthouse* we find her relationship with her mother and father, and there is a tribute to her brother Thoby in the character of Percival in *The Waves*.

To what extent the minor details of Virginia Woolf's novels are drawn from events that actually happened to the writer remains largely to be discovered. It is certain, however, that some subtleties draw on personal experience. One example is the story of the father throwing a vase of flowers at her mother, which is found in *To the Lighthouse* when Mr Ramsay throws his breakfast out of the window. Similarly, countless incidents in the autobiography return in the fiction. Images are also recurrent, as are sounds. One extremely frequent motif is that of waves crashing on the shoreline.

It is evident that the fictional material, although taken from life, was then modified in the creative process. It is also evident that autobiography does not explain novels. However, these autobiographical writings allow us to approach the novels with a deeper look rooted in Virginia Woolf's experience, both of writing and of life.

Leafing through the text of “A Sketch of the Past”, we find various interesting elements for the purposes of our study, which thematically, formally and structurally hinge on the motif of silence and, in a close connection with trauma, of the unspeakable. Not only, in fact, does Woolf maintain that there are no words for certain sensations, and in particular for *moments of being*, but we also note that while some events in her life are largely described, others are only mentioned, even though they have an importance that Woolf does not deny. The distinction between the unspeakable, the removed, the unspoken and the ineffable thus imposes itself as a key element for our reflection. We will therefore analyse the text fragments that concern Woolf's considerations on the role of memory and writing and the themes of trauma and death.

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There are three experiences considered traumatic: the episode in which Gerald Duckworth violates the writer while still a child; the death of her mother; the death of Stella. The relationship with her father also deserves to be counted among Woolf's traumatic experiences, as she defines it as such.

Melanie Klein, dealing with the topic of the Oedipal complex in girls, identifies the two biggest anxiety factors in young women as “fear of loss of love and of the death of the mother ... [and] fear of having her body attacked and her loved inner objects destroyed”⁷⁵. The emotional emphasis that pervades “A Sketch of the Past” could therefore be linked to the actual fulfilment of these two conditions.

Regarding the first episode, Woolf deals with it in the first pages when she describes the feeling of shame and guilt that accompanied her throughout her life. In particular, Woolf writes: “I must have been ashamed or afraid of my own body”⁷⁶. The reason for this feeling is explained shortly afterwards:

There was a slab outside the dining room door for standing dishes upon. Once when I was very small Gregory Duckworth lifted me onto this, and as I sat there he began to explore my body. I can remember the feel of his hand going under my clothes; going firmly and steadily lower and lower. I remember how I hoped that he would stop; how I stiffened and wriggled as his hand approached my private parts too. I remember resenting, disliking it – what is the word for so dumb and mixed a feeling?⁷⁷

Woolf's depiction of this scene of violation of the female and child body takes on a simple, neutral, descriptive, and almost detached style. It is a narration of events without frills and without adjectives or connotations. The anaphora “I remember”, however, imposes itself forcefully and suggests how traumatic this episode was in Woolf's life, who after years insists on remembering the scene. She herself writes that she remembers not only the hope that the man would stop and the memory of the emotions of disgust she felt, but also the sensations of her body stiffening and writhing. Not only, therefore, a psychological violation, but also a physical one. A violation that has to do with the body, with the consequence of feeling a sense of shame and fear in relation to this, as mentioned at the beginning. One last important consideration deserves to be made in relation to the last sentence: “what is the word for so dumb and mixed a feeling?”. Woolf seems to be looking for a word. The word, however, does not emerge. Trauma, by definition, is something one can hardly talk about, and

⁷⁵ Melanie Klein, *The Oedipus Complex in the Light of Early Anxieties* (1945). Rpt. in *Love, Guilt, and Reparation and Other Works: 1921-1945*. New York, Free P, 1975, pp. 370-419.

⁷⁶ Virginia Woolf, “A Sketch of the Past”, cit., p. 68.

⁷⁷ Ivi, p. 69.

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it is precisely because of this nature that it is defined as such. The word is the way of liberation from trauma, and for this very reason it is therapeutic. But what happens when speech is not possible? Woolf cannot find a word that can express a feeling that is so mixed, so complex, because it is amalgamated in a ball of sensations, but also so “dumb”. The word *dumb* here takes on the double meaning of dull and dumb, wordless, precisely because the word is associated with clarity, transparency, the ability to communicate. Dumbness and the feeling of being dull, on the other hand, are precisely what remains with the victim of abuse. The text continues:

It must have been strong, since I still recall it. This seems to show that a feeling about certain parts of the body; how they must not be touched; how it is wrong to allow them to be touched; must be instinctive. It proves that Virginia Stephen was not born on the 25th January 1882, but was born many thousands years ago; and had from the very first to encounter instincts already acquired by thousands of ancestresses in the past.⁷⁸

Woolf seems to argue that this episode has not only a personal, but a collective significance. Virginia Woolf was not born on her birthday, but centuries ago, along with all those ancestors who have known the feeling of being violated and have retained, in their instincts, the ability to discern what is good and what is bad. A kind of collective unconscious thus surrounds this traumatic experience, which, although individual, takes on a collective value. Moreover, this experience of horror and passivity leads not only to a look at oneself linked to an archetype, but also to the formation of one's personality. In a way, this episode is a birth, which triggers in her a sense of unanimity and belonging to the plant world that will often be a source of epiphanies and towards which Woolf demonstrates an atypical sensitivity, in all likelihood derived also from this harassment⁷⁹.

It is also important to remember that the narration of this episode is preceded by the famous mirror scene, recognised by many critics as the founding moment of Woolf's becoming a female subject:

There was a small looking-glass in the hall at Talland House. It had, I remember, a ledge with a brush on it. By standing on tiptoe I could see my face in the glass. When I was six or seven perhaps, I got into the habit of looking at my face in the glass. But I only did this if I was sure that I was alone. I was ashamed of it. A strong feeling of guilt seemed naturally attached to it.⁸⁰

This scene can be read in a strong connection to the second major trauma in Woolf's life since, according to Winnicott's studies, the mirror image is directly linked to the responsibility of the

⁷⁸ Ibidem.

⁷⁹ Cf. Daniel Albright, “Virginia Woolf as Autobiographer”, in *The Kenyon Review*, Autumn, 1984, New Series, Vol. 6, No. 4, pp. 1-17, *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4335512>, p. 11.

⁸⁰ Virginia Woolf, “A Sketch of the Past”, cit., pp. 67-68.

mother: “What does the baby see when he or she looks at the mother’s face? I am suggesting that, ordinarily, what the baby sees is himself or herself”⁸¹. Indeed, in “A Sketch of the Past” it is mainly the moments when Woolf’s mother did not meet her daughter’s gaze, or did not match it, that are emphasised⁸². This mismatch and the mother’s turning away from her daughter in order to mourn the grief she was experiencing at the time prevent the possibility of an appeal by young Virginia, who therefore remains silent, mute⁸³.

The death of the mother narrated through the scene at her bedside is central to the experience of the mirror. Woolf recounts that it was like touching cold iron, e.g. a conceptual metaphor. In death, the mother’s face is completely exposed to the child’s view and her gaze is obviously averted. Winnicott suggests how this avoidance is central to Woolf’s autobiography: “If the mother’s face is unresponsive, then a mirror is a thing to be looked at but not to be looked into”⁸⁴. Winnicott goes on to argue that, looking in the mirror, a girl seeks reassurance “that the mother can see her and that the mother is *en rapport* with her”⁸⁵. The consequence is that, denied this gaze and this correspondence, the girl will struggle throughout her life to feel seen, as the basis of her own creative gaze, since the recognition of the mother’s gaze is what allows the self to organise the child’s identity.

Lacan, unlike Winnicott, proposes a different reading to the previous one, based on the distinction between the spoken subject and the speaking subject. The denial of the mother’s gaze, in a strongly patriarchal society and family such as those described by Woolf, means the child’s discovery that the mother’s silence is a sign that she is, in some way, spoken. In this patriarchal context, therefore, the death of the mother is not only in physical terms, in terms of absence of life, but also in terms of dependence on her husband.

In the scene of the abuse suffered, the term “shame” returns several times. Lacan⁸⁶ invites the reader to refer to Sartre’s *L’Être et le néant*, where the author focuses on the role of the gaze of the Other as a founding part of human identity. Being the object of a gaze obviously also affects the emotion of shame. Since the face seen by the Other is unknown to the self, the gaze becomes an opportunity to recognise an identity that is broader than the known one. Sartre writes: “la honte pure n’est pas sentiment d’être tel ou tel objet répréhensible mais, en général, d’être ‘un objet’, c’est-à-dire de me ‘reconnaître’ dans cet être dégradé, dépendant et figé que je suis pour autrui”⁸⁷.

⁸¹ Donald Woods Winnicott, “Mirror-Role of Mother and Family in Child Development”, in *Playing and Reality*, New York, Basic Books, 1971, p. 27.

⁸² Cf. Virginia Woolf, “A Sketch of the Past”, cit., p. 82.

⁸³ Cfr. Emily Dalgarno, “Ideology into Fiction: Virginia Woolf’s *A Sketch of the Past*”, in *NOVEL: A Forum of Fiction*, Winter, 1994, Vol. 27, No. 2, pp. 175-195.

⁸⁴ D. W. Winnicott, “Mirror-Role of Mother and Family in Child Development”, in *Playing and Reality*, cit., p. 28.

⁸⁵ Ivi, p. 29.

⁸⁶ Cf. Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*, tr. Alan Sheridan, New York, Norton & Company, 1977.

⁸⁷ Jean Paul Sartre, *L’Être et le néant. Essai d’ontologie phénoménologique*, (1943), Paris, Gallimard, 1996, p. 328.

Consequently, shame as well as fear and pride often ensue, “are only various ways by which I recognize the Other as a subject beyond reach, and they include within them a comprehension of my selfness which can and must serve as my motivation for constituting the Other as an object”⁸⁸. The gaze of others thus makes us aware of ourselves, and perhaps Woolf, caught in Duckworth's gaze, was for the first time made aware of her being a woman in the other's perspective.

The fact that the harassment is narrated in the paragraph about the mirror is significant. Louise DeSalvo argues that in this autobiography Woolf explores “the possibility that her life might have been otherwise, that the bouts of depression and despair, the suicide attempts, were not an inevitable part of her makeup, but that they were, instead, caused by her reaction to what she had lived through”⁸⁹. The effects of physical abuse on children are notoriously devastating to the victim's psyche, to the extent that DeSalvo argues “that sexual abuse was probably the central and most formative feature of her early life”⁹⁰. In Lacanian terms, Woolf was undoubtedly a spoken subject on that occasion, in fact she even described herself as “dumb”, i.e. paralysed and dumbed down, so much so that we know from her diaries that the writer developed a real revulsion towards sex.

The condition of passivity, of not being an agent, but being subjected to forces outside her control, is so recurring that we think that this autobiography is not a place for Woolf to assert herself, as is typically the case in this literary genre, but rather a place where her identity is imposed upon her. It is not Woolf who makes choices; on the contrary, it is external events - shocks, moments of ecstasy, the violence of the world - that impose themselves on her. Indeed, this terrible episode also marks the discovery of herself as an impersonal, transcendent being, something thousands of years old.

From the experience of the mirror and that of abuse, Woolf derives the knowledge that the female body is a threatened, attackable, vulnerable body. The image of a break-up, which echoes that of abuse, is proposed in the text through a metaphor: “we are sealed vessels afloat on what it is convenient to call reality; at some moments, without a reason, without an effort, the sealing matter cracks; in floods reality”⁹¹. The same image is also proposed in *To the Lighthouse*, where Mrs. Ramsay recalls the lighthouse beam “as if it were stroking with its silver fingers some sealed vessel in her brain whose bursting would flood her with delight”⁹².

⁸⁸ Ivi, p. 291.

⁸⁹ Louise DeSalvo, *Virginia Woolf: The Impact of Childhood Sexual Abuse on Her Life and Work*, New York, Ballantine Books, 1989, p. 100.

⁹⁰ Ivi, p. 101.

⁹¹ Virginia Woolf, “A Sketch of the Past”, cit., p. 142.

⁹² Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, Ed. Stella McNichol, Penguin Edition, 1992, p. 72.

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The image of fingers violating, exploring, forcing silence is recurrent in autobiography as well as in Woolf's novels, and the symbolic image of the broken vessel is emblematic of the place of invasion and inner rupture.

The second traumatic episode narrated is therefore the death of her mother Julia. Even before recounting the event, Woolf signals to the reader that what is about to be described is in fact "indescribable":

That is what is indescribable, that is what makes all images too static, for no sooner has one said this was so, than it was past and altered. How immense must be the force of life which turns a baby, who can just distinguish a great blot of blue and purple on a black background, into the child who thirteen years later can feel all that I felt on May 5th 1895 – now almost exactly to a day, forty-four years ago – when my mother died.⁹³

Not only does the theme of the past being altered by the gaze of the present return in this instance, but also the motif of trauma, which makes the event indescribable, unspeakable, recurs: "there is no single word for them"⁹⁴. What makes the death of the mother peculiar, however, is that it is presented as an exception to the other memories.

If it were true, as I said above, that the things that ceased in childhood, are easy to describe because they are complete, then it should be easy to say what I felt for my mother, who died when I was thirteen. Thus I should be able to see her completely undisturbed by later impressions, as I saw Mr Gibbs and C. B. Clarke. But the theory, though true of them, breaks down completely with her. It breaks down in a curious way, which I will explain, for perhaps it may help to explain why I find it so curiously difficult to describe both my feeling for her, and her herself.⁹⁵

Evidently, the mother figure represents an anomaly with respect to the rules of memory so far presented and adopted by Woolf. If childhood memories are complete and therefore more static, that of the mother, although she died when the writer was only thirteen, is a memory in perpetual motion, not closed, not exhausted.

Until I was in the forties – I could settle the date by seeing when I wrote *To the Lighthouse*, but am too casual here to bother to do it – the presence of my mother obsessed me. I could hear her voice, see her, imagine what she would do or say as I went about my day's doings. She was one of the invisible presences who after all play so important a part in every life.⁹⁶

⁹³ Virginia Woolf, "A Sketch of the Past", cit., p. 79.

⁹⁴ Ivi, p. 80.

⁹⁵ Ibidem.

⁹⁶ Ibidem.

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The presence of the mother is thus portrayed as an obsession for Woolf, a disturbing, tormenting and haunting element in ordinary life. It seems that the writer even had visions that stimulated her in this way: she could see her and even hear her voice. The mother was thus first a physical presence and then an invisible presence in Woolf's life: her death did not cause her disappearance. This is perhaps the reason why her memory is not as immobile as others: because she continued to be a presence long after her death. What, then, freed Woolf from such obsession?

It is perfectly true that she obsessed me, in spite of the fact that she died when I was thirteen, until I was forty-four. Then one day walking round Tavistock Square I made up, as I sometimes make up my books, *To the Lighthouse*; in a great, apparently involuntary, rush. One thing burst into another. Blowing bubbles out of a pipe gives the feeling of the rapid crowd of ideas and scenes which blew out of my mind, so that my lips seemed syllabbling of their own accord as I walked. What blew the bubbles? Why then? I have no notion. But I wrote the book very quickly; and when it was written, I ceased to be obsessed by my mother. I no longer hear her voice; I do not see her.⁹⁷

The writing of *To the Lighthouse* was a cathartic and liberating experience for Woolf, who, as a result of writing the novel so fluidly and quickly, became liberated from her mother's obsession. It was thus a kind of liberating exorcism from the ghost of her parents. The power of the imagination seems to be to unite with the dead, as this theme recurs not only in *To the Lighthouse* for the parental figures, but also in *The Waves*, in which one character is dead but the others continue to revolve around that pivot, and in *Mrs. Dalloway*, whose protagonist unites with Septimus Smith.

The manner of writing the first celebrated novel seems to have almost imposed itself on the writer, who “apparently involuntary”, gave in to the need to say and write. Following the description of this process, Woolf states that words escaped like bubbles not only from her mind engaged in the creative process, but also from her lips. A kind of *bavardage* is then contrasted with the silence and modesty hitherto associated with the mother figure. The word once again becomes a therapeutic instrument of liberation from trauma: trauma ceases to be such only after it has been expressed. Writing thus takes on a salvific and curative value since it consents to the cessation of the obsession, which is sublimated in the creative gesture.

I suppose that I did for myself what psycho-analysts do for their patients. I expressed some very long felt and deeply felt emotion. And in expressing it I explained it and then laid it to rest.⁹⁸

⁹⁷ Ivi, p. 81.

⁹⁸ Ibidem.

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Woolf herself makes clear the association between writing and psychoanalysis, drawing the conclusion that the expression of emotions through the artifice of words is precisely what allows the emotions themselves to be silenced. The presence of parental figures in *To the Lighthouse* is so exact that even its first readers, i.e. Virginia Woolf's family members, complimented her on the accuracy of Leslie and Julia's figures in the fictional Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay.

The following pages are actually full of episodes and everyday scenes in which details of the mother figure emerge relating particularly to the senses of sight and hearing: Woolf describes the colours of her mother's clothes, her hands, the sound of her bracelets and her voice, which the writer admits to imitating.

Her voice is still faintly in my ears – decided, quick; and in particular the little drops with which her laugh ended – three diminishing ahs... “Ah – ah – ah...” I sometimes end a laugh that way myself.⁹⁹

It is curious how several suspension points punctuate the narration of the memories of her mother, and in particular the sound memories, as well as that of her mother's last words to her.

And there is my last sight of her; she was dying; I came to kiss her and as I crept out of the room she said: “Hold yourself straight, my little Goat.”... What a jumble of things I can remember, if I let my mind run, about my mother; but they are all of her in company; of her surrounded; of her generalised; dispersed, omnipresent, of her as the creator of that crowded merry world which spun so gaily in the centre of my childhood.¹⁰⁰

Julia's last loving words are followed by three suspension points, as if to mark a pause in the text, a sigh before resuming the dense list of memories. These, we are told, are all related to a mother figure always surrounded by people and life, to the extent that Julia is presented several times in the text as the “centre” of Woolf's childhood:

And she was the centre; it was herself. This was proved on May 5th 1895. For after that day there was nothing left of it. [...] I got a feeling of calm, sadness, and finality. It was a beautiful blue spring morning, and very still. That brings back the feeling that everything had come to an end.¹⁰¹

That the mother figure is central and therefore her disappearance was a profound trauma in the writer's life is certain. Also interesting is the juxtaposition of the colour blue with the emotion of sadness and nostalgia, which will return several times not only in her diaries, but also in her novels.

⁹⁹ Ibidem.

¹⁰⁰ Ivi, p. 84.

¹⁰¹ Ibidem.

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The centrality of the mother is due both to the natural importance of every mother in a child's life and to the peculiarities of the woman's character, which is extensively described by Woolf through numerous scenes. However, the writer adds:

Yet if one could give a sense of my mother's personality one would have to be an artist. It would be as difficult to do that, as it should be done, as to paint a Cézanne.¹⁰²

The motif of the ineffable, of what is inexpressible, returns. The mother's personality is so complex and rich that it cannot be described. The pictorial metaphor also suggests how only the gaze of an artist, and thus of one who has a special gift for capturing life, can render its features. The scene of her mother's death returns several times in the autobiography and Woolf chooses to describe at length the moment she stood at her bedside:

I remember very clearly how even as I was taken to the bedside I noticed that one nurse was sobbing, and a desire to laugh came over me, and I said to myself as I have often done at moments of crisis since, "I feel nothing whatsoever". Then I stooped and kissed my mother's face. It was still warm. She [had] only died a moment before.¹⁰³

Contrary to expectations, the writer claims to have found herself overcome with emotion to the point of wanting to laugh, as an almost hysterical reaction to the impossible, the unspeakable of her mother's death. She then claims to have told herself, to herself, that she felt absolutely nothing. It seems that, between the irreverent, hysterical laughter and the apathy, there is a denial of the only emotion possible in such a situation: the sadness of mourning.

Shortly afterwards, an entirely similar scene is narrated but from the following day, in which Woolf is accompanied to her mother's body by Stella.

Her face looked immeasurably distant, hollow and stern. When I kissed her, it was like kissing cold iron. Whenever I touch cold iron the feeling comes back to me – the feeling of my mother's face, iron cold, and granulated. I started back. Then Stella stroked her cheek, and undid a button on her nightgown. "She always liked to have it like that", she said. When she came up to the nursery later she said to me, "Forgive me. I saw you were afraid." She had noticed that I had started. When Stella asked me to forgive her for having given me that shock, I cried – we had been crying off and on all day – and said, "When I see mother, I see a man sitting with her." Stella looked at me as if I had frightened her. Did I say that in order to attract attention to myself? Or was it true?¹⁰⁴

¹⁰² Ivi, p. 85.

¹⁰³ Ivi, p. 92.

¹⁰⁴ Ibidem.

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The impressions and feelings of the next day are diametrically opposed to those of the previous one. Woolf, feeling her mother's cold body, seems to realise her final demise. The focus should be shifted to the element of the body: it is through the body that the writer experiences her mother's death. The corpse is cold; Woolf's body reacts by wincing and recoiling. Finally, the episode ends with what Woolf herself will call, a few lines later, a "hallucination"¹⁰⁵. The nature of the hallucination is questioned early on: she herself does not know whether it was a real hallucination or a childish attempt to bring attention to herself. However, the memory of the image of a man standing next to her dead mother remains. This denotes the strong and traumatic impact this untimely death had on the young writer's life. Not surprisingly, Woolf points out that even in the present time of writing, touching iron reminds her of the same sensation of her mother's cold body. The perceptions became acute until they became a preponderant element in Woolf's experience, of life and writing.

Also it was partly that my mother's death unveiled and intensified; made me suddenly develop perceptions, as if a burning glass had been laid over what was shaded and dormant. Of course this quickening was spasmodic. But it was surprising – as if something were becoming visible without any effort.¹⁰⁶

The trauma suffered following the death of her mother is immediately felt as the trigger for the unravelling and intensification of Woolf's perceptions. Something that was previously opaque now becomes transparent, and effortlessly so. Not only does this occur in grasping the external world, but it also has a reflection on the insights into the world of speech and writing.

I had taken *The Golden Treasury* with me. I opened it and began to read some poem. And instantly and for the first time I understood the poem (which it was I forget). It was as if it became altogether intelligible; I had a feeling of transparency in words when they cease to be words and become so intensified that one seems to experience them; to foretell them as if they developed what one is already feeling. I was so astonished that I tried to explain the feeling. "One seems to understand what it's about", I said awkwardly. I suppose Nessa has forgotten; no one could have understood from what I said the queer feeling I had in the hot grass, that poetry was coming true. Nor does that give the feeling. It matches what I have sometimes felt when I write. The pen gets the scent.¹⁰⁷

Julia's death seems to have opened up frontiers of the sensitive hitherto unknown to the writer. The words of others become more intelligible and transparent. They even cease to be words and

¹⁰⁵ Ibidem.

¹⁰⁶ Ivi, p. 93.

¹⁰⁷ Ibidem.

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become experience, such is their intensity. The poem becomes real, unravelling verse after verse. The very feeling of this new experience of the word is ineffable; Woolf fails in her attempt to explain it to her sister Nessa and still feels the strangeness of the feeling. The same thing happens when she writes. Her mother's death thus seems to have been the fuse that ignited the writer's intuitions and opened the way for words, both read and written.

Finally, Woolf, who had repeatedly referred to Julia as the centre of her childhood, describes the family's life following her disappearance:

With mother's death the merry, various family life which she had held in being shut for ever. In its place a dark cloud settled over us; we seemed to sit all together cooped up, sad, solemn, unreal, under a haze of heavy emotion. It seemed impossible to break through. It was not merely dull; it was unreal. A finger seemed laid on one's lips.¹⁰⁸

The joy that surrounded Julia, who, not surprisingly, in Woolf's imagination was never alone, suddenly disappears never to return. The feeling of a sad and solemn darkness hanging over the family imposes itself, and a general silence seems to take hold of everyone. A silence represented once again by the finger over the mouth of each member of the family, an image that will also return a few lines later: "And the we sat silent under the trees. The silence was stifling. A finger was laid on our lips"¹⁰⁹. The silence described by Woolf is oppressive, suffocating, like the image of a finger closing the mouth and preventing words, and pain, from flowing. It is a silence imposed, not chosen. In part, it seems to be imposed by the social constructs of the time, which stipulated observing a period of mourning; in part, it is imposed by the conscience of family members who feel obliged to be sad; in part, it is imposed by the trauma of the mother's death, which requires to be processed over time.

The tragedy of her death was not that it made one, now and then very intensely, unhappy. It was that it made her unreal; and us solemn, and self-conscious. We were made to act parts that we did not feel; to fumble for words that we did not know. It obscured, it dulled. It made one hypocritical and immeshed in the conventions of sorrow.¹¹⁰

The conventions of grief therefore required to be observed and deprived the family of spontaneity and social occasions for fun: "The shrouded, cautious, dulled life took the place of all the

¹⁰⁸ Ibidem.

¹⁰⁹ Ivi, p. 94.

¹¹⁰ Ivi, p. 95.

chatter and laughter of summer. There were no more parties; no more young men and women laughing”¹¹¹.

The third major trauma mentioned in “A Sketch of the Past” is Stella's death, which is closely linked to that of her mother. If the latter's grief is described as latent, as profound, and impossible to tell and thus to process, the grief of the half-sister, on whom the family had relied after Julia's disappearance and who had assumed the role of caregiver not only for the younger sisters, but also for their father Leslie, is different.

My mother's death had been a latent sorrow – at thirteen one could not master it, envisage it, deal with it. But Stella's death two years later fell on a different substance; a mind stuff and being stuff that was extraordinarily unprotected, unformed, unshielded, apprehensive, receptive, anticipatory. That must always hold good of minds and bodies at fifteen. But beneath the surface of this particular mind and body lay sunk the other death. Even if I were not fully conscious of what my mother's death meant, I had been for two years unconsciously absorbing it through Stella's silent grief; through my father's demonstrative grief; again through all the things that changed and stopped; the ending of society; of gaiety; the giving up of St Ives; the black clothes; the suppressions; the locked door of her bedroom. All this had toned my mind and made it apprehensive; made it I suppose unnaturally responsive to Stella's happiness, and the promise it held for her and for us of escape from that gloom; when once more unbelievably – incredibly – as if one had been violently cheated of some promise; more than that, brutally told not to be such a fool as to hope for things; I remember saying to myself after she died: “But this is impossible; things aren't, can't be, like this” – the blow, the second blow of death, struck on me; tremulous, filmy eyed as I was, with my wings still creased, sitting there on the edge of my broken chrysalis.¹¹²

Stella's death rested on a very delicate surface, concealing the other death: Julia's. The grief for one thus echoes that for the other, making the tangle of suffering inextricable. The anguish for the missing mother was absorbed by observing Stella's silent grief and her father's noisy grief, along with all the imagery of mourning described later. But what happens when death comes back to strike, unexpectedly and unjustly, the family? Woolf seems unwilling to believe that life can mock her in this way. She says she is unprepared, incredulous, helpless in the face of this second blow. The final metaphor of the broken chrysalis probably represents the caesura defined by these two deaths in Woolf's childhood and adolescence: an interruption, a rupture, a shattering not only of a happy era that will never return, but also of the author's self, who is no longer protected by the shell of joyful childhood and who is forced to grow up and face adult life without the refuge represented by her mother and sister. The still unfolded wings and the sitting “on the edge of my broken chrysalis”

¹¹¹ Ivi, p. 94.

¹¹² Ivi, p. 124.

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express the suspension of that moment, between the abyss of death and the opening of new life beyond that caesura.

Mother's and Stella's deaths, I suppose, united us. We never spoke of them. [...] This silence, we felt, covered something; something that most families had not. But without that bond, mine was from my earliest childhood so close with both Nessa and Thoby that if I describe myself I must describe them.¹¹³

Silence and death are thus inseparable. Not only is it impossible to talk about death, about Stella and Julia, but this silence also creates a very close bond between the remaining siblings: Virginia, Vanessa and Thoby. All three are affected in the same way, all three are unable to talk about what has happened, all three are forever bound together to such an extent that, in order to talk about herself, Woolf writes that she has to talk about them. "I am not thinking of mother and of Stella; I am thinking of the damage that their deaths inflicted"¹¹⁴: The bond established by the death is as strong as the damage suffered, and is repeated in the text after a few pages:

Without those deaths, to hark back to an earlier thought, it is true that he would not have been so genuinely, though dumbly, bound to us. If there is any goof (I doubt it) in these mutilations, it is that it sensitises. If to be aware of the insecurity of life, to remember something gone, to feel now and then, overwhelmingly, as I felt for father when he made no claim to it, a passionate fumbling fellowship – if it is a good thing to be aware of all this at fifteen, sixteen, seventeen, by fits and starts – if, if, if -. But was it good?¹¹⁵

The only positive elements brought by the death that 'mutilates' the family are the closer bond between siblings and the heightened sensitivity that awareness of the end brings. These deaths, on the other hand, conferred a sense of insecurity on the family members, uncovered the ideal refuge represented by the home and exposed them to the risks of life, making them more critical and skeptical.

Returning to the bond between the brothers, Woolf continues:

It seems to me therefore that our relation (Thoby's and mine) was more serious than it would have been without those deaths. The unspoken thought – I have roughly visualised it - was there, in him; in me; when he came into my room at Hyde Park Gate. It was behind our arguments.¹¹⁶

¹¹³ Ivi, p. 125.

¹¹⁴ Ivi, p. 136.

¹¹⁵ Ivi, p. 137.

¹¹⁶ Ivi, pp. 137-138.

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Death always remains a taboo that is not spoken of: it is a subject that stays behind conversations, a silent, unspoken thought that remains unspoken, a known truth yet removed from the surface. Yet, the awareness of having shared this experience unites the brothers. Later, however, Woolf returns to Stella's death in different words:

The leafless tree was behind our ostensible lives for many months. But trees do not remain leafless. They begin to grow little red chill buds. By that image I would convey the misery, the quarrels, the irritations, half covered, then spurting out, the insinuations, which as soon as family life started again began to prove that Stella's death had not left us more united; as father said; but had left us all ill adjusted; growing painfully into relations that her death had distorted.¹¹⁷

These considerations, harsher and more disenchanted than the previous ones, show how Woolf well understood the dramatic impact that those deaths had not only on the family equilibrium at the time, but also on their lives afterwards, marked forever, even in future relationships, by mourning. Death distorts relationships and leaves survivors battered, like broken cogs.

The last traumatic experience for Woolf is her relationship with her father, Leslie Stephen. The man is depicted from the outset as impossible to describe, therefore as part of that silence, the unexpressed and the unspeakable that constellates the entire text.

My father now falls to be described, because it was during the seven years between Stella's death in 1897 and his death in 1904 that Nessa and I were fully exposed without protection to the full blast of that strange character. Nessa, when Stella died, was just eighteen; I fifteen and a half. In order to explain why I say "exposed", and why, though the word is not the right one – but I cannot find one that is – I call him a strange character, I should have to be able to inhabit again the outworn shell of my own childish mind and body.¹¹⁸

The elements we are given to sketch the face of Leslie Stephen are so far few, but sufficient to understand that Virginia and Vanessa felt exposed, unprotected, to the outbursts of anger of the man, who must therefore have been irascible. Moreover, Woolf struggled to find the words to express this "strange character". The absence of the right words, and the failure to represent feelings and characters, is an omnipresent element in this autobiography. The brand of silence almost imposes itself as the stylistic signature of these autobiographical fragments.

In the present time of writing, Woolf attempts to describe the impact of this character in her life:

¹¹⁷ Ivi, p. 141.

¹¹⁸ Ivi, p. 107.

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I see him now from round the corner; not directly in front of me. Further, just as I rubbed out a good deal of the force of my mother's death memory by writing about her in *To the Lighthouse*, so I rubbed out much of his memory there too. Yet he too obsessed me for years. Until I wrote it out, I would find my lips moving; I would be arguing with him; raging against him; saying to myself all that I never said to him. How deep they drove themselves into me, the things it was impossible to say aloud.¹¹⁹

The gaze with which Woolf looks at her father is now indirect, hence more distant and detached. Like the mother, the father was also an obsessive presence for the writer, who uses the same image of moving lips to express this fixation. Towards the father, however, feelings of anger and frustration are highlighted, which remained unspoken, therefore silent. Woolf admits that she never told him what she thought of him; therefore, her anger remained unexpressed. This is perhaps the reason for the necessity of the writing of *To the Lighthouse* to get rid of the unspoken accumulated over a lifetime. This unspoken, as admitted in the last sentence of the quoted paragraph, is deeply rooted in Woolf: the silence of what could not be spoken aloud dug the chasm within her that led her to write, to say.

In the following pages, we learn that Woolf analyses her own feelings towards her father in the light of Freud's recent psychoanalytic discoveries:

But in me, though not in her, rage alternated with love. It was only the other day when I read Freud for the first time, that I discovered that this violently disturbing conflict of love and hate is a common feeling; and is called ambivalence. But before I analyse our relation as father and daughter, I will try to sketch him as I think he must have been, not to me, but to the world at large.¹²⁰

In the following lines, a rather objective portrait of the father is presented, based on real and biographical data. Yet, shortly afterwards, Woolf writes: "It bores me to write of him, to try to describe him, partly because it is all so familiar; partly because it is a type that for me lacks picturesqueness, oddity, romance"¹²¹. Woolf therefore argues that she is too simple a character, with no shadows to capture her imagination. She then goes on to quote his "nervous delicacy"¹²² and his "extreme irritability"¹²³. These traits, the writer argues, were socially accepted because they were typical of those defined at the time as "men of genius"¹²⁴. However, Woolf seems to disagree with this appellation as far as her father is concerned: "But was he a man of genius? No; that was not alas

¹¹⁹ Ivi, p. 108.

¹²⁰ Ibidem.

¹²¹ Ivi, p. 109.

¹²² Ibidem.

¹²³ Ibidem.

¹²⁴ Ibidem.

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quite the case”¹²⁵. With a disenchanted look, Woolf does not therefore justify her father's often tyrannical attitudes with the excuse of being an artist or a man of letters. Another characteristic of the father is also mentioned: his “way of impressing silence”¹²⁶ and the fact that he was “often dead silent at the head of the family table”¹²⁷. Silence is thus a characteristic feature of this ambivalent figure, whose strangeness is also captured a few pages later:

and it was the tyrant father – the exacting, the violent, the histrionic, the demonstrative, the self-centred, the self pitying, the deaf, the appealing, the alternately loved and hated father – that dominated me then. It was like being shut up in the same cage with a wild beast.¹²⁸

Woolf uses a series of adjectives with predominantly negative connotations and calls her father a tyrant, yet an ambivalence of emotions and feelings traps her in a combination of love and hate. What is interesting for our purposes is the last sentence of the paragraph, which contains the metaphor of being mute in a cage with a ferocious beast, representing the father. Once again, Woolf's inability to say, to express herself, to assert herself in front of her father returns. The writer particularly emphasises what happened on what are called “bad Wednesday(s)”¹²⁹, or the days when Leslie Stephen would check the account book. Woolf observed her father's scenes of anger and self-pity in silence, together with her sister Vanessa, but this silence was actually full of frustration:

I was speechless. Never have I felt such rage and such frustration. For not a word of what I felt – that unbounded contempt for him and of pity for Nessa – could be expressed.¹³⁰

Woolf, once again, remains speechless in the face of her father's brutality. Nothing she feels can be expressed or find a way out. The feeling of contempt towards her father is inextricably linked here with pity towards her sister, the main victim of such episodes. In the following pages, Woolf also returns to bad Wednesdays and continues to wonder: “How can one explain it?”¹³¹ proving that these events were traumatic and had a great impact on her. This is followed by considerations related to the social custom that a man should not have shown himself in such a condition in front of a woman, but her father seemed to ignore them: “Why then had he no shame in thus indulging his rage before women?”¹³². Woolf justifies this absence of modesty on the grounds that the father would have

¹²⁵ *Ivi*, p. 110.

¹²⁶ *Ibidem*.

¹²⁷ *Ivi*, p. 111.

¹²⁸ *Ivi*, p. 116.

¹²⁹ *Ivi*, p. 144.

¹³⁰ *Ibidem*.

¹³¹ *Ivi*, p. 145.

¹³² *Ibidem*.

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needed “self-dramatisation”¹³³ and therefore “he needed always some woman to act before; to sympathise with him, to console him”¹³⁴. This violent and despotic figure then accumulates other ambivalent traits as he shows himself weak in order to gain female comfort. But what was Woolf’s reaction to her father? “I was silent. I did not think him foolish. I thought him brutal”¹³⁵. No excuse is therefore worth redeeming the father with his tyrannical and egocentric attitudes, from which “the horror and the terror of those violent displays of rage”¹³⁶.

Having exhausted the episodes defined as traumatic by the writer in her autobiography, we will now move on to analyse her relationship with memory and with writing, an inexhaustible source of life and vitality for Woolf, whose existence was strewn with deaths and violent episodes. Writing, for Woolf, is cathartic: a salvific opportunity to let out unexpressed words and to affirm herself, as a person and as a writer. The word becomes an instrument of fulfilment and therapy. Between writing and memory there is an indissoluble link that is proposed in the essay from the very beginning. The text opens with Woolf’s motivation to write, namely her sister’s encouragement. Immediately, however, the writer poses a series of problems and presents the difficulties that such an undertaking produces:

There are several difficulties. In the first place, the enormous number of things I can remember; in the second, the number of different ways in which memoirs can be written.¹³⁷

The problematic nature of memory is presented from the outset: on the one hand, Woolf states, contrary to expectations, that she remembers a considerable number of things; on the other hand, there are many different ways of writing down memories. After this short paragraph, however, Woolf begins, without hesitation, to narrate her memoirs. The first, symbolically, concerns her mother Julia, or rather, her flowery dress, and is linked to the author’s second memoir, which is called “the most important of all my memories”¹³⁸. The latter concerns St. Ives, a place that will return several times in the text:

If life has a base that it stands upon, if it is a bowl that one fills and fills and fills – then my bowl without a doubt stands upon this memory. It is of lying half asleep, half awake, in bed in the nursery at St Ives. It is of hearing the waves breaking, one, two, one, two, and sending a splash of water over the beach; and then breaking, one,

¹³³ *Ibidem.*

¹³⁴ *Ibidem.*

¹³⁵ *Ivi*, p. 146.

¹³⁶ *Ibidem.*

¹³⁷ *Ivi*, p. 64.

¹³⁸ *Ibidem.*

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two, one, two, behind a yellow blind. It is of hearing the blind draw its little acorn across the floor as the wind blew the blind out. It is of lying and hearing this splash and seeing this light, and feeling, it is almost impossible that I should be here; of feeling the purest ecstasy I can conceive.¹³⁹

What is emphasised in this paragraph are sensations, impressions, perceptions caught with the senses. In particular, the sound of the waves of the sea and the image of their flow in perpetual motion stand out. The same image will return in a preponderant manner in the novel *The Waves*, all based on the fluctuating seascape and the identities of the characters. Probably, when Woolf wrote it at the end of her career, she took her cue from this memory that was so important to her that she said her life was based on it. Also interesting is the depiction of human existence as a vessel to be filled until it overflows. For Woolf, the basis that sustains every other memory is precisely these feelings she experienced as a child at St. Ives.

Nevertheless, Woolf returns to enumerate the difficulties of her undertaking:

I could spend hours trying to write that as it should be written, in order to give the feeling which is even at this moment very strong in me. But I should fail (unless I had some wonderful luck); I dare say I should only succeed in having the luck if I had begun by describing Virginia herself.

Here I come to one of the memoir writer's difficulties – one of the reasons why, though I read so many, so many are failures. They leave out the person to whom things happened. The reason is that it is so difficult to describe any human being. So they say: "This is what happened"; but they do not say what the person was like to whom it happened. And the events mean very little unless we know first to whom they happened. Who was I then?¹⁴⁰

Writing about feelings and impressions is therefore arduous and an almost impossible endeavour. The reason for this is not only related to the difficulty of finding the right words, but also to the fact that, for Woolf, it is not the events that happened that are important, but the person to whom they happened. Only if we relativise to this extent, and put the individual, the subject, at the centre, can we truly understand the importance of events. This is why Woolf, in the following lines, puts herself at the centre of the text, answering the question "Who was I at the time?". The centrality of feelings also returns shortly afterwards, when Woolf writes: "If I were a painter I should paint these first impressions in pale yellow, silver, and green"¹⁴¹; or else: "Sound and sight seem to make equal parts of these first impressions"¹⁴². Words are not sufficient, or rather suitable, to describe childhood impressions. Better would be to use other artistic forms, such as painting or music, which

¹³⁹ Ivi, pp. 64-65.

¹⁴⁰ Ivi, p. 65.

¹⁴¹ Ivi, p. 66.

¹⁴² Ibidem.

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do not use the tool of words and do not circumscribe the sensations with such sharp contours. The same applies to the second enumerated memory:

The next memory – all these colour-and-sound memories hang together at St Ives – was much more robust; it was highly sensual. It was later. It still makes me feel warm. [...] But again I cannot describe that rapture. It was rapture rather than ecstasy.

The strength of these pictures – but sight was always then so much mixed with sound that picture is not the right word – the strength anyhow of these impressions makes me again digress. Those moments – in the nursery, on the road to the beach – can still be more real than the present moment. [...] At times I can go back to St Ives more completely than I can this morning. I can reach a state where I seem to be watching things happen as if I were there. That is, I suppose, that my memory supplies what I had forgotten, so that it seems as if it were happening independently, though I am really making it happen. In certain favourable moods, memories – what one has forgotten – come to the top. Now if this is so, is it not possible – I often wonder – that things we have felt with great intensity have an existence independent of our minds; are in fact still in existence?¹⁴³

This shred of memory is also placed under the banner of sensations. Woolf herself speaks of a “highly sensual” memory, which has the power to make her still feel warm. It is precisely this influence of the past on the present that is at the centre of this reflection: the past seems not to be circumscribed and concluded, but still has an effect on the present. In particular, Woolf claims to reach, in the present of writing, emotional states that reproject her at that moment in St. Ives. Memory, a fallible tool, makes up for what one has forgotten by catapulting the subject into the same frame of the past. Yet Woolf claims, once again, that she cannot describe this feeling of rapture. Words fail.

Also, it is to be noticed that the focus on landscape and background sounds is reminiscent of John Cage's own poetics:

I see it – the past – as an avenue lying behind; a long ribbon of scenes, emotions. There at the end of the avenue still, are the garden and the nursery. Instead of remembering here a scene and there a sound, I shall fit a plug into the wall; and listen in to the past. I shall turn up August 1890. I feel that strong emotion must leave its trace; and it is only a question of discovering how we can get ourselves again attached to it, so that we shall be able to live our lives through the start.

But the peculiarity of these two strong memories is that each was very simple. I am hardly aware of myself, but only of the sensation. I am only the container of the feeling of ecstasy, of the feeling of rapture.¹⁴⁴

What seems to succeed in describing memories, rather, are the sounds, so much so that the writer states that she wants to ‘listen’ into the past. Woolf, with an eye to the future, wonders if there

¹⁴³ Ivi, pp. 66-67.

¹⁴⁴ Ivi, p. 67.

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will ever be a machine that can enable us to listen to the past and reconnect, emotionally, to a given moment. But why is the past so important that we want to be reminded of it? Why is there a desire, in Woolf, to live in memories of our lives from the beginning? Probably the answer lies in the high value placed on childhood memories, which, as she writes a little later, are simple, yet powerful, as they convey strong feelings of which the individual becomes the container.

Later, Woolf adds further considerations on memory and the selection of what is remembered:

These then are some of my first memories. But of course as an account of my life they are misleading, because the things one does not remember are as important; perhaps they are more important. [...] Unfortunately, one only remembers what is exceptional.¹⁴⁵

What we have forgotten is often more important than what we remember. The question, related to psychoanalysis studies, of the repressed emerges here. One wonders what Woolf removed, not only from the text, but especially from her memory. We have already read about various traumatic episodes. The one preceding these lines, not surprisingly, is the episode of the psycho-physical violence she suffered as a child at the hands of Gerald Duckworth. Woolf writes that unfortunately one only remembers what is exceptional. Yet, there seems to be no reason why one thing is exceptional and another is not. So much so that the writer wonders: “Why have I forgotten so many things that must have been, one would have thought, more memorable than what I do remember?”¹⁴⁶. The reason is sought, consistently, in psychology:

This leads to a digression, which perhaps may explain a little of my own psychology; even of other people's. Often when I have been writing my so-called novels I have been baffled by this same problem; that is, how to describe what I call in my private shorthand – “non-being”. Everyday includes much more non-being than being. [...] These separate moments of being were however embedded in many more moments of non-being. I have already forgotten what Leonard and I talked about at lunch; and at tea; although it was a good day the goodness was embedded in a kind of nondescript cotton wool. This is always so. A great part of every day is not lived consciously.¹⁴⁷

In this paragraph, for the first time in the autobiography, the famous issue of the *moments of being* is presented, which are nothing but intense moments of inner life where a revelation or epiphany is achieved. In contrast, the *non-being*, which are what we experience most of the time, represent those moments when life flows by without our awareness of it. Metaphorically, Woolf associates

¹⁴⁵ Ivi, p. 69.

¹⁴⁶ Ivi, p. 70.

¹⁴⁷ Ibidem.

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them with the image of cotton wool, which precisely covers our perceptions making them duller and ultimately less sensitive. Why is this distinction interesting for the purposes of our study? The answer lies in the following pages and in the importance these moments had on Woolf's writing life: not only on her inner life, therefore, but also on her novels, as mentioned above. Writing is in fact what is moved by these epiphanies and, at the same time, what allows them to be intelligible. Below are the words with which Woolf chose to describe the *moments of being*.

As a child then, my days, just as they do now, contained a large proportion of this cotton wool, this non-being. Week after week passed at St Ives and nothing made any dint upon me. Then, for no reason that I know about, there was a sudden violent shock; something happened so violently that I have remembered it all my life. I will give a few instances.¹⁴⁸

Moments of awareness manifest themselves, as suggested at the beginning of this chapter, as violent shocks, such that they are remembered for a lifetime. The emotions aroused by the *moments of being* in the immediate moment are mostly not pleasant. On the contrary, Woolf speaks of “hopeless sadness”¹⁴⁹, “powerlessness”¹⁵⁰, “horribly depressed”¹⁵¹, “horror”¹⁵², “absolute despair”¹⁵³. The three episodes narrated describe: an argument with her brother Toby, the observation of a flower in the garden at St Ives, and the fleeting overhearing of a conversation between her parents about a man who took his own life. They seem insignificant moments, or at least events that would not justify such strong feelings as those reported by Woolf. Why then does the writer use such strong terms? The reason is explained shortly afterwards:

These are three instances of exceptional moments. I often tell them over, or rather they come to the surface unexpectedly. But now that for the first time I have written them down, I realise something that I have never realized before. Two of these moments ended in a state of despair. The other ended, on the contrary, in a state of satisfaction. [...] This difference I think arose from the fact that I was quite unable to deal with the pain of discovering that people hurt each other; that a man I had seen had killed himself. The sense of horror held me powerless. But in the case of the flower I found a reason; and thus was able to deal with the sensation. I was not powerless. I was conscious – if only at a distance – that I should in time explain it.¹⁵⁴

¹⁴⁸ Ivi, p. 71.

¹⁴⁹ Ibidem.

¹⁵⁰ Ibidem.

¹⁵¹ Ibidem.

¹⁵² Ibidem.

¹⁵³ Ibidem.

¹⁵⁴ Ivi, pp. 71-72.

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The difference between positive emotion and negative emotion as a result of a moment of being seems to be caused by the feeling of powerlessness or, on the contrary, of power, related to the handling of the event. Being unprepared causes the outcome to be strongly negative, a horror. On the contrary, finding a reason allows one to feel able to cope with the feeling. Awareness, in short, is what makes the difference. Awareness is associated with power. Power, in turn, is combined with the ability to explain, and thus to use the word to describe what happened. The word thus returns to being, in a counterbalance to silence, a tool of defence against powerlessness, a symbol of strength, a fundamental element of reason and rationality, which makes one feel in control.

I only know that many of these exceptional moments brought with them a particular horror and a physical collapse; they seemed dominant; myself passive. This suggests that as one gets older one has a greater power through reason to provide an explanation; and that this explanation blunts the sledge-hammer force of the blow. I think this is true, because though I still have the peculiarity that I receive these sudden shocks, they are now always welcome; after the first surprise, I always feel instantly that they are particularly valuable. And so I go on to suppose that the shock-receiving capacity is what makes me a writer. I hazard the explanation that a shock is at once in my case followed by the desire to explain it.¹⁵⁵

The passivity of the child who succumbs to reality and does not know how to deal with it or how to read it is contrasted with the power of the adult who, through reason, finds an explanation. Indeed, Woolf argues that these shocks, in the present time of writing, i.e. maturity, are welcome and valuable. Indeed, Woolf attributes her being a writer to them: each shock is followed by the desire to explain it, i.e. the search for the exact word, which is a creative gesture.

I feel that I have had a blow; but it is not, as I thought as a child, simply a blow from an enemy hidden behind the cotton wool of daily life; it is or will become a revelation of some order; it is a token of some real thing behind appearances; and I make it real by putting it into words. It is only by butting it into words that I make it whole; this wholeness means that it has lost its power to hurt me; it gives me, perhaps because by doing so I take away the pain, a great delight to put the severed parts together. Perhaps this is the strongest pleasure known to me. It is the rapture I get when in writing I seem to be discovering what belongs to what; making a scene come right; making a character come together.¹⁵⁶

Woolf speaks of these moments as true revelations, as symbols of something that is normally hidden behind a veil that opaqueness reality. The only way to grasp that epiphany is through writing: by putting down on paper the impressions triggered by the *moments of being*, Woolf is able to take possession of them and, in this way, not to be a passive and succubus subject of such a vast and

¹⁵⁵ Ivi, p. 72.

¹⁵⁶ Ibidem.

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frightening reality, but to master it. This, she adds, means that these shocks can no longer hurt her, as they did when she was a child, but on the contrary give her pleasure: it is the pleasure that comes from sublimating, through a creative gesture, something difficult or traumatic. Finally, Woolf argues that this pleasure is expressed in her writing, particularly in her characters and in her ability to render certain scenes. From this derive some important consequences and a philosophical thought that inhabits all of Woolf's writing:

From this I reach what I might call a philosophy; at any rate it is a constant idea of mine; that behind the cotton wool is hidden a pattern; that we – I mean all human beings – are connected with this; that the whole world is a work of art; that we are parts of the work of art. *Hamlet* or Beethoven quartet is the truth about this vast mass that we call the world. But there is no Shakespeare, there is no Beethoven; certainly and emphatically there is no God; we are the words; we are the music; we are the thing itself. And I see this when I have a shock.¹⁵⁷

In this renowned paragraph of “A Sketch of the Past”, Woolf's philosophy, whose basic idea is that everything is a work of art, including human beings, is expressed in clear terms. In this conception of collectivity as a work of art, the individual is missing: Shakespeare or Beethoven are just two individuals; what connects us all, however, is our very substance, being in the world, being human. This humanity is the whole to which Woolf's work aspires, for “we are the words; we are the music; we are the thing itself”. If there is no Shakespeare and there is no Beethoven, the direct consequence is that there is no Virginia Woolf either: the artist seems to have no ego or personality, in fact, it is almost an abnegation. In fact, there is no speaker, only an expression: “we are the words; we are the music”. Such poetics is reminiscent of Italo Calvino, who saw a universal fraternity between all living beings and therefore advocated the attempt to make oneself multiple, which also means getting rid of one's ego:

... e lo sforzo per liberarsi e autodeterminarsi inteso come un dovere elementare, insieme a quello di liberare gli altri, anzi il non potersi liberare da soli, il liberarsi liberando; la fedeltà a un impegno e la purezza di cuore come virtù basilari che portano alla salvezza e al trionfo; la bellezza come segno di grazia, ma che può essere nascosta sotto spoglie d'umile bruttezza come un corpo di rana; e soprattutto la sostanza unitaria del tutto, uomini bestie piante cose, l'infinita possibilità di metamorfosi di ciò che esiste.¹⁵⁸

This poetics also returns in the conclusion of *The Waves*, where Bernard realises that he and his five friends are but six scattered members of one great being.

¹⁵⁷ Ibidem.

¹⁵⁸ Italo Calvino, *Fiabe Italiane, Raccolte dalla tradizione popolare durante gli ultimi cento anni e trascritte in lingua dai vari dialetti*, Milano, Oscar Mondadori, 1993, p. 18.

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As the writer will say a few lines later, in “A Sketch”, our lives are not limited by the boundaries of our own bodies or thoughts: there is always a background, a network that unites us. This pattern, for Woolf, is everything that can be defined as being. This is why the writer states: “I feel that by writing I am doing what is far more necessary than anything else”¹⁵⁹.

If writing, and therefore speech, is considered salvific, silence, by opposition, is associated with passivity, “hopeless sadness”¹⁶⁰, “collapse”¹⁶¹. Feeling “exposed to a whole avalanche of meaning that had heaped itself up and discharged itself upon me, unprotected, with nothing to ward it off”¹⁶² causes the writer to find herself paralysed and mute. The paralysis of the body is in fact associated with the paralysis of the *logos*, where the production of clarifying words is always associated with movement, with perpetual flow, with salvation in the face of the horror of non-sense. When the writer finds herself in these circumstances, she states: “I could not explain it; I said nothing”¹⁶³.

Again, speaking of her mother's death and her invisible presence as an obsession in Woolf's life even after her death, the writer states:

Yet it is by such invisible presences that the “subject of this memoir” is tugged this way and that every day of his life; it is they that keep him in position. Consider what immense forces society brings to play upon each of us, how that society changes from decade to decade; and also from class to class; well, if we cannot analyse these invisible presences, we know very little of the subject of the memoir; and again how futile life-writing becomes. I see myself as a fish in a stream; deflected; held in place; but cannot describe the stream.¹⁶⁴

The invisible presences by which we are inhabited and the invisible external forces that society imposes on us are therefore an important part of our lives, which cannot be left out of autobiographical writing. At the same time, what is invisible is difficult to describe. Yet, without it, writing about oneself would become 'futile'. Woolf brings up here the question of the truth and reliability of memory: she states that she feels like a fish in a river, carried along by the waters but unable to describe the flow. The difference between the private and public worlds also emerges here: the subject of biography, in order to understand himself, cannot help but analyse the social forces that the outside world imposes on him.

The image of the river and the waters returns recurrently in Woolf's writings: not only in *The Waves*, a novel entirely based on this image, but also again in “A Sketch of the Past”:

¹⁵⁹ Virginia Woolf, “A Sketch of the Past”, cit., p. 73.

¹⁶⁰ Ivi, p. 78.

¹⁶¹ Ibidem.

¹⁶² Ibidem.

¹⁶³ Ibidem.

¹⁶⁴ Ivi, p. 80.

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The past only comes back when the present runs so smoothly that it is like the sliding surface of a deep river. Then one sees through the surface to the depths. In those moments I find one of my greatest satisfactions, not that I am thinking of the past; but that it is then that I am living most fully in the present. For the present when backed by the past is a thousand times deeper than the present when it presses so close that you can feel nothing else, when the film on the camera reaches only the eye. But to feel the present sliding over the depths of the past, peace is necessary. The present must be smooth, habitual. For this reason – that it destroys the fullness of life – any break – like that of house moving – causes me extreme distress; it breaks; it shallows; it turns the depths into hard thin splinters. [...] I write this partly in order to recover my sense of the present by getting the past to shadow this broken surface. Let me then, like a child advancing with bare feet into a cold river, descend again into that stream.¹⁶⁵

Memory and writing are strongly associated with the image of running waters. For memories to return to the surface, the present moment must be calm, without ripples. Only in this way is it possible to look out over the mirror of water and observe, through the smooth patina of the surface, the depths of the river. The satisfaction Woolf draws from this is not so much that of being able to immerse oneself in one's past, but rather that of living the present fully, because it is supported by the past, which gives it depth. Curiously, the image associated with the return to autobiographical writing, and thus to the recollection of the past, is that of a little girl plunging into the deep waters of a river. It will not be superfluous, here, to recall that Woolf's suicide death occurred in precisely this same way: drowning in a river with her pockets full of stones, as if to validate the hypothesis that the past was too heavy a burden to remain on the tranquil surface of the present, and therefore carried her down forever.

In an interesting article, Anastasia Golovina traces a so-called “psychobiography”¹⁶⁶ of Virginia Woolf by retracing the traumatic events of her life in the light of current psychoanalytic knowledge. As we have already seen in our analysis, Golovina also points to the following traumatic moments in Woolf's life: the death of her mother, the death of her father, sexual abuse. All these would have contributed to the depression from which the writer suffered and the constant mood swings associated with the illness until her suicide at the age of 59.

As for the sexual abuse, it appears that it was not only the humiliation she suffered at the age of six from her half-brother, but that she was continuously abused by two of her half-brothers for several years. Louise De Salvo describes Woolf's childhood home as one “in which incest, sexual violence, and abusive behaviour were a common occurrence”¹⁶⁷. Subsequently, the series of losses in

¹⁶⁵ Ivi, p. 98.

¹⁶⁶ Anastasia Golovina, *Psychobiography: Virginia Woolf*, 2013, no pagination.

¹⁶⁷ P. Gay, *On Not Psychoanalyzing Virginia Woolf*, American Scholar, 2002, p. 71.

the family increased the writer's psychological pain: the sudden death of her mother at the age of 49 triggered her first nervous breakdown; the loss of her half-sister two years later aggravated this condition; the death of her father from cancer in 1904 drove her into a state of manic depression. Quentin Bell reports, in this regard, that Woolf attempted suicide by jumping out of a window and had to be interned during this period, which coincided with her second major nervous breakdown¹⁶⁸.

In her thirties, Virginia married Leonard Woolf and shortly after the marriage suffered a third breakdown and her mental health continued to deteriorate in the following years, resulting in another suicide attempt. As for her married life, it appears that the couple was advised against having children due to depression¹⁶⁹. Furthermore, the marriage to Leonard seems to have been devoid of passion and based solely on mutual respect. Friends called their union a perfect "marriage of true minds"¹⁷⁰. Woolf's problematic sexuality is evident from the fact that, although she had several affairs with several women, most prominently Vita Sackville-West, it appears that she experienced sex with the male gender, including her husband, as abusive. Her sister Vanessa described Virginia as the woman "who had never understood or sympathized with sexual passion in men"¹⁷¹.

Undoubtedly, the fact that Virginia was considered a frigid woman has its roots in the abuse she suffered as a child. Woolf's biographer, Lyndall Gordon, argues that the memory of molestation haunted Woolf's mind throughout her life and established in her not only a terror of being molested by men, but also a more generic form of resistance to male authority¹⁷². Indeed, the fear of being invaded physically, emotionally and spiritually is a distinctive Woolf trait. Although it is said of Virginia and Leonard that "they never had many reasons to marry, but loving each other was not one of them. Nor was having sex or children"¹⁷³, the last ten years of Woolf's life were emotionally focused on Leonard, whom she called her "inviolable center"¹⁷⁴. The diaries and letters also reveal a harmony and deep complicity between the two, and Leonard was always the first critic of her work and also the one who was able to give her rest from her torments. Woolf in fact wrote in one of her letters: "I should have shot myself long ago in one of these illnesses if it had not been for him"¹⁷⁵. However, the last ten years of the writer's life were equally punctuated by increasingly acute nervous breakdowns and growing inner suffering. Not only Woolf's troubled past, but also the outbreak of World War II and the destruction of the writer's home in London contributed to her worsening

¹⁶⁸ Quentin Bell, *Virginia Woolf: A Biography*, Inc. New York, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1972, p. 90.

¹⁶⁹ Cf. Jane Goldman, *The Cambridge introduction to Virginia Woolf*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2006.

¹⁷⁰ Cf. Thomas Stephen Szasz, *"My madness saved me": the madness and marriage of Virginia Woolf*, New Brunswick, N.J., Transaction Publishers, 2006.

¹⁷¹ *Ibidem*.

¹⁷² Cf. Lyndall Gordon, *Virginia Woolf, a writer's life*, New York, Norton, 1984.

¹⁷³ *Ibidem*.

¹⁷⁴ Jane Goldman, *The Cambridge introduction to Virginia Woolf*, cit.

¹⁷⁵ Cfr. Susan Rubinow Gorsky, *Virginia Woolf*, Boston, Twayne Publishers, 1978.

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condition. When all this became too much to bear, on 28 March 1941, Woolf decided to commit suicide by drowning herself and left the following note to her husband:

Dearest,

I feel certain that I am going mad again. I feel we can't go through another of those terrible times. And I shan't recover this time. I begin to hear voices, and I can't concentrate. So I am doing what seems the best thing to do. You have given me the greatest possible happiness. You have been in every way all that anyone could be. I don't think two people could have been happier till this terrible disease came. I can't fight any longer. I know that I am spoiling your life, that without me you could work. And you will I know. You see I can't even write this properly. I can't read. What I want to say is I owe all the happiness of my life to you. You have been entirely patient with me and incredibly good. I want to say that - everybody knows it. If anybody could have saved me it would have been you. Everything has gone from me but the certainty of your goodness. I can't go on spoiling your life any longer. I don't think two people could have been happier than we have been.¹⁷⁶

On this page we read the terror of going mad again, the certainty of never recovering, the experience of hearing voices, the tiredness of continuing to fight depression, the gratitude towards her husband, and the guilt of making his life darker as well. The traits that can be detected in Woolf's personality are many and are indicative of her psychological distress.

Many psychologists agree that the relationship between a child and its parents, the parental nurturing style and the personality of the parents are fundamental factors that contribute to the development of the child's personality. As for Woolf, we know for certain from her diaries that she was obsessed with both her mother and father, but that she often felt neglected or invisible. In the cited articles, there are numerous references to Woolf's unhealthy obsession with her mother, her mixed feelings towards her and her feeling the lack of maternal love and attention. The complex relationship with her mother may have led Woolf to develop traits of dependency and a constant need for approval and attention. If Woolf describes her mother's death as the biggest disaster of her life, Reid describes it as a pivotal moment, because that death "fell into the very middle... between childhood and adulthood"¹⁷⁷. According to some sources, Woolf even felt responsible for her mother's death, and this caused her first breakdown, which some experts describe as the first moment when her eventual bipolarity revealed itself. It is well known that the premature loss of parents coupled with a sense of guilt and responsibility for the death are implicated in depressive risk factors. According to Abramson and the theory of attributional style, people who tend to blame themselves for negative events are more likely to be depressed¹⁷⁸.

¹⁷⁶ Quentin Bell, *Virginia Woolf: A Biography*, cit., p. 226.

¹⁷⁷ Panthea Reid, *Art and affection: A Life of Virginia Woolf*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1996.

¹⁷⁸ Cf. Gordon L. Flett, *Personality theory and Research: an International Perspective*, Mississauga, Ont., J. Wiley and Sons Canada, 2007.

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Finally, it is evident that Woolf had a tendency towards perfectionism that affected not only her private life, but especially her creativity in writing. If she was not satisfied with what she wrote, Woolf would burn her manuscripts and start writing again. It is believed that she burnt the manuscript of *The Voyage Out* five or six times¹⁷⁹. In addition to this, perfectionism is often considered a response to negative life events¹⁸⁰ and is linked to eating disorders¹⁸¹. Woolf was also known for her unhealthy attitude towards food¹⁸² and is believed to have suffered from anorexia at certain times in her life. This picture of perfectionist tendencies can be imagined if one reasons through the Frost Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale¹⁸³ that since Virginia's parents had rather high standards for their children, Virginia may have developed her perfectionism as a response to her own need for approval.

Lastly, it is known that Woolf was very strict with herself and self-critical. Her husband describes her as “hopelessly sensitive about everything”¹⁸⁴ and any criticism was experienced as torture. This is also an indication of low self-esteem, which can be examined in the light of Carl Roger's studies and his theory of conditions of worth. Rogers argues that self-esteem tends to develop in early childhood and derives from interaction with parents¹⁸⁵. Not only do we know that Woolf felt neglected, but also that when she was 13 her family called her 'mentally ill' and that her siblings mocked her by calling her by the nickname *Goat*¹⁸⁶. According to Sullivan, the child tends to develop a positive sense of self, as opposed to the negative self, as a result of feedback from others and that anxiety can be generated by negative feedback¹⁸⁷. In light of what has been examined so far, it is evident that Woolf abused a negative sense of self due to the negative relationships she experienced in her family. According to Erikson's theories and his understanding of the importance of establishing a sense of identity, it is evident that Woolf experienced a constant battle with herself, which even involved her sexuality. The inability to build a healthy and strong sense of identity is undoubtedly linked to the many dramatic events that marked her life.

In conclusion, Woolf's symptoms of mental illness and possible bipolarity are also evident from the fact that the writer experienced both moments of acute depression and the “highs of mania”¹⁸⁸, indeed she went through “the various and exhausting stages of excitement, hostility and

¹⁷⁹ Cf. J. H. Stape, *Virginia Woolf: interviews and recollections*, Iowa City, University of Iowa Press, 1995.

¹⁸⁰ Cf. Enns, M., Cox, B., & Clara, *Perfectionism and Neuroticism: A Longitudinal Study of Specific Vulnerability and Diathesis-Stress Models*, *Cognitive Therapy & Research*, 29(4), 2005, pp. 463-478.

¹⁸¹ Vohs, K. D., & Joiner Jr., T. E. *Perfectionism, perceived weight status, and self-esteem interact to predict bulimic symptoms: Journal Of Abnormal Psychology*, 108(4), 1999, p. 695.

¹⁸² Cf. Thomas Stephen Szasz, *"My madness saved me": the madness and marriage of Virginia Woolf*, cit.

¹⁸³ Cf. Gordon L. Flett, *Personality theory & research: an international perspective*, cit.

¹⁸⁴ Cf. J. H. Stape, *Virginia Woolf: interviews and recollections*, cit.

¹⁸⁵ Cf. Gordon L. Flett, *Personality theory & research: an international perspective*, cit.

¹⁸⁶ Cf. Thomas Stephen Szasz, *"My madness saved me": the madness and marriage of Virginia Woolf*, cit.

¹⁸⁷ Cf. Gordon L. Flett, *Personality theory & research: an international perspective*, cit.

¹⁸⁸ Cf. Mary Ann Caws, *Virginia Woolf*, Woodstock, N.Y., Overlook Press, 2002.

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self-accusations”¹⁸⁹. In one of her diaries, Woolf wondered “How can I cure my violent moods?”¹⁹⁰. Despite being visited by twelve doctors during her lifetime, depression and bipolarism were not recognised at the time and were treated with bizarre treatments. That is why, after years of torment, Woolf decided to take her own life.

As far as the collocation of the text is concerned, it should be pointed out at the outset that the notion of autobiography with regard to “A Sketch of the Past” is problematic. Numerous studies have been conducted in this regard, the most significant of which, with respect to our study, is that of Nóra Séllei¹⁹¹. Séllei questions two paradoxes: first, how the text deconstructs itself as autobiography but at the same time desperately insists on constructing a unified self; second, how the text inscribes itself and is defined by all the discourses that create the autobiographical subject in the text.

Starting from the assumption that no kind of writing, not even the so-called autobiographical writing, is able to give an absolute representation of the truth of identity, it is evident that the self cannot be represented in language even though the autobiographical genre was born with this requirement. The concept of autobiography is rooted in the following notion:

the self-evident existence of an autonomous, self-identical individual, is founded on the oneness of the author, narrator and subject, [and] presupposes the possibility of a whole truth which would be the property of the subject and which he could convey at will.¹⁹²

However, the homogeneous identity of the writing subject and the referentiality of language are problematic and questioned notions of poststructuralist theories, on the grounds that “to use signs entails that meaning is dispersed, divided and never quite one with itself. Not only meaning but 'I' too, the whole idea that I am a stable, unified entity must also be a fiction”¹⁹³. Inevitably then, the change in the concept of identity leads to a change in perspective in the notion of autobiography and erodes

the distinction between fiction and non-fiction and deconstructs the apparent relation between the self and its textual embodiment [and] autobiography is not seen as produced by a pre-existent self but as producing a provisional and contingent one.¹⁹⁴

¹⁸⁹ Ibidem.

¹⁹⁰ Ibidem.

¹⁹¹ Nóra Séllei, *Virginia Woolf and the Problem of Autobiography*, (this essay is a revised and substantially extended version of a paper given at the Conference of English and American Studies in Timisoara, Romania in 1996 and published in the 1997 issue of B.A.S., Timisoara).

¹⁹² G. Thomas Couser, *Altered Egos. Authority in American Autobiography*, Oxford, OUP, 1989, p. 23.

¹⁹³ Ivi, p. 18.

¹⁹⁴ Ivi, p. 189.

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Paul de Man is of the same opinion in his essay *Autobiography as De-Facement*, where he argues that autobiography is “not a genre or a mode but a figure of reading or understanding that occurs, to some degree, in all texts. [...] [T]he author declares himself the subject of his own understanding, but this merely makes explicit the wider claim to authorship that takes place whenever a text is stated to be by someone”¹⁹⁵. It follows directly that:

[t]he interest of autobiography, then, is not that it reveals reliable self-knowledge - it does not - but that it demonstrates in a striking way the impossibility of closure and of totalisation (that is the impossibility of coming into being) of all textual sign systems made up of tropological substitutions.¹⁹⁶

Hence the question:

whatever the writer does is in fact governed by the technical demands of self-portraiture and thus seems determined in all its aspects by the resources of their medium [...] since the mimesis here assumed to be operative is one mode of figuration among others.¹⁹⁷

It follows that autobiography is not a representation of a unitary subject, but a version of it. In *Autobiographics*, Leigh Gilmore introduces a complex method of investigation:

to describe the elements of self-representation which are not bound by a philosophical definition of the self-derived from Augustine, not content with literary history of autobiography, those elements that instead mark a location in the text where self-invention, self-discovery and self-representation emerge within the technologies of autobiography – namely those legalistic, literary, social and ecclesiastical discourses of truth and identity, through which the subject of autobiography is produced.¹⁹⁸

Hence his definition of autobiography as “a description of self-representation and as a reading practice, concerned with interruptions and eruptions, with resistance and contradiction as strategies of self-representation”¹⁹⁹.

De Man's and Gilmore's theories are apt to describe Woolf's text, which right from the title casts doubt on the author's full control over her past and destabilises her own authorship: both the indefinite article “A” and the term “Sketch” refer to the idea that this text is one possibility among

¹⁹⁵ Paul de Man, “Autobiography as De-Facement”, *Modern Language Notes* 94, 1979, 919-30, pp. 921-922.

¹⁹⁶ Ivi, p. 922.

¹⁹⁷ Ivi, p. 920.

¹⁹⁸ Leigh Gilmore, *Autobiographics. A Feminist Theory of Women's Self-Representation*, Ithaca & London, Cornell Univ. Press, 1994, p. 42.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibidem*.

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many variables and that it is only a draft, therefore characterised by an underlying incompleteness, instability and impossibility of conclusion. The title itself therefore upsets the classical assumption of autobiography in its notions of referentiality of language and unitary identity being told. Indeed, in this text Woolf oscillates between various paradoxes: “assumed authenticity and admitted fictionality, assumed verifiability and admitted construction, assumed fictionality of truth-telling and admitted scepticism towards the possibility of finding and expressing a final cause”²⁰⁰. Séllei emphasises how this text, paradoxically, demonstrates the impossibility of writing one's own life story, while attempting to do so:

The oscillation, instability, and self-deconstructing quality of the text can be located on several levels, all related to the problem of the linguistic sign, of Symbol, and of a linguistic system of signs called autobiography, a special trope of reading. Thus, this autobiographical text written intermittently in the last two years of Woolf's life, with the assumed (or, rather, imposed) intention of giving an ultimate summary and evaluation of a life from the position of finality and retrospection rather turns out to be an admission of futility, of incapacity, of inappropriateness of language and linguistic signs to create a closure that can be called self and self-expression.²⁰¹

Language fails as a system precisely in its attempt to be used to achieve its stated purpose, namely the reconstruction of the subject's identity. It should be noted that Woolf, from the beginning of her career and not only in this late autobiography, has always been skeptical of language:

Words with short wings for their heavy body of meaning, inadequate to carry them far and thus alighting awkwardly upon the very common objects that surrounded them and were to their inexperienced touch so massive: but who knows [...] what precipices aren't concealed in them, or what slopes of ice don't shine on the sun on the other side?²⁰²

In “A Sketch of the Past”, according to Séllei, it is the awareness of the unreliability and non-referentiality of the language system that undermines the authority of self-writing from the very base. Shari Benstock, about this text, writes:

Woolf views the past not as a 'subject matter' - a content as such but rather a method, a scene-making. [...] Unable to argue logically the ontology of autobiography by means of self-consciousness, Woolf moves toward an instinctive notion that the 'sealed vessel' of selfhood is an artificial construct, that it 'cracks' and floods, allowing access to that which in conscious moments is considered wholly separate and different from self - 'what is convenient to call reality'. But Woolf's notion of reality is [...] rather a linguistic space (a 'scene') that conceals -

²⁰⁰ Nóra Séllei, *Virginia Woolf and the Problem of Autobiography*, cit., p. 75.

²⁰¹ Ibidem.

²⁰² Virginia Woolf, “Kew Gardens”, (1918) in *The Complete Shorter Fiction*, ed. Susan Dicks, London, Triad Grafton Books, 1989, p. 94.

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and tries to seal itself against - the gap (the 'crack') of the unconscious. [...] 'Writing the self' is therefore a process of simultaneous sealing and splitting that can only trace fissures of discontinuity.²⁰³

Yet, Séllei points out, Woolf's text is a constant oscillation between destabilising the authenticity of what is written and denying the awareness of the futility of doing so. From the very beginning of the text, in fact, Woolf declares herself aware of the difficulties of such a literary genre in her ontology, but at the same time places herself in the position of authority. Indeed, as per traditional autobiography, there is a temporal placement of the diary, through dates that end not only the chronology, but also Woolf's history and psychology in the present of the writing. The aim, at the same time, seems classic: to capture the essence of identity throughout the course of her life. However, Séllei notes, "the text does not even presume self-knowledge but from the first moment on problematises itself as an agent of representation and creates itself as fiction"²⁰⁴. Moreover, Woolf declares from the outset that one of the problems she will have to face is that of the abundance of memories that requires selection, but of course the opposite question arises in the reader: what has been forgotten? What has been omitted from the text? Indeed, we know that at the time of the writing of "A Sketch", Woolf was reading Freud and his theories of psychoanalysis certainly influenced the text, so much so that Virginia writes: "the things one does not remember are as important; perhaps they are more important"²⁰⁵. In this way, memories that are forgotten, repressed, omitted, unspoken because they are unspeakable are regarded as extremely significant and are contrasted with the author's earliest memories, which are defined as fundamental to her life. These include memories of her mother and her family environment. The first three memories narrated in the text in fact recall "the child's dyadic unity with the mother, the primordial unity of being, from the pre-Oedipal and pre-linguistic phase"²⁰⁶. These images, which suggest an absence of separateness from the mother, are called *jouissance* by Kristeva: "the moment of bodily contact when the body is not split into senses but is enwrapped in the totality of sensual pleasure, without any consciousness of the self [...]". Paradoxically, the selfconscious narrator attempts to evoke these memories, to reconstitute them in the Symbolic, in linguistic differentiation, and the failure is appropriately admitted at the end of both"²⁰⁷. The impossibility of verbalising these feelings is constantly referred to in the text:

²⁰³ Shari Benstock, *The Private Self. Theory and Practice of Women's Autobiographical Writings*, London, Routledge, 1988, p. 29.

²⁰⁴ Nóra Séllei, *Virginia Woolf and the Problem of Autobiography*, cit., p. 78.

²⁰⁵ Virginia Woolf, "A Sketch of the Past", cit., p. 69.

²⁰⁶ Nóra Séllei, *Virginia Woolf and the Problem of Autobiography*, cit., p. 80.

²⁰⁷ *Ibidem*.

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I could spend hours trying to write [the purest ecstasy I can conceive] as it should be written. [...] But I should fail (unless I had some wonderful luck); I dare say I should only succeed in having the luck if I had begun by describing Virginia herself.²⁰⁸

So they say: 'This is what happened'; but they do not say what the person was like to whom it happened.²⁰⁹

Who was I then?²¹⁰

Clearly there is a distancing from the past and a split between the narrator and the subject of the autobiography, so much so that Woolf also writes: "What I write today I should not write in a year's time"²¹¹, emphasising the constant change to which identity is subjected. Séllei concludes that:

The identity of self, thus the narrator and the subject of autobiography, i.e. the authority of autobiography as the repository of self-knowledge, at this point are problematised in directions different from the question of textual self representation: both the narrator and the subject are exposed to a matrix of infinite variables in which the innumerable versions of both selves (i.e. that of the narrator and the autobiographical subject) multiply each other thus capable of creating an endless number of texts, none of which can be the authorised version, the sacred narrative of the personal history.²¹²

Despite the impossibility of resolving this question, Woolf desperately attempts to put herself in the text and does so precisely through the absence of the completeness it would require: Woolf proceeds by free association, as Freud indicated, and by 'scene-making'. What is missing in the text and what contributes to the impossibility of a desired completeness is, however, hinted at and silently indicated at times, and recurrently explicitly expressed verbally at other times, as in the case of the impossibility of the description of the mother, where language fails. This is why Woolf states that she prefers images, which are recorded in the text as 'scenes': because they are a suspension in time, a crystallised and eternalised moment.

If I were painting myself I should have to find some - rod, I shall say - something that would stand for the conception. It proves that one's life is not confined to one's body and what one says and does; one is living all the time in relation to some background rods or conceptions. Mine is that there is a pattern hid behind the cotton wool.²¹³

²⁰⁸ Virginia Woolf, "A Sketch of the Past", cit., p. 65.

²⁰⁹ Ibidem.

²¹⁰ Ivi, p. 75.

²¹¹ Ibidem.

²¹² Nóra Séllei, *Virginia Woolf and the Problem of Autobiography*, cit., p. 83.

²¹³ Virginia Woolf, "A Sketch of the Past", cit., p. 72.

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Moments of being are consciously conceived as part of *conception*, i.e. they are symbolic substitutions for the inexpressible and the unrepresentable. This gives rise to Séllei's most important question:

The ultimate question remains: why is the narrator of "A Sketch of the Past" oscillating between authorising her own text and parallel with that undermining that position; why does she take all her efforts to position her story within a discourse of truth and identity while at the same time she creates not only gaps but abysses in the text?²¹⁴

That is, why does Woolf make constant efforts to narrate herself but at the same time purposely leave huge holes of the unsaid? One possible answer is given by DeSalvo, who argues that Woolf stopped writing this autobiography, left unfinished, because on the one hand, reading Freud may have put pressure on her to reinterpret what she had already written, which she was not willing to do; on the other hand, Woolf seems to have abandoned the project when she revealed the long-hidden and unspoken element of Gerald Duckworth's sexual abuse when she was six or seven years old.²¹⁵ This memory emerges after a series of efforts to break the countless Victorian taboos concerning sex, death, and innocence. In this context Woolf's traumatic memories are held back by "the rules of the game of Victorian society. [...] We still play the game. It is useful. It also has its beauty, for it is founded upon restraint, sympathy, unselfishness. [...] But the Victorian manner is perhaps - I am not sure - a disadvantage at writing. [...] On the other hand, the surface manner allows one, as I have found, to slip in things that would be inaudible if one marched up straight and spoke out loud"²¹⁶.

What, then, is so difficult to reveal? In using the expression "slip in" Woolf seems to have to silently slip between memories and avoid those that would be "inaudible". At this point, as Séllei points out, it is useful to remember that in "A Sketch of the Past" right after the first memory is that of the first abuse, and that when the text ends the narrator was attempting to render 'audible' the account of an alleged abuse by her other brother, George, in the period between 1895/7 and 1904. This is followed by the death of the mother, when "a finger seemed laid on one's lips. [...] A finger was laid on our lips"²¹⁷. The taboo of incest and sexual abuse prevents her from "telling the truth about my experiences as a body"²¹⁸ even in 1940, as she writes in her essay *Professions for Women*.

²¹⁴ Nóra Séllei, *Virginia Woolf and the Problem of Autobiography*, cit., p. 88.

²¹⁵ Cf. Louise DeSalvo, *Virginia Woolf and the Impact of Childhood Sexual Abuse on her life and work*, New York, Ballantine Books, 1989, pp. 131-132.

²¹⁶ Virginia Woolf, "A Sketch of the Past", cit., p. 129.

²¹⁷ Ivi, p. 93.

²¹⁸ Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar (eds.): *The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women. The Tradition in English*, New York & London: W.W. Norton & Co., 1985, p. 1387.

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The last twenty pages of the text constantly reveal the effort to verbalise and at the same time conceal the most traumatic experiences of those years:

Why do I shirk the task of wafting [Thoby] from the boat to my bedsitting room at Hyde Park Gate? It is because I want to go on thinking about St Ives. [...] I do not want to go into my room at Hyde Park gate. I shrink from the years 1897-1904, the seven unhappy years. [...] I am not thinking of mother and Stella; I am thinking of the damage their deaths inflicted. I will describe it more carefully later, I will illustrate with a scene or two.²¹⁹

Séllei points out that this suspense could be interpreted as a technique for constructing the story by the narrator, but what makes it significant and unique is that “it has only one more parallel in the text: nowhere else can we read any other remark creating a suspense but twenty pages later, when after the description of George the narrator starts interpreting the character”²²⁰. In fact, George is defined in crude and derogatory terms and of him is highlighted “some sexual urge”²²¹:

The structure of the argument follows the same pattern as the one attached to the looking-glass shame: a natural feeling of guilt because of being a tomboy; the inherited streak of the Puritan; some ancestral dread; being ashamed or afraid of her body; and then "another memory, also of the hall may help to explain this," and then comes the memory when Gerald Duckworth lifted her on a slab and explored her body (MB 77), as if it were the most negligible reason, only a 'may', attached to the series of reasons, just like George's "sexual urge", which became obviously traumatic in Woolf's life. But the text of "A Sketch of the Past" never releases the suspense the remark ("as became obvious later") creates: the text ceases and only silence speaks.²²²

The text ends and only silence speaks. What silence? Perhaps that of an introspection too painful to continue, as DeSalvo argues; perhaps that of the victory over Victorian taboos symbolised by the finger on the lips; perhaps that, initially, of skepticism about the possibility of telling one's story. In any case, “This narrator, who still maintained the game of authorising her text, gives up writing at the moment when a new system of signs, with referents supposedly never voiced before, i.e. a new language is needed to tell the truth about herself as a body. At this moment all pretence for textual representation fails: the strip of pavement that writing represents becomes insufficient and shaky, providing only a temporary, false and artificial bridge over the abyss of life”²²³.

A new language capable of recounting the abuse, unspeakable, does not properly exist: that is why autobiography remains incomplete, unfinished. However, the impossibility of telling, so

²¹⁹ Virginia Woolf, “A Sketch of the Past”, cit., p. 136.

²²⁰ Nóra Séllei, *Virginia Woolf and the Problem of Autobiography*, cit., p. 90.

²²¹ Virginia Woolf, *Moments of Being*, cit., p. 168.

²²² Nóra Séllei, *Virginia Woolf and the Problem of Autobiography*, cit., p. 90.

²²³ *Ibidem*.

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verbalised in the text, ends up becoming sensations, metaphors and deep moments that can be transposed onto the page through words charged with silence.

Summarising briefly what we have discovered so far, we can state that various levels of silence are present in the text.

A first level is related to the theme of death and mourning, with particular reference to the mother figure - central in Woolf's life - and to her sister.

A second level of silence is associated with the traumatic episode of sexual abuse by her brother and is therefore related to the violation of the body, which at first seems unspeakable.

A third level is the silence imposed by the taboos of Victorian society and the conventions adopted during periods of mourning.

A fourth level is that relating to inauthentic communication between certain members of the family, with reference to Woolf's father.

A fifth level of silence relates to the expression of silence itself, which is conveyed through locutions indicating the inability to express certain feelings and the fallibility of language, which is not sufficient to say everything.

A sixth level of silence is that associated with the numerous metaphors Woolf resorts to in order to covertly (and not explicitly) say the most painful experiences as well as the ineffable ones.

II. *La douleur*: “C’est dans ce silence-là que la guerre est encore présente, qu’elle sourd à travers le sable, le vent”

*La douleur*²²⁴ is an autobiographical novel by Marguerite Duras included within the text collection of the same name, which contains six short stories in total. This collection, which first appeared in 1985 published by P.O.L., is divided into two sections. The first contains only *La douleur*, while the second contains five short stories of various kinds: *Monsieur X. dit ici Pierre Rabier*, *Albert des Capitales*, *Ter le milicien*, *L’Ortie brisée*, *Aurélia Paris*. Each of the six texts is preceded by an introduction, written by the author, which states the category to which the text belongs and mentions some considerations about it. According to Duras, therefore, the first four texts are autobiographical in nature and the facts narrated there are authentic. These are texts of which the author writes: “la littérature m’a fait honte”²²⁵. The last two short stories, on the other hand, although set in Paris during the German Occupation at the time of the Liberation, are described as fictional: “C’est inventé. C’est de la littérature”²²⁶.

The text that interests us for the purposes of this study is the first in the collection, which bears the same title: *La douleur*. The publishing history of this text is unusual. Written in 1944, it was then apparently forgotten and published in 1985, a year after *L’Amant*. However, in 1981, in *Outside*²²⁷, among the articles published by Duras between 1957 and 1980, a short text appeared anonymously in 1976 entitled *Pas mort en déportation*²²⁸ that is reminiscent of *La douleur* in terms of content and style. Five years later, Duras recognised the text as her own²²⁹ and said she had “retrouvé dans un cahier, une sorte de journal intemporel” written “pendant la fin de la guerre”²³⁰. Again, Duras writes about the text: “Ce n’est pas un texte politique, c’est un texte. Sans qualification. Je crois que l’ai écrit pour ne pas oublier. Ce qu’un homme peut devenir, ce qu’on peut lui faire subir. Et la permanence de l’amour qu’on peut lui porter”²³¹. The *cahier* Duras writes about is actually a set of four cahiers kept by the author under the name *Cahiers de la guerre*. This set is part of the writer’s archives deposited in the fonds of the Institut de la Mémoire et de l’Edition Contemporaine and has been transcribed and edited by Sophie Bogaret and Olivier Corpet under the title *Cahiers de la guerre et autres textes* (POL/IMEC, 2006). These pages thus refer to rewritten pages, extracted from the same cahier, which would become those of *La douleur* in 1985.

²²⁴ Marguerite Duras, *La douleur* (1985), Paris, Gallimard coll. “Folio”, 1993, pp. 13-85.

²²⁵ Ivi, p. 12.

²²⁶ Ivi, p. 194.

²²⁷ Marguerite Duras, *Outside* suivi de *Le monde extérior*, Paris, P.O.L., coll. “Folio”, 2014.

²²⁸ Ivi, pp. 349-354.

²²⁹ “Maintenant j’ose dire que c’est moi qui ai écrit ce texte-là”. Ivi, p. 349.

²³⁰ Marguerite Duras, “Pas mort en déportation”, in *Outside*, cit., p. 349.

²³¹ Ibidem.

This text, which defies strict classification, deals with the wait and return from the concentration camps of Robert Antelme, Duras's husband at the time. In the text, the diary is kept by “petite Marguerite”, also called “madame L.”²³², and Antelme is constantly referred to as “Robert L.”

Although Antelme was arrested in June 1944 and later sent to Germany as a political deportee, the text covers a period from April 1945 to the summer of 1946. Composed of twelve fragments, dated imprecisely, with only the mention “avril” at the beginning of paragraphs, or at most with the number of the month (“20, 24, 26, 28 avril”), sometimes of the day (“Dimanche”), this diary has only one complete date (“Dimanche, 22 avril 1945”). The appellation “journal intemporal” given by Duras strikes us: the diary is, by definition, placed in time, a writing of the days that consigns the ordinariness of the everyday to the testimony of a dated written page. Intimate writing is inscribed in a defined time to which it gives form: in this sense, calling this diary “intemporal” seems a challenge to the genre. It is equally true that the diary actually dissimulates a written account “plusieurs mois après le retour de Robert Antelme”²³³ and conceived from a known conclusion, namely the survival of Antelme, which gives the 1976 text its title: *Pas mort en déportation*.

The classification of the text is therefore problematic: is it a diary, an autobiographical novel or a fictional account? When was it actually written? When was it rewritten?

It is certain that Duras forcefully excludes this text from the sphere of literature: she affirms her desire to expose facts and to bear witness to what happened. Moreover, she firmly opposes this text, with respect to which “la littérature [lui] [...] fait honte”²³⁴, to the last two in the collection, about which it is written “C’est inventé. C’est de la littérature”²³⁵. And yet, the text is rich in poetic processes that challenge the genre of confession or testimony, of a properly anecdotal or historical nature. Moreover, although the diary is evidently a true story that actually happened and thus escapes the definition of literature as fiction, it should be pointed out that inventing also consists of transposing lived truths through *déplacement*, substitution or integration of other material²³⁶. In terms of the cruelty of the facts narrated and the closeness to its author, the diary stands alongside another diary from April 1945: *L'Espèce humaine* by Robert Antelme, written on his return from deportation. As for *La douleur*, the *topos* of the rediscovered manuscript is a classic of fiction and places the text in a potentially fictional framework. Indeed, it must be emphasised that *La douleur* is not only a

²³² Marguerite Duras, *La douleur*, cit., p. 42, p. 15.

²³³ Sophie Bogaret, Olivier Corpet, *Préface aux Cahiers de la guerre et autres textes* (2006), Gallimard coll. “Folio”, 2008, p. 9.

²³⁴ Marguerite Duras, *La douleur*, cit., p.12.

²³⁵ Ivi, p. 194.

²³⁶ Cf. Florence de Chalonge, “*La Douleur*, le “journal intemporel” de Marguerite Duras”, in *Écritures autobiographiques: Entre confession et dissimulation*, Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2010 (22 juin 2022), <<http://books.openedition.org/pur/38711>>.ISBN:9782753547131.

rediscovered diary, but also a re-worked, re-written diary. As Lejeune²³⁷ observes, there is nothing strange in this: indeed, it is very rare for an author not to edit his text with a view to publication. Therefore, the published diary is rarely identical to the diary first written. However, Duras insists on another element in her introduction:

Quand l'aurais-je écrit, en quelle année, à quelles heures du jour, dans quelle maison ? Je ne sais plus rien. Ce qui est sûr, évident, c'est que ce texte-là, il ne me semble pas pensable de l'avoir écrit pendant l'attente de Robert L.²³⁸

This short paragraph, full of elements of uncertainty and doubt, seems to indicate that the diary was written *a posteriori*. The writing of the diary, in short, would not be contemporaneous with the events. Laure Adler's biography²³⁹ dedicated to Duras, the writer's interviews and the manuscripts of the *Cahiers* confirm that Duras wrote this diary in the immediate post-war period, probably in 1946-1947, while Robert Antelme was also writing *L'Espèce humaine*. As further evidence of the late writing of the diary, it is worth noting that there is also a prologue in the text, dated 25 April 1945, relating to Madame Kats:

Si j'étais vraiment malade, je crois que Mme Kats penserait moins à sa fille. [...] MME Kats a attendu six mois, d'avril à novembre 1945. Sa fille était morte en mars 1945, on lui a notifié la mort en novembre 1945.

It is therefore retrospective writing, and this is decisive for the genre to which the text belongs. Maurice Blanchot, in one of his reflections on the personal diary, in April 1955 drew a distinction between the diary that "rapporte" and the narrative that "raconte"²⁴⁰. In this demarcation lies the difference between a passive process of writing that is a delivery of facts and an active, form-conscious process that processes facts and makes them into a narrative. Moreover, a diary is not written in function of an end: simply, the diarist one day stops writing. On the contrary, *La douleur* seems to be written after Robert Antelme's return and ends like a short story, that is, starting from a common conclusion: the saved life of her husband, a survivor of the Nazi concentration camps. In fact, the diary opens with the statement: "J'attends Robert L. qui doit revenir"²⁴¹ and ends with "Il n'est pas mort au camp de concentration"²⁴².

²³⁷ Cf. Philippe Lejeune, « Le Journal », *Les Brouillons de soi*, Le Seuil, 1998, p. 317-418.

²³⁸ Marguerite Duras, *La douleur*, cit., p. 12.

²³⁹ Laure Adler, *Marguerite Duras*, Paris, Gallimard, 1998.

²⁴⁰ Maurice Blanchot, « Sur le journal intime », *Nouvelle Revue Française*, n° 28, avril 1955, p. 683-691, resumed under the title « Le Journal intime et le récit », in *Le Livre à venir* (1959), Gallimard coll. « Folio », 1986, p. 254.

²⁴¹ Marguerite Duras, *La douleur*, cit., p. 15.

²⁴² Ivi, p. 85.

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In terms of dating, as already mentioned, the diary is also uneven. If initially, during the spasmodic wait for Antelme, Duras maintains a more or less regular dating, since his return there is like a clean break. The very first part of the diary is only dated as “Avril”; a little later, the days run from 20 to 28 April: this period is suspended and troubled by the wait, it is almost a delirious time experienced as a single lapse of time without precise boundaries. Finally, a typographic blank in the middle of the page marks the caesura that demarcates the time of waiting from that of return. After the blank, in fact, we read:

Je ne sais plus quel jour c'était, si c'était encore un jour d'avril, non c'était un jour de mai, un matin à onze heures le téléphone a sonné. [...] « Écoutez-moi bien. Robert est vivant ». ²⁴³

The announcement that Robert is alive immediately brings the diary writing to an end: from this moment on, there is no more mention of dates or months in the diary at the top of the page. The passing of time is no longer accounted for and witnessed through the indication of the day: the time of waiting, which was crystallised in a marble block, returns to melt and flow, regardless of its passing.

We can therefore conclude that, although presented as a rediscovered diary, the text in question is an account written after Antelme's return and rewritten by the author. This, however, does not make the narrated facts any less true: it remains a testimony to the horror of the Shoah, albeit from an indirect point of view, that of Duras waiting for and seeing her deported husband return. In some ways, we can consider Duras's work as testimonial literature precisely because it incorporates, within the enormous prolepsis that is Antelme's anticipated and thoughtful death, not only the diarist's personal experience, but also, by extension, that of the deportees' families.

The interest in *La douleur* is linked, beyond its editorial history and the difficult characterisation of the text, to the treated themes of loss, death, grief, the evident relationship to trauma and the presence of silences, both formal and thematic, in the writing. Moreover, in contrast to the other texts in this collection, it is Duras herself who defines the importance of *La douleur*, writing:

La douleur est une des choses les plus importantes de ma vie. Le mot « écrit » ne conviendrait pas. Je me suis trouvée devant des pages régulièrement pleines d'une petite écriture extraordinairement régulière et calme. Je

²⁴³ Ivi, p. 65.

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me suis trouvée devant un désordre phénoménal de la pensée et du sentiment auquel je n'ai pas osé toucher et au regard de quoi la littérature m'a fait honte.²⁴⁴

The text is defined not only as one of the most important things in her life, but also as something that goes beyond writing and beyond literature: an almost sacralised text, a sort of relic, due to the importance of the themes it deals with and its extremely personal and almost shameless contents. Literature, compared to testimony, takes on a negative connotation here because it is capable of trivialising real pain by fabricating texts that produce knowledge but are less 'authentic'. In this total transparency, which recounts Duras's madness as she waits and the gritty details of Antelme's return, there is no room for recollection of the writing, there is only the recognition of one's own hand. As in any traumatic experience, the repressed is almost more important than what is remembered. These pages are therefore like a plunge into the past, into the repressed, into the trauma, which with astonishment is seen anew:

Je n'ai aucun souvenir de l'avoir écrit.

Je sais que je l'ai fait, que c'est moi qui l'ai écrit, je reconnais mon écriture et le détail de ce que je raconte, je revois l'endroit, la gare d'Orsay, les trajets, mais je ne me vois pas écrivant ce Journal. [...]

Comment ai-je pu écrire cette chose que je ne sais pas encore nommer et qui m'épouvante quand je la relis.²⁴⁵

The sensations evoked are those of estrangement with the experience, but also familiarity with the writing; forgetfulness of the time of writing, but remembrance of what happened; the surprise of finding it, but also fatigue in re-reading. This metacommentary, which distances itself from the time of the writing of the text and even sustains its forgetfulness by underlining a feeling of unreality and estrangement from it, serves as a defensive strategy and places the writer in the dual role of subject-in-history and alienated, detached subject.

The text opens, following the aforementioned frame, with the image of Duras waiting in her home for the telephone to ring, placed next to her: "Face à la cheminée, le téléphone, il est à côté de moi. A droite, la porte du salon et le couloir. Au fond du couloir, la porte d'entrée"²⁴⁶. The description of the house and its surroundings is very brief and immediately leaves room for the main question from which the journal originates: the spasmodic waiting for Robert Antelme. The text, written in the first person, continues with Duras's mental hypotheses concerning her husband's eventual return, expressed in the conditional form:

²⁴⁴ Ivi, p. 12.

²⁴⁵ Ibidem.

²⁴⁶ Ivi, p. 13.

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Il pourrait revenir directement, il sonnerait à la porte d'entrée : « Qui est là. - C'est moi. » Il pourrait également téléphoner dès son arrivée dans un centre de transit : « Je suis revenu, je suis à l'hôtel Lutetia pour les formalités. » Il n'y aurait pas de signes avant-coureurs. Il téléphonerait. Il arriverait. Ce sont des choses qui sont possibles. Il en revient tout de même. Il n'est pas un cas particulier. Il n'y a pas de raison particulière pour qu'il ne revienne pas. Il n'y a pas de raison pour qu'il revienne. Il est possible qu'il revienne. Il sonnerait : « Qui est là. C'est moi. »²⁴⁷

The writer and Antelme's wife pictures the image of her husband phoning her and simply arriving home, in a completely normal and ordinary conversation. She tries to convince herself that this is possible, that it would not be rare or peculiar, that it is reasonable to expect him to return. This stream of self-persuasive thoughts has the function of calming and reassuring, almost like a mantra to be repeated to convince oneself that everything will be fine. A few lines later, Duras insists on the supposed normality of such a return:

Ils ont fini par reculer. J'ai fini par vivre jusqu'à la fin de la guerre. Il faut que je fasse attention : ça ne serait pas extraordinaire s'il revenait. Ce serait normal. Il faut prendre bien garde de ne pas en faire un événement qui relève de l'extraordinaire. L'extraordinaire est inattendu. Il faut que je sois raisonnable : j'attends Robert L. qui doit revenir.²⁴⁸

The return would therefore not be an extraordinary event, but an everyday one. Duras also adduces objective and technical reasons to his hypothesis: the enemies are retreating. In an attempt to normalise the event of the return and to make it truly credible, Duras also tries to rationalise what is happening, which is purged of all consideration and remains a simple and objective: "J'attends Robert L. qui doit revenir". This sentence, apparently lucid and devoid of connotations, could serve as a summary for the entire *journal*, which is nothing more than a recording of the moods of a woman waiting for her deported husband. The telephone returns just after this sentence, after a typographical blank:

Le téléphone sonne : « Allô, allô, vous avez des nouvelles ? » Il faut que je me dise que le téléphone sert aussi à ça. Ne pas couper, répondre. Ne pas crier de me laisser tranquille. « Aucune nouvelle. Rien ? Aucune indication ? Aucune. - Vous savez que Belsen a été libéré ? Oui, hier après-midi... - Je sais. » Silence. Est-ce que je vais encore le demander ? Oui. Je le demande : « Qu'est-ce que vous en pensez ? Je commence à être inquiète. » Silence. « Il ne faut pas se décourager, tenir, vous n'êtes hélas pas la seule, je connais une mère de quatre enfants...

²⁴⁷ Ibidem.

²⁴⁸ Ivi, p. 14.

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Je sais, je m'excuse, je dois sortir, au revoir. » Je repose le téléphone. Je n'ai pas bougé de place. Il ne faut pas trop faire de mouvements, c'est de l'énergie perdue, garder toutes ses forces pour le supplice.²⁴⁹

Almost elevated to the function of *liaison* with her husband, the telephone represents the direct means by which Duras can receive information, and thus assumes a fundamental role in waiting. The conversation above is interesting because it highlights Duras's thirst for news on the one hand, and her shame and fear of being pushy or repetitive on the other. The silences between turns of phrase, emphasised by the word 'Silence' that is repeated twice after the words exchanged, punctuate the rhythm of the communication and increase the perception of anguish felt by the first person narrator. Duras's modesty, which required her not to ask again for what she has evidently already asked for, is however put aside at the moment when the anxiety of losing her husband is so great as to be unbearable. The primary need is for reassurance. In a conversation with herself, subterranean to the telephone conversation reported in inverted commas, Duras justifies herself against this and allows herself to put aside her shame and speak, breaking the silence. In an effort to safeguard the essential, however, as soon as the conversation distances itself from Duras's self-interest, the writer excuses herself and hangs up the phone. Indeed, she states that in this moment of extreme fatigue and excruciating pain, it is necessary to save all energy for the torment. The waiting time is thus experienced as an ordeal, a continuous flow of doubts and uncertainties that alternate between moments of hope and despair and that drain the author physically and spiritually.

The text continues with the writer's lucubrations that proceed by anaphora of “Elle a dit”²⁵⁰ and recapitulate the meagre information obtained during the conversation. It is followed, however, by an “Elle ne l'a pas dit”²⁵¹, which introduces the omissions of which this text is full. In fact, the journal proceeds by gaps and ellipses, typographical blanks and other rhetorical figures whereby it is more what is not said than what is made explicit. In fact, from the outset it must be remembered that Duras has not written who Robert L. is, where he is, why, who is on the phone with her. Moreover, even Robert L.'s name is truncated: we do not know his identity because he is stripped of his full surname.

What the interlocutor did not say on the phone was that the next day “les listes des noms”²⁵² will come. Duras writes: “Il faut descendre, acheter le journal, lire la liste. Non. Dans les tempes j’entends un battement qui grandit. Non je ne lirai pas cette liste”²⁵³. Once again, the text proceeds

²⁴⁹ Ibidem.

²⁵⁰ Ibidem.

²⁵¹ Ibidem.

²⁵² Ibidem.

²⁵³ Ibidem.

by subtraction: it is not specified what the list is; Duras refuses to carry out this action; the sentences are short and simple, without connectives linking them together.

The text proceeds in an alternation of action and thought: we catch a glimpse of Duras walking through Paris and going to *l'école de médecine*, with an immense fatigue that we perceive through the list of gestures to be performed: “Le moment de bouger arrive. Se soulever, faire trois pas, aller à la fenêtre”²⁵⁴; at the same time, we hear her obsessive thoughts that, as they pound, give her no peace and accompany her wherever she goes. The tormenting images of her husband's possible death also continue: “Les passants, toujours, ils marcheront au moment où j'apprendrai qu'il ne reviendra jamais. Un avis de décès”²⁵⁵. The flow of these thoughts is depicted with the image of a beat in the temples, which returns several times in the text:

Le battement dans les tempes continue. Il faudrait que j'arrête ce battement dans les tempes. Sa mort est en moi. Elle bat à mes tempes. On ne peut pas s'y tromper. Arrêter les battements dans les tempes - arrêter le cœur - le calmer - il ne se calmera jamais tout seul, il faut l'y aider. Arrêter l'exorbitation de la raison qui fuit, qui quitte la tête.²⁵⁶

The beating of the mind coincides with the beating of the heart, which goes at the same time as Antelme's heart: the body of the one seems linked to that of the other, so much so that Duras states: “Sa mort est en moi. Elle bat à mes tempes”. The perfect synchrony of these noises and movements is autonomous and is not managed by the subject, who in fact argues that it is necessary to help this organ - the heart - to regain a more regular beat. Not only does the heart need to be regulated again, but also reason: Duras is aware that reason is leaving her mind. She is aware, that is, that she is inhabited by madness: Antelme's spasmodic and obsessive waiting has brought the writer to the limits of sanity.

We follow Duras along the Parisian streets and see her completely isolate herself from the rest and distance herself from the outside world:

Dans la rue je dors. Les mains dans les poches, bien calées, les jambes avancent. Éviter les kiosques à journaux. Éviter les centres de transit. Les Alliés avancent sur tous les fronts. Il y a quelques jours encore c'était important. Maintenant ça n'a plus aucune importance. Je ne lis plus les communiqués.²⁵⁷

²⁵⁴ Ivi, p. 15.

²⁵⁵ Ibidem.

²⁵⁶ Ibidem.

²⁵⁷ Ibidem.

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Duras strides like an automaton through the streets, inhabited only by her thoughts. The body movements, mechanical and automatic, go hand in hand with the syntax: simple, made up of essential sentences, stripped of frills or connotations. Duras proceeds by avoidance: she does not speak, does not ask, does not seek, does not read. The text is all subtraction: of actions, of information, of emotions, of connotations.

There follow a few lines describing the historical context of those days, namely the advance of the Allies along the front. The news is good for the French people, but Duras is too immersed in her own personal tragedy to rejoice, and the recurring images of Robert L.'s possible death return:

Dans un fossé, la tête tournée contre terre, les jambes repliées, les bras étendus, il se meurt. Il est mort. À travers les squelettes de Buchenwald, le sien. Il fait chaud dans toute l'Europe. Sur la route, à côté de lui, passent les armées alliées qui avancent. Il est mort depuis trois semaines. C'est ça, c'est ça qui est arrivé. Je tiens une certitude. Je marche plus vite. Sa bouche est entrouverte. C'est le soir. Il a pensé à moi avant de mourir.²⁵⁸

For the first time in the text, the image of the “fossé noir” appears, which will represent the checkpoint of Duras's every obsession: it is the end of torment, since it is the symbol of the death of her companion. The image takes on realistic tones and is described in detail in the position assumed by Antelme's corpse. The passage of the Allies along the roads next to the corpse is only mentioned as a historical fact: indifference to death, in war, reigns supreme. Duras, talking to herself, repeats to herself that this is how things happened and that her husband has been dead for three weeks. The thoughts become a certainty and this also causes her body to move faster, to the rhythm of the image of her deceased husband's open mouth. Finally, an almost consoling thought: Antelme must have thought of his wife before he died. As if to redeem the futility and pain of death, Duras tells herself a fictionalised version of this death, in an attempt to seek impossible comfort.

La douleur est telle, elle étouffe, elle n'a plus d'air. La douleur a besoin de place. Il y a beaucoup trop de monde dans les rues, je voudrais avancer dans une grande plaine, seule. Juste avant de mourir, il a dû dire mon nom. Tout le long de toutes les routes d'Allemagne, il y en a qui sont allongés dans des poses semblables à la sienne. Des milliers, des dizaines de milliers, et lui. Lui qui est à la fois contenu dans les milliers des autres, et détaché pour moi seule des milliers des autres, complètement distinct, seul. Tout ce qu'on peut savoir quand on ne sait rien, je le sais.²⁵⁹

The pain experienced when faced with the thought of death is such that it is irrepressible. Suffering demands to be experienced and needs a space, not only mental but also physical, to express

²⁵⁸ Ivi, p. 16.

²⁵⁹ Ibidem.

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itself. In opposition to the space of mourning and loneliness is the street, full of people. Once again, the sense of alienation and estrangement from the rest of the world returns, the desire for isolation and the need for a shelter where the imagined mourning can take place. Like every obsessive thought, the idea that Antelme pronounced Marguerite's name just before he died returns: the element of the name, as well as that of the voice, make Duras exist through Antelme. It is almost as if the body of one were the sounding board of the identity of the other. To exist, Duras needs that pain. In Duras's imagination, Antelme's body is placed alongside that of the other dead, but is at the same time distinct: death is individual and not a general fact, like war, which remains indifferent to individuals.

Il est mort en prononçant mon nom. Quel autre nom aurait-il pu prononcer ? Ceux qui vivent de données générales n'ont rien en commun avec moi. Personne n'a rien de commun avec moi. La rue. Il y a en ce moment à Paris des gens qui rient, des jeunes surtout. Je n'ai plus que des ennemis. C'est le soir, il faut que je rentre attendre au téléphone.²⁶⁰

The certainty, or reassuring thought, that Antelme spoke her name before he died returns for the third time. At the same time, the perception of the uniqueness of that death and the uniqueness of the experience of mourning returns: the image of people and young people laughing in the street contrasts firmly with the loneliness of those who experience the mourning of a loved one.

The thoughts in the text are punctuated by the passing of the day: it is now evening and Duras reminds herself of the need ("il faut") to return to wait by the telephone. A contradiction is evident here: the thought of Robert L.'s death is not so certain as to acquire a concreteness, since his wife still feels the need to wait for him.

De l'autre côté aussi c'est le soir. Dans le fossé l'ombre gagne, sa bouche est maintenant dans le noir. Soleil rouge sur Paris, lent. Six ans de guerre se terminent. C'est la grande affaire du siècle. L'Allemagne nazie est écrasée. Lui aussi dans le fossé. Tout est à sa fin. Impossible de m'arrêter de marcher. Je suis maigre, sèche comme de la pierre. À côté du fossé, le parapet du pont des Arts, la Seine. Exactement, c'est à droite du fossé. Le noir les sépare. Rien au monde ne m'appartient plus, que ce cadavre dans un fossé. Le soir est rouge. C'est la fin du monde. Je ne meurs contre personne. Simplicité de cette mort. J'aurai vécu. Cela m'indiffère, le moment où je meurs m'indiffère. En mourant je ne le rejoins pas, je cesse de l'attendre.²⁶¹

In this paragraph, the image of the ditch returns five times: it is an obsession that takes on the contours of paranoia. The black grave coincides with the end of everything for Duras, who does not await victory or liberation from the Nazis, but only the return of her husband, without whom every

²⁶⁰ Ivi, pp. 16-17.

²⁶¹ Ivi, p. 17.

other event loses meaning and significance. Nothing in the world belongs to her any more except a death: the nothingness of this perception is echoed in the next sentence, “C'est la fin du monde”. The world does not end for everyone, only for Duras. Death is simple and Antelme's death overlaps with Duras's: everything is indifferent to her in a world without a companion, even her own death.

It is at this moment in the text that we see the appearance of another character, with a symbolically truncated name: D. The man, Dyonis Mascolo, is a friend of Duras' and visits her every day. The conversation proceeds by omission: Duras herself states that D. no longer asks her how she is and no longer even greets her. Everything boils down to “Aucune nouvelle? – Aucune.”²⁶². Every other word would be useless and in excess: everything is cut out and only the essentials remain. Conversation is reduced to the absence of news and therefore the absence of useful words. The two characters stand in silence, while Duras returns to wait by the telephone. “Je me tais”²⁶³ is written in the text, like the previous “silence”: silence is not only conveyed through the very short and essential sentences, but is also made explicit and written down. The journal revolves entirely around the pivot of silence, of lack: of a man, of news, of words. The atmosphere surrounding the two characters is also sober: a light bulb is turned on in the room; at 9 p.m., no one has eaten yet; D. is described as thin and unkempt; Duras is lost in her isolation, as can be inferred when she writes: “D. est assis loin de moi. Je regarde un point fixe au-delà de la fenêtre noire”²⁶⁴. In this gloomy atmosphere, the author's delusions return, echoing the image of Robert's death and the ditch:

L'évidence fond sur moi, d'un seul coup, l'information : il est mort depuis quinze jours. Depuis quinze nuits, depuis quinze jours, à l'abandon dans un fossé. La plante de pieds à l'air. Sur lui la pluie, le soleil, la poussière des armées victorieuses. Ses mains sont ouvertes. Chacune de ses mains plus chère que ma vie. Connues de moi. Connues de cette façon-là que de moi. Je crie. Des pas très lents dans le salon. D. vient. Je sens autour de mes épaules deux mains douces, fermes, qui me retirent la tête de la table. Je suis contre D., je dis : « C'est terrible. - Je sais, dit D. - Non, vous ne pouvez pas savoir. – Je sais, dit D., mais essayez, on peut tout. » Je ne peux plus rien. Des bras serrés autour de soi, ça soulage. On pourrait presque croire que ça va mieux quelquefois. Une minute d'air respirable. On s'assied pour manger. Aussitôt l'envie de vomir revient. Le pain est celui qu'il n'a mangé, celui dont le manque l'a fait mourir. J'ai envie que D. parte. J'ai encore besoin de la place vide pour le supplice.²⁶⁵

The image of death imposes itself on Duras without any control on her part and from there a kind of delirium begins: the writer states that she is certain of it, visualises the corpse abandoned on

²⁶² Ibidem.

²⁶³ Ibidem.

²⁶⁴ Ivi, p. 18.

²⁶⁵ Ivi, p. 19.

the ground, the debris of war and time on the defenceless body, the position of the hands. It is from the image of the hands that a cry starts that Duras cannot hold back. The thought is too strong and frightening and gives rise to a reaction in the real world. D. rushes in, but the comfort he can give is momentary: a minute of breathing air. In the moment the two are about to eat, then, the impossibility of performing everyday acts returns: hunger is replaced by nausea. At the idea of eating the bread her husband cannot eat, Duras suffers. Her body is directly linked to his, with the suffering that ensues. It is as if Duras experienced the trauma of deportation to the concentration camp on her skin, and not indirectly. The suffering for Antelme's situation is such that it is experienced in the first person, in a kind of extreme psychological projection. Thus, the need for solitude and emptiness to experience mourning returns: space must be made for silence and lack. The time when she remains alone is for Duras the time to devote to Antelme's absence, even in sleep: "Je m'endors près de lui tous les soirs, dans le fossé noir, près de lui mort"²⁶⁶.

This is followed by pages of accounts of Duras's research activities, as she contacts deportees who have returned to Orsay and attempts to get news in a clandestine manner. However, there are no acquaintances of Robert L. and this only increases the writer's frustration and anguish, which she concludes by writing: "Chaque soir, je dis à D.: 'Demain je ne retournerai pas à Orsay'"²⁶⁷.

The next entry in the journal is enriched with the date of the month: it's 20th April. Duras has returned to Orsay, unable to respect her own will, and writes: "Je ne sais plus où me mettre pour me supporter"²⁶⁸. There is no refuge from pain, no place to find relief, no thought to give comfort: Duras lives an eternal torment, in a time suspended between life and death not only for Antelme, but also for her, who lives in a forcibly distant symbiosis with him.

Duras describes various scenes seen at Orsay, such as the women waiting for the men to return from the war shouting, the prisoners returning in confusion, the spectators standing by for the sake of witnessing unique moments in history. She then returns to her personal feelings: "Je travaille mal, tous ces noms que j'additionne ne sont jamais le sien. Au rythme de chaque cinq minutes, l'envie d'en finir, de poser le crayon, de ne plus demander de nouvelles, de sortir du centre pour le reste de ma vie"²⁶⁹. The desire to leave this reality of waiting and pain forever is strong, but a living hope in Duras, albeit faint, ensures that she does not give up and that her research continues. Also set in Orsay, it is a rather stark description of the return of the first deportee from Weimar:

²⁶⁶ Ivi, p. 20.

²⁶⁷ Ivi, p. 21.

²⁶⁸ Ibidem.

²⁶⁹ Ivi, p. 27.

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Tout à coup débouchent du couloir d'entrée deux scouts qui portent un homme. L'homme les tient enlacés par le cou. Les scouts le portent, les bras en croix sous les cuisses. L'homme est habillé en civil, il est rasé, il a l'air de beaucoup souffrir. Il est d'une étrange couleur. Il doit pleurer. On ne peut pas dire qu'il est maigre, c'est autre chose, il reste très peu de lui-même, si peu qu'on doute qu'il soit en vie. Pourtant non, il vit encore, son visage se convulse dans une grimace effrayante, il vit. Il ne regarde rien, ni le ministre, ni la salle d'honneur, ni les drapeaux, rien. Sa grimace, c'est peut-être qu'il rit. C'est le premier déporté de Weimar qui entre dans le centre. Sans m'en rendre compte j'ai avancé, je me tiens au milieu de la salle d'honneur, le dos au micro.²⁷⁰

The description of the war-torn and starving body is both horrifying and attractive to Duras, who cannot stop herself from moving forward to get a better look. The body of the man, still alive, is striking for its extreme thinness, which cannot be described: “On ne peut pas dire qu'il est maigre, c'est autre chose”. It is precisely this “autre chose” that is the unspeakable that war and the concentration camp impose. There are no adequate words to describe what was not even imaginable. The story continues, in the flow of time punctuated by the date on the diary page, and Duras leaves to return home:

J'ai hâte de rentrer, de m'enfermer avec le téléphone, retrouver le fossé noir. Dès que je quitte le quai et que je prends la rue du Bac, la ville redevient lointaine, et le centre d'Orsay disparaît. Peut-être qu'il reviendra tout de même. Je ne sais plus.²⁷¹

The need is always to return to the “fossé noir”, the space reserved for mourning and suffering. The distance between herself and the rest of the world is also evident in the description of Paris and its streets: everything seems distant. Finally, the obsessive thought returns: perhaps he will come back. There is no longer any certainty of life or death: finally, thought opens up to doubt, which is the grey area most tiring to live in and most costly in terms of energy, since it considers both possibilities and triggers hope on the one hand and despair at the other extreme. This is followed by a description of Duras herself, who almost pities herself for her psycho-physical situation:

Le suis très fatiguée. Je suis très sale. Je passe aussi une partie de mes nuits au centre. Il faut que je me décide à prendre un bain en rentrant. Cela doit faire huit jours que je ne me lave plus. J'ai si froid dans le printemps, l'idée de se laver me fait frissonner, j'ai comme une fièvre fixe qui ne partirait plus. Ce soir je pense à moi. Je n'ai jamais rencontré une femme plus lâche que moi. Je récapitule, des femmes qui attendent comme moi, non, aucune n'est aussi lâche que ça. J'en connais de très courageuses. D'extraordinaires. Ma lâcheté est telle qu'on ne la qualifie plus, sauf D. Mes camarades du Service des Recherches me considèrent comme une malade.²⁷²

²⁷⁰ Ivi, pp. 30-31.

²⁷¹ Ivi, pp. 32-33.

²⁷² Ivi, p. 33.

The woman describes herself as tired, dirty, sleepless, filthy, feverish. The signs of neglect are evident: she states that she has not bathed for eight days. The feeling is that of a constant fever, a perpetual physical malaise, a clear symptom of a deteriorated global condition. Duras is aware of her appearance and the need to take care of herself, so much so that she states: “Ce soir je pense à moi”. She then goes on to define herself in unpleasant terms and make comparisons between herself and women stronger and braver than her in the same situation. Even her *lâcheté*, like the thinness of the first deportee, cannot be described: words are lacking for this unprecedented situation. The entire journal is the ground of the unspeakable.

The perspective on Duras's condition shifts: now the gaze reported is that of D.:

D. me dit : « En aucun cas on a le droit de s'abolir à ce point. » Il me le dit souvent : « Vous êtes une malade. Vous êtes une folle. Regardez-vous, vous ne ressemblez plus à rien. » Je n'arrive pas à saisir ce qu'on veut me dire. [Même maintenant quand je retranscris ces choses de ma jeunesse, je ne saisis pas le sens de ces phrases.] Pas une seconde je n'entrevois la nécessité d'avoir du courage. Ma lâcheté à moi serait peut-être d'avoir du courage. Suzy a du courage pour son petit garçon. Moi, l'enfant que nous avons eu avec Robert L., il est mort à la naissance - de la guerre lui aussi - les docteurs se déplaçaient rarement la nuit pendant la guerre, ils n'avaient pas assez d'essence. Je suis donc seule. Pourquoi économiser de la force dans mon cas. Aucune lutte ne m'est proposée. Celle que je mène, personne ne peut la connaître. Je lutte contre les images du fossé noir.²⁷³

Duras is seen and defined as sick, as insane. The only comparison D. makes is between the woman and nothingness: “Vous ne ressemblez plus à rien”. There is no thing, not even a word to describe her, that Duras resembles. The writer herself states that she did not understand the meaning of her friend's statement: the meaning of the words is such that it is reduced to the silence of incomprehension. In the following lines, Duras mentions a woman, Suzy, who is bravely expecting her child. It is made explicit here that Duras and Antelme also had a son, but that this one died at birth, again during the war. The trauma of loss and death is already familiar to the writer, who nevertheless does not hesitate about this detail and returns to writing about her husband's expectation. There is no room for anything else: not even the death of a child. The woman claims to be alone with her struggle: that against the obsessive thoughts of the “fossé noir”.

The next entry in the diary begins with some news about the Allies advance. This news is delivered almost as if it were a journalistic chronicle, yet, a little later, the emphasis is placed on the exhausting fatigue of those waiting: “Il me semble que j’ai assez attendu. Nous sommes fatiguées”²⁷⁴;

²⁷³ Ivi, pp. 33-34.

²⁷⁴ Ivi, p. 36.

“Il y a des gens qui n’attendent rien. Il y a aussi des gens qui n’attendent plus”²⁷⁵; “Chaque jour j’attends moins”²⁷⁶; “Ce n’est pas ordinaire d’attendre ainsi. Je ne saurai jamais rien”²⁷⁷. Fatigue, perceived as something that wears down not only the mind but also the body, is underlined by the physical sensations expressed by Duras:

Je monte lentement, je suis très essoufflée par la fatigue. [...] J’ai froide. Je vais me rasseoir sur le divan près du téléphone. C’est la fin de la guerre. Je ne sais pas si j’ai sommeil. Depuis quelque temps déjà je n’éprouve plus le sommeil. Je me réveille alors je sais que j’ai dormi. Je me lève, je colle mon front contre la vitre.²⁷⁸

Later, more details about the days of the Liberation are given. Duras records in her diary the news events that are most significant to her, such as the fact that fifty-one thousand prisoners in the Buchenwald camp were killed on the eve of the Allies' arrival: “Pourquoi? On dit : Pour qu’ils ne racontent pas”²⁷⁹. One way to prevent speech and testimony is killing: to preserve the silence and secrecy of what happened and to make it truly unspeakable, literally, the Germans shot the prisoners shortly before the arrival of the allied troops who, Duras writes, found the bodies still warm. This is followed by a speech about hate and love, inextricably linked for Duras in a two-sided medal: “Maintenant, entre l’amour que j’ai pour lui et la haine que je leur porte, je ne sais plus distinguer. C’est une seule image à deux faces”²⁸⁰. Later, as if this were contained in a parenthesis, Duras returns to the emphasis on fatigue:

Mon front contre la vitre froide c’est bon. Je ne peux plus porter ma tête. Mes jambes et mes bras sont lourds, mais moins lourds que ma tête. Ce n’est plus une tête, mais un abcès. La vitre est fraîche.²⁸¹

The glass of the window is the *fil rouge* in the description of the writer's prostration, as she alienates herself from the rest of the world, from which she is symbolically separated by the transparent glass, which gives her relief as it is cool. Duras writes that her arms and legs are heavy, as after having made an immense physical effort. This reminds us of the symbolic symbiosis with her husband Antelme, who surely, having been exhausted in the concentration camps, felt these sensations. Yet the most pertinent physical sensation is that of a head so heavy that it is no longer defined as a head, but rather as an abscess, i.e. a cavity filled with pus and substances that the body

²⁷⁵ Ibidem.

²⁷⁶ Ivi, p. 37.

²⁷⁷ Ibidem.

²⁷⁸ Ibidem.

²⁷⁹ Ivi, p. 38.

²⁸⁰ Ibidem.

²⁸¹ Ivi, p. 39.

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must expel in order to heal from inflammation, swelling and pain. Symbolically, Duras's head appears to be a container for germs and harmful, damaging, and destructive thoughts. In fact, as repeated several times in the text, the writer herself states that she is sick and fears that she has lost her sanity. This intense paragraph is followed by a moment of closed-eyed imagination that Duras describes thus:

Je ferme les yeux. S'il revenait nous irions à la mer, c'est ce qui lui ferait le plus de plaisir. Je crois que de toutes façons je vais mourir. S'il revient je mourrai aussi. S'il sonnait : « Qui est là. - Moi, Robert L. », tout ce que je pourrais faire c'est ouvrir et puis mourir. S'il revient nous irons à la mer. Ce sera l'été, le plein été. Entre le moment où j'ouvre la porte et celui où nous nous retrouvons devant la mer, je suis morte. Dans une espèce de survie, je vois que la mer est verte, qu'il y a une plage un peu orangée, le sable. À l'intérieur de ma tête la brise salée qui empêche la pensée. Je ne sais pas où il est au moment où je vois la mer, mais je sais qu'il vit. Qu'il est quelque part sur la terre, de son côté, à respirer. Je peux donc m'étendre sur la plage et me reposer. Quand il reviendra nous irons à la mer, une mer chaude. C'est ce qui lui fera le plus plaisir, et puis le plus de bien aussi. Il arrivera, il atteindra la plage, il restera debout sur la plage et il regardera la mer. Moi, il me suffira de le regarder, lui. Je ne demande rien pour moi. La tête contre la vitre.²⁸²

The image evoked is that of the sea, which not by chance will also be the journal's closing. Duras imagines going to the sea with her husband, and yet at the same time states, paradoxically, that this will not be possible under any circumstances: neither if Antelme does not return, because he will be dead, nor if Antelme does return, because in that case it will be she herself who will die, due to her inability to bear this moment. The substance of which Duras seems to be made in this diary is waiting itself: what to do, then, when one no longer waits? All that remains is to die. In any case, the reasoning goes on “dans une espèce de survie” and the description of a beach and the sea is evoked, which prevent thoughts and therefore do good. The image of the sea mingles in a kind of delirium with the expectation of Robert L.: at the same time, Duras writes that she is certain that her husband is alive, that she can therefore lie down on the beach and rest, that she will watch him while he watches the sea. The sequence of images of the sea thus insinuates itself into Duras's doubts and hopes, creating a confused vortex of thoughts. Of all of them, the one that returns again and more often is that of her own death:

Je serai morte. Dès son retour je mourrai, impossible qu'il en soit autrement, c'est mon secret. D. ne le sait pas. J'ai choisi de l'attendre comme je l'attends, jusqu'à en mourir. Ça me regarde.²⁸³

²⁸² Ivi, pp. 39-40.

²⁸³ Ivi, p. 40.

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Death, the emblem of perpetual rest and the absence of toil, is invoked as desirable. The thought of death is Duras's secret, which she keeps silent even to D.. Waiting and death come to coincide because they both culminate in pain that is no longer bearable. Duras's choice thus resembles a planned suicide. Later, Marguerite's house is filled with the presence of D. and Antelme's brother-in-law, M., who engage in a conversation dense with silences made explicit by the writer: "Il y a de longs silences dans la conversation, et puis tout à coup les voix reviennent"²⁸⁴. Silence seems to be the element that surrounds the entire journal and fills its interstices. There follows a brief dream of Duras, feverish, which evokes the image, seen a few days earlier, of a pregnant girl who no longer awaits the return of her comrade from the war, since the latter is dead: "Elle parlait, elle parlait sans pouvoir s'arrêter"²⁸⁵. The girl's rant, in stark contrast to the silence of those who are still waiting, seems to be a river in flood that breaks free of everything it has so far held back: "Elle parlait, elle pleurait, elle ne pouvait rien garder à l'intérieur"²⁸⁶. The impossibility of holding back and the liberation that follows are at the antipodes of Duras's current feelings, who still experiences the suspended time of waiting by containing everything in silence.

The next diary page is the most precisely dated: "Dimanche 22 avril 1945"²⁸⁷. In a dialogue with D., we learn that Duras is curing her fever, but we find the same anguish as always:

Je porte un café à D. Il me regarde et il a un sourire très doux: "Merci ma petite Marguerite." Je crie que non. Mon nom me fait horreur.²⁸⁸

The proper name is horrifying, that is, it generates fear and disgust, as Duras's identity is annulled in Antelme's waiting. The very person of Duras no longer exists except as a function of the passive action of waiting. This is also made evident by the total lack of personal care and other interests, as well as by the psycho-physical feelings reported in the diary so far. The name, the emblem of personal identity, is horrifying because it is emptied of all meaning.

In this section of the journal we also learn a lot of news, reported in a journalistic style. The news is learned through reading the journal and alternates with the encounters Duras has with Mme Bordes. The latter is wracked with grief:

²⁸⁴ Ivi, p. 41.

²⁸⁵ Ibidem.

²⁸⁶ Ibidem.

²⁸⁷ Ivi, p. 42.

²⁸⁸ Ibidem.

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La fille pleure sur un divan. La loge est sale et en désordre, sombre. La loge est pleine de pleurs de Mme Bordes, elle ressemble à la France. “Nous voilà bien, dit le fils, elle ne veut pas se lever.” Mme Bordes est couchée, elle me regarde, elle est défigurée par les pleurs.²⁸⁹

The comparison between Mme Bordes' grief and that of the whole of France is followed, in the next pages, by an invective against De Gaulle, who seems only interested in the country's victory and not in the mourning that the population is experiencing. To this, the writer mixes her everyday actions such as fetching bread and climbing the stairs: much is said, but little substance. The actions are recorded as news events, just like the news about the war, but are not emotionally connoted.

In this grey landscape, one detail that deserves attention is a brief musical moment:

D. joue du piano. Il a toujours joué du piano, dans toutes les circonstances de sa vie. Je m'assieds sur le divan. Je n'ose pas lui dire de ne pas jouer du piano. Ça fait mal dans la tête et ça fait revenir la nausée.²⁹⁰

Piano music is too beautiful to be bearable: it gives one a headache and makes one nauseous. The psychological fatigue of tolerating beauty in a moment of such acute pain is such that it immediately becomes physical fatigue. Indeed, music has the power to evoke images and sensations for which there is no room in Duras's mind now: all energy is focused on the single point of waiting for Antelme. Duras and D. have two diametrically opposed attitudes to this: it is said that D. plays in every circumstance of his life, as if to find in the piano a relief from the labours of the day; on the contrary, Duras does not tolerate the beauty of art in the moment of suffering. At the same time, the writer is silent about her desire for silence and does not dare tell her friend about this toil. The silence in the conversation then becomes actual silence that leaves room for the music to fill the atmosphere.

Following the political reasoning concerning the discussed figure of De Gaulle, pages full of anguish return, introduced by a striking sentence: “On n'existe plus à côté de cette attente”²⁹¹. As made clear earlier, Duras's identity coincides with waiting and there is nothing else to define it now. The terrible images of Antelme's imagined death also return:

Des rafales de mitraillette à chaque minute à l'intérieur de la tête. Et on dure, elles ne tuent pas. Fusillé en cours de route. Mort le ventre vide. Sa faim tourne dans la tête pareille à un vautour. Impossible de rien lui donner. On peut toujours tendre du pain dans le vide. On ne sait même pas s'il a encore besoin de pain. On achète du miel, du sucre, des pâtes. On se dit : s'il est mort, je brûlerai tout. Rien ne peut diminuer la brûlure que fait sa faim. On meurt d'un cancer, d'un accident 'automobile, de faim, non, on ne meurt pas de faim, on est achevé avant. Ce que

²⁸⁹ Ivi, p. 43.

²⁹⁰ Ivi, p. 44.

²⁹¹ Ivi, p. 46.

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la faim a fait est parachevé par une balle dans le cœur. Je voudrais pouvoir lui donner ma vie. Je ne peux pas lui donner un morceau de pain. Ça ne s'appelle plus penser ça, tout est suspendu.²⁹²

The main theme is that of hunger, accompanied by that of death. Duras's head is described as a container of images of death and horror: the gunshot to the head; the corpse in the grave; the open mouth of a dead man; the empty stomach of someone who has not eaten for some time. Emptiness is a theme that returns again and again, both as a physical emptiness - that in Antelme's stomach - and as a spiritual emptiness, that of the distance and waiting experienced by Duras. Robert L.'s hunger is likened to a vulture in Duras's mind: a bird of ill omen swirling around waiting to feed on carrion. Not only that: the writer's mind is also tormented by machine-gun fire every minute. Both images - the bird of prey and the machine gun - are symbols of horror, death and torment. Figuratively, Duras expresses torture that is akin to a torment. On a less abstract level, the author states that she would like to be able to give her husband some bread and that if she cannot do it in reality, she can always do it in her imagination, described as "le vide". The hypothesis of her husband's death also returns, and should this be the case, Duras already knows that she would burn all the food bought for him, because nothing can relieve the burning - this time psychological - that Antelme's hunger creates in her. The symbiosis between the two bodies reappears here in a direct connection between the hunger of one and the torment of the other. Duras, prostrate with grief, writes with infinite sadness that she wishes she could give her husband her life but cannot give him even a piece of bread. The juxtaposition of these two diametrically opposed images in terms of importance - life and a piece of bread - is so strong that it is no longer possible to go any further in the succession of thoughts: Duras writes that this is no longer in the regime of thinking, but that everything is suspended. This suspension means emptiness, waiting, absence of thought, absence of language, absence of words to describe what one feels and what one experiences. Suspension is silence: it is a space of annulment and pause, an interval, an interruption of speech and discourse.

Later on, Duras puts herself on the same level as Mme Bordes and states that they are two beings who live only in the present - a present made up of waiting - and that it is not possible to foresee one more day to live, just as it is not possible to make plans for three days later. D. does not seem to tolerate this kind of thinking on Marguerite's part and tells her that she must try to read:

On a essayé de lire, on aura tout essayé, mais l'enchaînement des phrases ne se fait plus, pourtant on soupçonne qu'il existe. Mais parfois on croit qu'il n'existe pas, qu'il n'a jamais existé, que la vérité c'est maintenant. Un autre enchaînement nous tient : celui qui relie leur corps à notre vie. Peut-être est-il mort depuis quinze jours déjà, paisible, allongé dans ce fossé noir. Déjà les bêtes lui courent dessus, l'habitent. Une balle dans la nuque ?

²⁹² Ibidem.

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dans le cœur ? dans les yeux ? Sa bouche blême contre la terre allemande, et moi qui attends toujours parce que ce n'est pas tout à fait sûr, qu'il y en a peut-être pour une seconde encore. Parce que d'une seconde à l'autre seconde il va peut-être mourir, mais que ce n'est pas encore fait. Ainsi seconde après seconde la vie nous quitte nous aussi, toutes les chances se perdent, et aussi bien la vie nous revient, toutes les chances se retrouvent. Peut-être est-il dans la colonne, peut-être avance-t-il courbé, pas à pas, peut-être qu'il ne va pas faire le second pas tellement il est fatigué ? Peut-être que ce prochain pas, il n'a pas pu le faire il y a de cela quinze jours ? Six mois ? Une heure ? Une seconde ? Il n'y a plus la place en moi pour la première ligne des livres qui sont écrits. Tous les livres sont en retard sur Mme Bordes et moi. Nous sommes à la pointe d'un combat sans nom, sans armes, sans sang versé, sans gloire, à la pointe de l'attente.²⁹³

Reading is therefore an impossible activity for Duras, because it requires linearity of thought and the chaining of sentences that are not intelligible to her. Everything is mixed with doubt: is Antelme alive or dead? This thought is so cumbersome that it leaves no possibility of distraction even when reading. Another succession of thoughts follows: Antelme's very existence is questioned. Perhaps, Duras speculates, this was always life and he never existed. Then again come the doubts and speculations about how Robert might have died and the images of his corpse on enemy soil. It seems to be a chase after time for Duras: perhaps there is still a second of life left for Antelme and for that second Duras still has to wait for him. Every hypothesis, every question mark ends with no certain answer. The only point of arrival of this delirious reasoning is that there is no space for reading in her mind: all the books are late on Duras, because her waiting places her in a suspended time, which is not the time of others, but another time, without a name, just as without a name her battle is defined: a fight without weapons nor blood nor glory and without a name, since unspeakable and impossible to define is the torment that the writer is experiencing.

Dans la tête de Mme Bordes comme dans la mienne ce qui survient ce sont de bouleversements sans objet, des arrachements d'on ne sait quoi, des écrasements idem, des distances qui se créent comme vers des issues, et puis qui se suppriment, se réduisent jusqu'à presque mourir, ce n'est que souffrances partout, saignements et cris, c'est pourquoi la pensée est empêchée de se faire, elle ne participe pas au chaos mais elle est constamment supplantée par ce chaos, sans moyens, face à lui.²⁹⁴

The minds of Duras and Madame Bordes are veritable battlefields, full of destruction and devastation without object, i.e. without name. The mind is the realm of chaos because suffering is everywhere and all logical thought is prevented by the raging pain, in the face of which reasoning finds itself without means. Pain is such that it cannot be thought and therefore said. Duras's writing, actually, in that it cannot make itself word, becomes word and expresses the unthinkable and the

²⁹³ Ivi, pp. 47-48.

²⁹⁴ Ivi, p. 48.

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unspeakable. The very fact of describing pain in these terms is, in reality, an act of writing and naming. Duras writes silence because talking about pain is a way of overcoming the silence of the unspeakable and trauma.

The following days are a continuous alternation of thoughts of death and hope. Duras continues to stand by the telephone waiting for news; she suspends her visits to the research centre; one evening she visits D. out of fear that he is hiding the death of Robert L.. In this almost paranoid landscape, the theme of hallucination also returns:

Sur le coup de dix heures, tout à coup, chez moi, la peur était rentrée. La peur de tout. Je m'étais retrouvée dehors. Tout à coup j'avais relevé la tête et l'appartement avait changé, la clarté de la lampe aussi, jaune tout à coup. Et tout à coup la certitude, la certitude en rafale : il est mort. Mort. Mort. Le vingt et un avril, mort le vingt et un avril. Je m'étais levée et j'étais allée au milieu de la chambre. C'était arrivé en une seconde. Plus de battement aux tempes. Ce n'est plus ça. Mon visage se défait, il change. Je me défais, je me déplie, je change. Il n'y a personne dans la chambre où je suis. Je ne sens plus mon cœur. L'horreur monte lentement dans une inondation, je me noie. Je n'attends plus tellement j'ai peur. C'est fini, c'est fini ? Où es-tu ? Comment savoir ? Je ne sais pas où il se trouve. Je ne sais plus non plus où je suis. Je ne sais pas où nous nous trouvons. Quel est le nom de cet endroit-ci ?²⁹⁵

The episode narrated is that of a delirium experienced by Duras who, distraught with fear, is completely overwhelmed to the point of no longer having rational control over her actions: she leaves the house almost fleeing because the flat had changed in her eyes and the light was no longer the same as it had always been. All it takes is one blunder to shatter the precarious equilibrium of the writer, who in fact draws from this moment the certainty that her husband is dead. The word “mort” is repeated several times, underlining the repetitiveness of the obsessive and paranoid thought that inhabits her. With this certainty arrived in a flash, everything changes: there is no longer a throb in the temples; the face is transfigured; the body relaxes. The accumulated tension seems to dissolve into nothingness to the point that the room is perceived as an empty space inhabited by no one where even her heart can no longer be heard. We perceive a muffled sound, a bare environment, a suspension of time. It seems to be a description of a real panic attack, which enraptures the subject in the terror of death and makes him feel overwhelmed by pain. The horror felt at the thought of death is here compared to a flood in which the writer drowns: the panic is such that it overwhelms her and the fear is such that she can no longer even wait, which was the only action Duras clung to in order to live. Here begins a confused flow of questions about Antelme, alternating between the second person, addressing him directly, the third person singular, speaking of him as if he were not there, and the

²⁹⁵ Ivi, p. 49.

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first person plural, involving herself and Robert L. in an incoherent whole. The confusion in pronouns continues in the following paragraph, however, referring to Duras herself:

Qu'est-ce que 'est que cet endroit ? Qu'est-ce que c'est que toute cette histoire ? De quoi s'agit-il ? Qui c'est ça, Robert L. ? Plus de douleur. Je suis sur le point de comprendre qu'il n'y a plus rien de commun entre cet homme et moi. Autant en attendre un autre. Je n'existe plus. Alors du moment que je n'existe plus, pourquoi attendre Robert L. ? Autant en attendre un autre si ça fait plaisir d'attendre ? Plus rien de commun entre cet homme et elle. Qui est ce Robert L. ? A-t-il jamais existé ? Qu'est-ce qui fait ce Robert L., quoi ? Qu'est-ce qui fait qu'il soit attendu, lui et pas un autre. Qu'est-ce qu'elle attend en vérité ? Quelle autre attente attend-elle ? À quoi joue-t-elle depuis quinze jours qu'elle se monte la tête avec cette attente-là ? Que se passe-t-il dans cette chambre ? Qui est-elle ? Qui elle est, D. le sait. Où est D. ? Elle le sait, elle peut le voir et lui demander des explications. Il faut que je le voie parce qu'il y a quelque chose de nouveau qui est arrivé. Je suis allée le voir. En apparence rien n'était arrivé.²⁹⁶

In the moment of panic, Duras no longer even recognises where she is and why, nor does she remember the whole story she is going through and who Robert L. is. Thoughts seem to whirl around in her mind as she has transcribed them on the page and the overall picture is one of total confusion dictated by the anguish and bewilderment she felt at the thought of her dead husband. This moment, which seems to be the culmination of grief, gives rise to a new thought: there is no longer anything in common between Duras and Antelme. The experiences experienced by both - the waiting of the one and the concentration camp of the other - have created an unbridgeable gulf between the two, to the point that a reunion is impossible. Waiting is now seen as an action to be done for the sake of doing it, so much so that waiting for Antelme or another would be the same thing. Antelme is emptied of his identity because what remains is only a waiting woman. Duras herself says of herself: "Je n'existe plus". This is also the most alienating part of the text: the writer, talking about herself, alternates the third person singular with the first. Almost as if looking at herself from above, outside her body, Duras asks: "Qui est-elle ?". In total identity confusion, the only solution sighted is to ask the gaze of another, D., to recognise her and bring her back to herself.

On 24th April, an episode is recounted that gives rise to hope: D. and Duras receive a night-time phone call in which they are given the information that Robert L. was alive two days earlier. This is followed by a visit by the two to two of Antelme's fellow prisoners, who are interrogated by D. but struggle to remember what happened, leaving Duras in the torment of doubt.

The first part of the paragraph, relating to the phone call, sees D. on the phone and records the latter's lines and waits for turns to speak. These are made explicit, in Duras's anxiety of waiting, with

²⁹⁶ Ivi, p. 50.

the word 'Silence' written twice. Moreover, in the night-time conversation, Duras's narrating self once again turns from "Je" into "Elle"²⁹⁷. Upon hearing the news of Robert being alive two days earlier, Duras melts away in a moment of low tension:

« Ils l'ont quitté il y a deux jours, il était vivant. » Elle n'essaye plus d'arracher le téléphone. Elle est par terre, tombée. Quelque chose a crevé avec les mots disant qu'il était vivant il y a deux jours. Elle laisse faire. Ça crève, ça sort par la bouche, par le nez, par les yeux. Il faut que ça sorte. D. a posé l'appareil. Il dit son nom à elle : « Ma petite, ma petite Marguerite. » Il ne s'approche pas, il ne la relève pas, il sait qu'elle est intouchable. Elle est occupée. Laissez-la tranquille. Ça sort en eau de partout. Vivant. Vivant. On dit : « Ma petite, ma petite Marguerite. » Il y a deux jours, vivant comme vous et moi. Elle dit : « Laissez-moi, laissez-moi. » Ça sort aussi en plaintes, en cris. Ça sort de toutes les façons que ça veut. Ça sort. Elle laisse faire.²⁹⁸

The scene depicted is that of a woman in the grip of madness who lets herself fall to the ground and seems to be inhabited by a psychosis. In shameless writing, Duras also recounts the details of this moment of abandonment: all kinds of liquids pour out of the cavities of her body, which previously held everything in the tension of waiting. Duras is defined as untouchable in this delicate moment when D. calls her by name to give her back her name. Screams and cries mingle in a moment at once of hope and terror, which constitutes an interlude of thawing within the time lapse of suspension that Duras had been experiencing for a fortnight.

The next diary page, dated 27 April, reports another phone call. This time on the other end of the phone is François Mitterrand, a friend of Duras, who gives her some news received from the prisoners and in particular from Philippe, Antelme's companion. Even in the essential recording of this phone call, which only records the lines between the two, silences are made explicit: the word "Silence"²⁹⁹ is repeated no less than five times in a very short paragraph. Duras continues to tell the silence: the unspeakable is expressed by explicating everything that takes place in the mind and in reality, almost as in a journalistic recording of events. The writer thus learns that Antelme may return within forty-eight hours and no longer.

The 26th and 27th of April are also records of daily events and historical happenings. Duras's wait becomes more and more exhausting as the moment of the end, whatever it may be, draws near. 27 April is divided into two entries. In the first, Duras states that she has become like Mme Bordes and can no longer get up, so much so that it is Mme Kats who does the housework for her. The story is told of the latter woman, who waited in vain for her daughter's return for six months, only to discover her death. The second entry takes on strongly emotional overtones. Duras experiences the

²⁹⁷ Ivi, p. 51.

²⁹⁸ Ibidem.

²⁹⁹ Ivi, p. 56.

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spasmodic waiting for the last hours in which it is possible for Robert to return and feels so overwhelmed that she experiences a kind of isolation from the rest of the world:

Rien. Le trou noir. Aucune lumière ne se fait. Je reconstitue la chaîne des jours, mais il y a un vide, un gouffre entre le moment où Philippe n'a pas entendu de coup de feu et la gare où personne n'a vu Robert L. Je me lève. Me Kats est partie chez son fils. Je me suis habillée, assise près du téléphone. D. arrive. Il exige que j'aie manger au restaurant avec lui. Le restaurant est plein. Les gens parlent de la fin de la guerre. Je n'ai pas faim. Tout le monde parle des atrocités allemandes. Je n'ai plus jamais faim. Je suis écœurée de ce que mangent les autres. Je veux mourir. Je suis coupée du reste du monde avec un rasoir, même de D. Le calcul infernal : si je n'ai pas de nouvelles ce soir, il est mort.³⁰⁰

Nothingness and the black hole of despair are written into the text as key elements in understanding the atmosphere in which Duras lives. Her reasoning and assumptions about Antelme's eventual return continue but find no conclusion. Meanwhile, life calls Duras back to her daily routine, like eating, but she is not hungry: it is a hunger that seems to have abandoned her forever. The paragraph concludes with an explication of Duras's isolation from the rest of the world: the image of the razor dividing her from the other men, even from D., is a strong symbol, of a clear and irreparable separation.

The date 28 April presents two entries. In the first, Duras speaks of the peace that is beginning to take hold on the streets of Paris and the life that comes with it, but she also writes of her annoyance at this new freedom because it does not concern her:

Ceux qui attendent la paix n'attendent pas, rien. Il y a de moins en moins de raisons de ne pas avoir de nouvelles. La paix apparaît déjà. C'est comme une nuit profonde qui viendrait, c'est aussi le commencement de l'oubli. La preuve en est là déjà : Paris est éclairé la nuit.³⁰¹

Once again, the stark separation emerges firmly between Duras, who still awaits her husband's return, and the people, who happily welcome the imminent end of the war. Paris lights up at night to signify a return of life and freedom, but for Duras this represents nothing more than the beginning of forgetfulness for what has happened. As if to remain anchored in the period of waiting, mourning and darkness that the war had engendered, Duras resents any sign of exultation.

Je suis sortie, la paix m'est apparue imminente. Je suis rentrée chez moi rapidement, poursuivie par la paix. J'ai entrevu qu'un avenir possible allait venir, qu'une terre étrangère allait émerger de ce chaos et que là personne

³⁰⁰ Ivi, p. 59.

³⁰¹ Ivi, p. 62.

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n'attendrait plus. Je n'ai de place nulle part ici, je ne suis pas ici, mais là-bas avec lui, dans cette zone inaccessible aux autres, inconnaissable aux autres, là où ça brûle et où on tue. Je suis suspendue à un fil, la dernière des probabilités, celle qui n'aura pas de place dans les journaux. La ville éclairée a perdu pour moi toute autre signification, que celle-ci : elle est signe de mort, signe de demain sans eux. Il n'y a plus rien d'actuel dans cette ville que pour nous qui attendons. Pour nous elle est celle qu'ils ne verront pas. Tout le monde s'impatiente de voir la paix tant tarder à venir.³⁰²

Thus, while the rest of the world rejoices at the impending peace, Duras is a subject in her own right, who has nothing to share with others. For the writer, peace is personified as someone who pursues her, but she does not want to be reached. Duras does not want a possible future without war and without waiting. Her own person is now constituted by the torment of waiting: who to be, then, in a country of peace where there is nothing left to wait for? If the context around her were to change, nothing would make sense in her current condition. Hence a great sense of bewilderment and alienation: Duras does not feel that she belongs in a festive Paris, where terror gives way to hope. The author writes that she does not belong to this place, but is anchored “là-bas”, in the black pit, together with Antelme: a zone inaccessible and unknowable to others, because it is the inner zone of pain experienced by those who wait, suspended by a thread, for the return of the loved ones. Here returns, even verbally, the feeling of suspension and of the last hope that continues to crystallise time for Duras. The illuminated city for the writer is not an emblem of victory and joy, but of death and pain, because it signals the real possibility of a future without those who died in the war. The contrast between Paris illuminated by the street lamps and Duras's waiting in the dark is such that for the latter, there is no longer anything current in this city: in a kind of new anachronism, the writer feels she belongs to another time, that of the war, and another place, that of occupied and sombre Paris.

The second page dated 28 April reports the news of Hitler's death and offers a reflection on the seven million Jews exterminated in the concentration camps: “On ne parle pas encore des juifs à Paris”³⁰³, Duras writes, but at the same time, in impudent and daring writing, details are given of the ways in which Jews were murdered, such as the strangulation of Jewish infants in which some women specialised.

Ce nouveau visage de la mort organisée, rationalisée, découvert en Allemagne déconcerte avant que d'indigner. On est étonné. Comment être encore Allemand ? On cherche des équivalences ailleurs, dans d'autres temps. Il n'y a rien. D'aucuns resteront éblouis, inguérissables. Une des plus grandes nations civilisées du mode, la capitale de la musique de tous les temps vient d'assassiner onze millions d'êtres humains à la façon méthodique, parfaite,

³⁰² Ibidem.

³⁰³ Ivi, p. 64.

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d'une industrie d'état. Le monde entier regarde la montagne, la masse de mort donnée par la créature de Dieu à son prochain.³⁰⁴

Right from the start, Duras finds herself pondering the nature of this genocide - organised, thought-out, lucidly planned and, for this very reason, indignant. There is no precedent in human history for such a crime and the writer wonders how to still be German after what happened. Germany, presented as the home of music and thus of one of the noblest arts, is as capable of beauty as it is of horror. The discovery of the banality of evil, as Hannah Arendt would say, is surprising and frightening: man is capable, at the same time, of creating music and death. The fact that it is precisely music that is presented as diametrically opposed, in this juxtaposition, to the ugliness of genocide, is significant. Music has always been an emblem of spirituality, of nobility of spirit, of beauty that transcends all language and all barriers. It is, evidently, at the antipodes of war, which instead brings division, hatred, death. The risk the writer immediately sees is that of blaming the German people, but she writes with great lucidity:

Si l'on fait un sort allemand à l'horreur nazie, et non pas un sort collectif, on réduira l'homme de Belsen aux dimensions du ressortissant régional. La seule réponse à faire à ce crime est d'en faire un crime de tous. De le partager. De même que l'idée d'égalité, de fraternité. Pour le supporter, pour en tolérer l'idée, partager le crime.³⁰⁵

The idea of sharing the crime is the only solution not to simplify and reduce what happened. The risk of pointing to the Germans as the only culprits would be to betray "l'homme concentrationnaire de Belsen"³⁰⁶. Sharing the crime in order to tolerate it is thus Duras's idea, which for the first time in the diary shows an extraordinary lucidity of thought.

Just after this reflection, the diary contains a typographical blank that signals a turning point: that of the news that Robert L. has been found alive. The blank is significant because it points out a clear separation from what has been experienced so far: the pain of waiting will give way to the certainty of life; the concern for Antelme's possible return will become a fight against death to ensure that his body recovers; Duras's delirious writing will regain lucidity of thought and become a crude reportage of the extremely precarious physical condition of a man returned from the concentration camp. The blank, the emblem of pause, suspension and silence in the literary text, marks a sharp caesura between waiting and return.

³⁰⁴ Ibidem.

³⁰⁵ Ivi, p. 65.

³⁰⁶ Ivi, p. 64.

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Je ne sais plus quel jour c'était, si c'était encore un jour d'avril, non c'était un jour de mai, un matin à onze heures le téléphone a sonné. Ça venait d'Allemagne, c'était François Morland. Il ne dit pas bonjour, il est presque brutal, clair comme toujours. « Écoutez-moi bien. Robert est vivant. Calmez-vous. Oui. Il est à Dachau. Écoutez encore de toutes vos forces. Robert est très fable, à un point que vous ne pouvez pas imaginer. Je dois vous le dire : c'est une question d'heures. Il peut vivre encore trois jours, mais pas plus. Il faut que D. et Beauchamp partent aujourd'hui même, ce matin même pour Dachau. [...] »³⁰⁷

After the blank, time is no longer defined. The sense of bewilderment and surprise is such that it is not circumscribed or specified in a date, as before. Duras claims not to know what day or what month it is, but remembers well the ringing of the telephone at 11am. Morland's call is not introduced by a greeting, but is almost 'brutal', that is, direct, without frills. The urgency of the news is such that it cannot be introduced by any other formulas of courtesy: Robert is alive. The recording of the phone call appears as if from the outside: everything Morland pronounces is transcribed, from which we also intuit Duras's excitement at this news as he tells her: "Calmez-vous". Listening requires a lot of strength, as the writer is just as exhausted as Robert, who is described as extremely weak. The immediate departure of D. and Beauchamp is required in order for them to take Antelme home before it is too late.

In the following lines it is made explicit that Robert is unrecognisable and some rather crude details begin to emerge, in a register of writing that will become less demure and more obscene: "Rodin et Morland avaient mis une heure avant de reconnaître Robert L. C'était Rodin qui finalement l'avait reconnu à cause de sa denture"³⁰⁸. Later, Robert is carried inside a sheet "comme on fait pour les morts"³⁰⁹ and is joined by D. and Beauchamp, who had travelled from Paris to retrieve him. The recovery by the two is experienced in the same way: "Ils l'ont pris. Et c'est après qu'ils ont dû le reconnaître"³¹⁰. They *had to* acknowledge it, as if it was an imposed, unwanted, forced action. The journey home is described as a real passion, the details of which are described with impressive shamelessness: Robert is dressed in his uniform so as not to arouse suspicion, but he has to be helped because he cannot stand; he has to be prevented from making the Nazi salute in front of the S. S.; he must be prevented from being given vaccinations because they would kill him in his present state; once out of the camp Robert has such a syncope that they think it is over; the journey is interrupted every half hour for Antelme's dysentery. Duras's writing is transparent and straightforward, forcing the reader to read atrocious and increasingly crude details.

³⁰⁷ Ivi, p. 65.

³⁰⁸ Ivi, p. 66.

³⁰⁹ Ibidem.

³¹⁰ Ibidem.

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Upon leaving the Dachau camp, the insistence of the text emphasises the need to talk Robert felt:

Dès qu'ils se sont éloignés de Dachau, Robert L. a parlé. Il a dit qu'il savait qu'il n'arriverait pas à Paris vivant. Alors il a commencé à raconter pour que ce soit dit avant sa mort. Robert L. n'a accusé personne, aucune race, aucun peuple, il a accusé l'homme.³¹¹

The physical distance from the place of horror and death causes Antelme's river of words to flow unbridled: the need to witness what happened is such that it gives him no respite. The need to speak contrasts strongly with the silence experienced so far: the telling of the unspeakable can be done, must be done, so that others will know. This is the first thought of Antelme, who accuses man, and not Germany, of this crime. The need to speak and to tell others about the experience of the concentration camps contrasts with the silence imposed by the Nazis on the prisoners and the silence of those who knew what was happening but could not speak about it. At the end of the war, the silence melts away and the urge to speak is such that it cannot be controlled or channelled. Indeed, again in the following paragraphs, Duras repeats Antelme's urgency to testify several times: "Il voulait que D. et Beauchamp me racontent après sa mort ce qu'il avait dit"³¹²; "Robert parlait et racontait toujours"³¹³; "Il racontait"³¹⁴; "Puis il a recommencé à parler"³¹⁵. Finally, the paragraph closes with D.'s phone call to Duras, who warns her that Antelme will be unrecognisable and that the view is worse than one might expect.

After another typographical blank, undated, the unexpected meeting between Duras and her husband finally takes place.

J'ai entendu des cris retenus dans l'escalier, un remue-ménage, un piétinement. Puis des claquements de portes et des cris. C'était ça. C'était eux qui revenaient d'Allemagne.³¹⁶

Duras is listening and the first recognition is through sounds: the noises made on the stairs, those of footsteps, those of open and closed doors and finally those of voices, screams and cries. Duras's certainty is such that recognition is immediate and leaves no room for doubt: "C'était ça. C'était eux qui revenaient d'Allemagne". It is peculiar that it is precisely the sounds that are the first

³¹¹ Ivi, p. 67.

³¹² Ibidem.

³¹³ Ibidem.

³¹⁴ Ivi, p. 68.

³¹⁵ Ibidem.

³¹⁶ Ibidem.

element of familiarity: the other's music, expressed in movements and voice, is the first indicator of his identity and allows his identification.

Duras's immediate and spontaneous reaction is to flee: “Je n’ai pas pu l’éviter. Je suis descendue pour me sauver dans la rue”³¹⁷. The break in the frozen time of waiting and the emotional upheaval at the idea of seeing again, after so long, her husband transfigured by the concentration camp experience are so important that they generate a desire to escape and to safeguard oneself, that they cause Duras to go down to throw herself into the street. At this point in the narrative, memories become hazy: “Je ne sais plus exactement. Il a dû me regarder et me reconnaître et sourire”³¹⁸. The three actions of looking, recognising and smiling are a climax of familiarity that the writer is psychologically unable to sustain, and her reaction is strong:

J’ai hurlé que non, que je ne voulais pas voir. Je suis repartie, j’ai remonté l’escalier. Je hurlais, de cela je me souviens. La guerre sortait dans des hurlements. Six années sans crier. Je me suis retrouvée chez des voisins. Ils me forçaient à boire du rhum, ils me le versaient dans la bouche. Dans les cris.³¹⁹

Duras cannot bear the sight of her husband, so she screams and runs away. The element of the scream, repeated no less than five times in these few lines, is significant and emblematic: on the one hand it is an expression of the pain finally released after weeks of exhausting waiting, on the other hand it is a confusing communication, through sound, of an overwhelming and irrepressible emotion that reveals as much joy as horror at seeing her deported husband again.

Subsequent recollections are faded and imprecise due to the excessive emotional load of the encounter, so much so that Duras uses formulas such as: “Je ne sais plus”³²⁰ or “On m’a dit après que”³²¹. However, the transparency of memory only returns in revealing the pain of the moment: “Je me souviens des sanglots partout dans la maison”³²². The noisy cry is still part of the list of sounds of which the writer retains a memory. It thus seems that the sound memory is the most significant element of the key moment that marks the caesura of this journal.

Confirming the importance of sounds, after another typographical blank we read:

Dans mon souvenir, à un moment donné, les bruits s'éteignent et je le vois. Immense. Devant moi. Je ne le reconnais pas. Il me regarde. Il sourit. Il se laisse regarder. Une fatigue surnaturelle se montre dans son sourire, celle d'être arrivé à vivre jusqu'à ce moment-ci. C'est à ce sourire que tout à coup je le reconnais, mais de très

³¹⁷ Ibidem.

³¹⁸ Ibidem.

³¹⁹ Ivi, pp. 68-69.

³²⁰ Ivi, p. 69.

³²¹ Ibidem.

³²² Ibidem.

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loin, comme si je le voyais au fond d'un tunnel. C'est un sourire de confusion. Il s'excuse d'en être là, réduit à ce déchet. Et puis le sourire s'évanouit. Et il redevient un inconnu. Mais la connaissance est là, que cet inconnu c'est lui, Robert L., dans sa totalité.³²³

The moment of the husband's actual recognition takes place in a kind of space-time bubble in which sounds die out and only silence remains. In an almost cinematic atmosphere, the silence marks the extreme suspension of all noise and unnecessary words. Silence provides the essential space for the meeting of the two gazes to take place and for the recognition not so much of the person but of the beloved to take place. It is in fact the smile, expressed with supernatural fatigue, that is the element through which Duras sees her husband beyond the destroyed body reduced to nothingness of the person in front of her. A distinction between Antelme's body and essence seems to emerge in this moving scene: through the smile, an element of familiarity and gladness, Duras sees the immensity of her husband's person, who allows himself to be looked at, as if it costs him effort to allow an external gaze to rest on what remains of him. The extinguishing of the smile also marks the conclusion of this silent bubble within which recognition takes place. Once the face fades back into the absence of expressivity, the man in front of Duras also returns to being a stranger, deprived of his identity. Yet, recognition has taken place and the writer reiterates that it is indeed he, Robert Antelme, who has returned.

The following pages, always rhythmically marked by rather frequent and never dated typographical blanks, are purely about Antelme's struggle with death once he returns home. His physical condition is indeed at the limit and Duras does not neglect to highlight the details.

Firstly, Antelme wishes to see home, but for this to happen “On l’avait soutenu”³²⁴. Not only does the body struggle to support itself, but also the face shows signs of weakness to the point of having to limit its expressiveness: “Ses joues se plissaient mais elles ne décollaient pas des mâchoires, c’était dans ses yeux qu’on avait vu son sourire”³²⁵. It is, however, the moment set in the kitchen that evidently changes the mood of those present: the kitchen, a place intended for food and its consumption, is lived by Antelme as a painful experience. Robert is not yet able to eat independently, because his body must slowly get used to taking in substances again, on pain of death. Antelme's first words in the diary are questions about food: “Je peux en manger?” and “Alors je ne peux pas en manger?”³²⁶. The inability to eat reminds him of the concentration camp and his attitude changes completely:

³²³ Ibidem.

³²⁴ Ibidem.

³²⁵ Ivi, pp. 69-70.

³²⁶ Ivi, p. 70.

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Il avait cessé de poser des questions sur ce qui s'était passé pendant son absence. Il avait cessé de nous voir. Son visage s'était recouvert d'une douleur intense et muette parce que la nourriture lui était encore refusée, que ça continuait comme au camp de concentration. Et comme au camp, il avait accepté en silence. Il n'avait pas vu qu'on pleurait. Il n'avait pas vu non plus qu'on pouvait à peine le regarder, à peine lui répondre.³²⁷

Having received an initial denial about the possibility of eating, Robert seems to become disinterested in everything else. His attention, as in the concentration camps, is solely focused on survival and basic needs. Once the possibility of eating has been eliminated, Antelme ceases to ask questions and does not seem to notice what is around him: he does not even notice that his wife and friends can hardly look at him and that they weep for him. Antelme's grief is described as mute, as in concentration camps. At the same time, Antelme's acceptance of the rejection of his loved ones is also described as silent. The habit of silence and passive consent is an emblematic trait of concentration camps, where no opposing words or self-expression were allowed. Silence therefore returns here as habit and trauma.

Here opens a succession of pages all dedicated to Antelme's body care. The following pages are characterised by a shamelessness of language and content that allows Duras to say the unspeakable.

First of all, the arrival of the doctor is narrated, who initially does not understand why he has been called because he does not realise, at first glance, that Antelme is still alive. In an echo of Mary Shelley, in *Frankenstein*, when she refers to the monster as a “lifeless thing”, Duras also calls her husband “la forme”³²⁸. This formula is repeated four times in a very few lines and emphasises the almost total lifelessness of Antelme's body, which is monstrous, unrecognisable, and disgusting to look at because of its thinness. Thereafter, every detail of Robert L.'s slow and gruelling recovery is described: the fever, the accelerated heartbeat, the difficulty in eating without dying. Death is personified and takes on the character of the enemy to fight against:

La lutte a commencé très vite avec la mort. Il fallait y aller doux avec elle, avec délicatesse, tact, doigté. Elle le cernait de tous les côtés. Mais tout de même il y avait encore un moyen de l'atteindre lui, ce n'était pas grand, cette ouverture par où communiquer avec lui mais la vie était quand même en lui, à peine une écharde, mais une écharde quand même. La mort montait à l'assaut. 39,5 le premier jour. Puis 40. Puis 41. La mort s'essouffait. 41 : le cœur vibrait comme une corde de violon. 41, toujours, mais il vibre. Le cœur, pensions-nous, le cœur va s'arrêter. Toujours 41. La mort, à coups de boutoir, frappe, mais le cœur est sourd. Ce n'est pas possible, le cœur va s'arrêter. Non.³²⁹

³²⁷ Ibidem.

³²⁸ Ibidem.

³²⁹ Ivi, pp. 72-73.

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Death seems to surround Antelme's body and crave it for itself, and Duras describes the attempt to wrest him from it as an action to be done slowly, gently and carefully. The rhythm of Antelme's salvation, slow due to the physical needs of a mangled body that would not withstand faster cures, contrasts strongly with the rhythm of Duras's writing, which is full of dots and extremely short, sometimes even nominal sentences. The writing is punctuated by numbers that signal Antelme's feverishness coming and going. Once again, in this cadenced writing, sounds return and in particular that of the heartbeat, likened to a vibrating violin.

The following pages are among the most scabrous and audacious, as obscene details are recounted that are difficult to read even for the reader, who is confronted with the unspeakable that is said and a breaking of silence that no longer maintains any decency.

Il devait peser entre trente-sept et trente-huit kilos : los, la peau, le foie, les intestins, la cervelle, le poumon, tout compris : trente-huit kilos répartis sur un corps d'un mètre soixante-dix-huit. On le posait sur le seau hygiénique sur le bord duquel on disposait un petit cousin : là où les articulations jouaient à nu sous la peau, la peau était à vif. [...]

Une fois assis sur son seau, il faisait d'un seul coup, dans un glou-glou énorme, inattendu, démesuré. Ce que se retenait de faire le cœur, l'anus ne pouvait pas le retenir, il lâchait son contenu. Tout, ou presque, lâchait son contenu, même les doigts qui ne retenaient plus les ongles, qui les lâchaient à leur tour.³³⁰

Antelme's skeletal body is described in detail in all its horror and thinness. The insistence initially is on malnutrition and the decay of the physique, which is also told through the numbers of weight and height, as if to provide an objective parameter to rely on. The list of organs seems to want to rub in the reader's face the absurdity and at the same time the truth of what has been said: in those thirty-seven kilos there is Antelme in his whole. Later, no details are spared about the most intimate moments such as going to the bathroom. Antelme's body no longer retains anything, not even fingernails, and Duras's writing spares us nothing, even describing the excrement that leaks from her husband's sick body.

Later, the writer returns to her insistence on thinness:

Le cœur, lui, continuait à retenir son contenu. Le cœur. Et la tête. Hagarde, mais sublime, seule, elle sortait de ce charnier, elle émergeait, se souvenait, racontait, reconnaissait, réclamait. Parlait. Parlait. La tête tenait au corps par le cou comme d'habitude les têtes tiennent, mais ce cou était tellement réduit - on en faisait le tour d'une seule main - tellement desséché qu'on se demandait comment la vie y passait, une cuiller à café de bouillie y passait à grand-peine et le bouchait. Au commencement le cou faisait un angle droit avec l'épaule. En haut, le cou pénétrait

³³⁰ Ivi, pp. 72-73.

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à l'intérieur du squelette, il collait en haut des mâchoires, s'enroulait autour des ligaments comme un lierre. Au travers on voyait se dessiner les vertèbres, les carotides, les nerfs, le pharynx et passer le sang : la peau était devenue du papier à cigarettes.³³¹

Antelme's body is described as skeletal; Duras claims that the skin is almost invisible and allows the vertebrae and innards to be seen with the naked eye. Robert L.'s bony frame draws geometric lines through which his wife traces the thinness of his physique with her eyes and pen. Duras dwells in particular on the head, which seems to be the largest part of the body and which, like an infant, is disproportionate to the rest. The head is also attributed the faculty of thought and language and it is pointed out that Antelme spoke. In an ascending climax, the writer describes that her husband remembered, recounted, recognised, claimed and spoke. The verb “parlait” is repeated twice in succession, interspersed with a full stop, again emphasising Antelme's need and urgency to testify, as opposed to the previous silence in the concentration camps and the silence associated with the denial of food.

Thereafter, the focus of the journal brings the reader back to the impudent details of a few lines earlier:

Il faisait donc cette chose gluante vert sombre qui bouillonnait, merde que personne n'avait encore vue. Lorsqu'il l'avait faite on le recouchait, il était anéanti, les yeux mi-clos, longtemps.

Pendant dix-sept jours, l'aspect de cette merde resta le même. Elle était inhumaine. Elle le séparait de nous plus que la fièvre, plus que la maigreur, les doigts désonglés, les traces de coups des S.S. On lui donnait de la bouillie jaune d'or, bouillie pour nourrisson et elle ressortait de lui vert sombre comme de la vase de marécage. Le seau hygiénique fermé on entendait les bulles lorsqu'elles crevaient à la surface. Elle aurait pu rappeler - glaireuse et gluante - un gros crachat. Dès qu'elle sortait, la chambre s'emplissait d'une odeur qui n'était pas celle de la putréfaction, du cadavre - y avait-il d'ailleurs encore dans son corps matière à cadavre - mais plutôt celle d'un humus végétal, l'odeur des feuilles mortes, celle des sous-bois trop épais. C'était là en effet une odeur sombre, épaisse comme le reflet de cette nuit épaisse de laquelle il émergeait et que nous ne connaîtrions jamais.³³²

Not only are the images strong and shameless, but also Duras's lexicon is indiscreet and becomes as crude as what is being narrated, just think of the use of the word “merde” several times. Faeces are described in minute detail in their appearance and smell, on which a strong emphasis is placed as it is compared to that of the putrefaction of a corpse. The semantic field of death returns several times, reminding us that Antelme is poised between life and death. The indiscretion on excrement, defined as inhuman, is also what Duras needs to make a split between Antelme and the

³³¹ Ivi, p. 73.

³³² Ivi, pp. 73-74.

rest of human beings. Faeces, more than leanness or S.S. blows, distance him from the human realm, because they are so atrocious that one cannot categorise them: “Devant la chose inconnue on cherchait des explications”³³³. Duras and her companions cannot understand how Antelme could be reduced to that state and seek rational explanations, such as what he might have ingested. However, awareness of the impossibility of knowledge soon sets in: “Comment savoir ce que ce ventre contenait encore d’inconnu, de douleur?”³³⁴. Not only is it impossible to know what Antelme ate, but so is imagining what pain he physically endured. Thought comes to a stop where the unimaginable shows up and language becomes suspended, through a question mark that is not answered. In a way, the Nazi extermination and concentration camp remain unreal for Duras, as they are outside her frame of reference and outside direct knowledge.

For seventeen days, Duras claims that the same events are repeated identically and adds that she and her friends conceal from Antelme not only what comes out of his body, but also his own body: “Dix-sept jours nous cachons à ses propres yeux ce qui sort de lui de même que nous lui cachons ses propres jambes, ses pieds, son coprs, l’incroyable”³³⁵. The impressionability of what is seen by others is not sustainable, in her opinion, by a physique and mind as debilitated as those of a deportee. Hiding corresponds to omitting, to not saying, to concealing through images and words something abhorrent that one never gets used to, because it is impossible to get used to the monstrous: “On ne pouvait pas s’y habituer”³³⁶. Indeed, Duras writes that: “Lorsque les gens entraient dans la chambre et qu’ils voyaient cette forme sous les draps, ils ne pouvaient pas en supporter la vue, ils détournaient les yeux. Beaucoup sortaient et ne revenaient plus”³³⁷. It is impossible for ordinary people to bear the sight of Antelme's dying body, and the very fact that Duras writes it is an explication of this unspeakability and unimaginability of the concentration camp experience. In Duras's obscene and shameless writing, she manages to say the silent, the unspeakable, the monstrous, that which sight and the human cannot tolerate. The writing of this journal is a constant challenge to silence: first to Duras's madness, now to the obscenity of the body approaching death.

After seventeen days, a number that is repeated over and over again in the text to emphasise the duration of Antelme's pain and the precision of the testimony, Duras writes: “la mort se fatigue”³³⁸. Once again, through the rhetorical figure of personification, death is presented as an enemy against whom Robert L. is winning. In the following lines, in fact, through the description of the above-mentioned elements, Duras writes that the appearance of Antelme and his ejections is

³³³ Ivi, p. 74.

³³⁴ Ibidem.

³³⁵ Ibidem.

³³⁶ Ivi, p. 75.

³³⁷ Ibidem.

³³⁸ Ibidem.

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becoming human again: “elle a une odeur plus humaine, une odeur humaine”³³⁹. Robert L. is described as a baby in swaddling clothes, who needs to rest on something soft for support:

Il est couché sur ses neuf cousins, un pour la tête, deux pour les avant-bras, deux pour les bras, deux pour les mains, deux pour les pieds ; car tout ça ne pouvait plus supporter son propre poids, il fallait engloutir ce poids dans du duvet, l'immobiliser. Et une fois, un matin, la fièvre sort de lui. La fièvre revient mais retombe. Elle revient encore, un peu plus basse et retombe encore. Et puis un matin il dit : « J'ai faim. »³⁴⁰

The meticulous and detailed depiction of Antelme's state spares the reader no sorrowful images, who is confronted with pages of fatigue and pain revealed without restraint. Duras's sentence structure is very short and simple, cadenced by many points. The syntax is elementary and paratactic. Antelme's body is reduced to a bundle surrounded by pillows that contain and shape it. The progress of the fever is followed step by step by the writer's pen, which records its every high and low. Finally, what seems to definitively delineate the improvement in Robert L.'s health is the declaration of the return of his appetite, which had disappeared with the fever. The journal then continues with the doctor's detailed instructions, almost as if the diary had turned into a report. Particular emphasis is placed on Antelme's hunger, which looms up in an almost bestial attitude from this point of view:

Sa faim a appelé sa faim. Elle est devenue de plus en plus grande, insatiable.

Elle a pris des proportions effrayantes.

On ne le servait pas. On lui donnait directement les plats devant lui et on le laissait et il mangeait. Il fonctionnait.

Il faisait ce qu'il fallait pour vivre. Il mangeait. C'était une occupation qui prenait tout son temps. Il attendait la nourriture pendant des heures. Il avalait sans savoir quoi. Puis on éloignait la nourriture et il attendait qu'elle revienne.³⁴¹

Hunger is described as insatiable and terrifying: it too has monstrous connotations. Antelme has no other concern than that of eating, reduced to an animalistic state of seeking the satisfaction of basic needs. The very act of eating is depicted as swallowing: the urge to fill the inner emptiness, physical and psychological, causes him to swallow anything, regardless of taste. The days themselves seem to be cadenced by the rhythm of meals: Antelme's only expectation is that of food.

³³⁹ Ibidem.

³⁴⁰ Ibidem.

³⁴¹ Ivi, p. 76.

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Il a disparu, la faim est à sa place. Le vide donc est à sa place. Il donne au gouffre, il remplit ce qui était vide, les entrailles décharnées. C'est ce qu'il fait. Il obéit, il sert, il fournit à une fonction mystérieuse. Comment sait-il pour la faim ? Comment perçoit-il que c'est cela qu'il faut ? Il le sait d'un savoir sans équivalence aucune.³⁴²

The obsession with food is such that Antelme himself disappears: his identity is replaced by hunger, a bit like Duras and waiting. Hunger takes on the connotations of emptiness, an inner emptiness that is not only the physical space of a stomach that has been starving for too long, but it is a psychological emptiness of one who is severely lacking in care, because he has experienced an unprecedented and hitherto unknown trauma. In fact, Duras defines her husband's attitude towards hunger as “mystérieuse”, as it is unknowable to those who have not gone through the same experience. The questions that follow in the paragraph are questions Duras asks herself about Robert L.: a space of unknowability seems to loom between the two because nothing can bridge the abyss created by living through an almost supernatural experience. The writer cannot understand the hunger of a deportation survivor because she did not experience it first-hand. The question marks once again remain unanswered, but this time the impossibility of knowledge is made explicit in the text through the phrase: “Il le sait d'un savoir sans équivalence aucune”. There is nothing equivalent, no yardstick of comparison, no measure that can help to detect and understand the state of mind of one who has experienced such trauma.

The animal-like state to which the deportee is prone is reiterated in the description of the act of eating: “il suce l'os, les yeux baissés, attentif seulement à ne laisser aucune parcelle de viande. [...] Sans lever les yeux”³⁴³. Antelme's only focus of attention is on food: he waits for nothing else and sees nothing else. As he eats, his eyes are downcast, greedy to consume what he has long been deprived of. The sucking of the meat bone without wasting any edible shred is another element of excess that Duras emphasises. At the same time, the writer continues to record the physical state of Robert, whose “jambes flottent”³⁴⁴ in his trousers and of whom she says “on voit à travers ses mains”³⁴⁵. Antelme's body is transparent, without substance, ephemeral and almost ghostly.

Quand il mange on le laisse seul dans la pièce. [...] On le laisse seul devant la nourriture. On évite de parler dans les pièces à côté. On marche sur la pointe des pieds. On le regarde de loin. Il fonctionne. Il n'a pas de préférence marquée pour les plats. De moins en moins de préférence. Il avale comme un gouffre. Quand les plats n'arrivent pas assez vite il sanglote et il dit qu'on ne le comprend pas.

³⁴² Ivi, p. 77.

³⁴³ Ibidem.

³⁴⁴ Ibidem.

³⁴⁵ Ibidem.

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Hier après-midi il est allé voler du pain dans le frigidaire. Il vole. On lui dit de faire attention, de ne pas trop manger. Alors il pleure.³⁴⁶

The relationship with food, strongly linked to affectivity, is consummated in a new intimacy for Antelme. He is left alone, in an almost sacred atmosphere, to eat his meals. The others watch him from afar, do not speak in the next room and tiptoe about. The meal is eaten in the silence of both Antelme and his companions: no one dares make a noise, as if a sacred rite were being celebrated.

The inability of his wife and friends to understand this new relationship with hunger is also emphasised: Antelme cries, sobs, cannot tolerate waiting for food nor being told, albeit for his own good, not to eat too much. The gesture of stealing into his own home is emblematic of the problematic nature with which this relationship comes back into being. Antelme is like a child, being scolded for excesses and stealing to claim what is his own: the trauma of imprisonment has transformed him into an instinctual being that has nothing to do with adulthood. It is clear that Robert L. is no longer the person he was before deportation. His relationship with Duras is also destined to change. She herself, realising this early on, writes: “Il ne me voyait pas. Il m’avait oubliée”³⁴⁷.

In the following paragraphs, as “les forces reviennent”³⁴⁸, the focus returns to the writer and her emotional reactions to the sight of her husband transfigured by the concentration camp experience. Indeed, the first-person singular returns, but it is always laced with her husband's state, in a symbiosis of bodies that continues even after the deportation ceases.

Moi aussi, je recommence à manger, je recommence à dormir. Je reprends du poids. Nous allons vivre. Comme lui pendant dix-sept jours je ne peux pas manger. Comme lui pendant dix-sept jours je n'ai pas dormi, du moins je crois n'avoir pas dormi. En fait je dors deux à trois heures par jour. Je m'endors partout. Je me réveille dans l'épouvante, c'est abominable, chaque fois je crois qu'il est mort pendant mon sommeil. J'ai toujours cette petite fièvre nocturne. Le docteur qui vient pour lui s'inquiète aussi pour moi. Il ordonne des piqûres. L'aiguille se casse dans le muscle de ma cuisse, mes muscles sont comme tétanisés. L'infirmière ne veut plus me faire de piqûres. Le manque de sommeil provoque des troubles de vision. Je m'accroche aux meubles pour marcher, le sol penche devant moi et j'ai peur de glisser [...] Je me sens très près de la mort que j'ai souhaitée.³⁴⁹

Together with Antelme, Duras also returns to eating and sleeping. It seems that the two bodies heal hand in hand, so much so that it is through the first person plural that the writer describes the

³⁴⁶ Ivi, pp. 77-78.

³⁴⁷ Ivi, p. 78.

³⁴⁸ Ibidem.

³⁴⁹ Ivi, pp. 78-79.

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interdependence between her and her husband: “Nous allons vivre”. Again, through “comme lui”, repeated twice, Duras emphasises the equality of actions and reactions experienced by the two bodies, which experience an almost total harmony. Yet the difference lies in the trauma actually experienced: Antelme experiences anguish relating to food; Duras experiences anguish relating to the nightmare of her husband's death. Not even in sleep can the woman find rest, quite the contrary. The trauma experienced while waiting for Robert L. returns forcefully in dreams, to the point that Duras speaks of a night fever that causes her visions. This affects her physical state and the indolence of her muscles, for which treatment by the same doctor is necessary. Duras's physical state appears to be as debilitated as Antelme's, minus the thinness, so much so that she states that she feels close to the death she had invoked so much. This closeness to death is undoubtedly the essential trait that unites the two: for one, it is a death of the body; for the other, it is a death of the soul.

Mon identité s'est déplacée. Je suis seulement celle qui a peur quand elle se réveille. Celle qui veut à sa place, pour lui. Ma personne est là dans ce désir, et ce désir, même quand Robert L. est au plus mal, il est inexprimablement fort parce que Robert L. est encore en vie. Quand j'ai perdu mon petit frère et mon petit enfant, j'avais perdu aussi la douleur, elle était pour ainsi dire sans objet, elle se bâtissait sur le passé. Ici l'espoir est entier, la douleur est implantée dans l'espoir.³⁵⁰

If before there was waiting, now Duras's identity is replaced by fear. The trauma of the terror of her husband's death is evident and remains during the days and nights following his return. The desire to take his place accompanies her even though Robert L. is still alive and safe at home. The two identities of husband and wife are overwhelmed by each other's traumas and it seems that Duras and Antelme are uniquely defined by these experiences: we know nothing else about them and their personal characteristics. The experience of trauma is all-consuming and obliterates the personalities of the two. The man lives in an animalistic state; the woman is in constant terror in a state bordering on madness.

For the first time in the text, Duras also ventures a comparison with other griefs related to loss: that of her brother and that of her son. With the loss of these two loved ones, the writer also claims to have lost her grief, because there is nothing worse than what she has already experienced. However, if that was an objectless, constant grief in which she lived immersed, this is a new grief, rooted in hope.

The text proceeds with typographical blanks punctuated by the anaphora: “Les forces reviennent”³⁵¹. We learn that Antelme's 24-year-old sister has died in the concentration camps and

³⁵⁰ Ivi, p. 79.

³⁵¹ Ibidem.

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that for a month this news is hidden from him for fear that he will not be able to bear it. The verb “caché”³⁵² returns, as do the omissions and silences. Yet, Antelme seems to read in the silence of his loved ones and somehow hears that silence and understands:

Il a dit : « Vous me cachez la mort de Marie-Louise. » Jusqu'au jour on est restés ensemble dans la chambre, sans parler d'elle, sans parler. J'ai vomi. Je crois qu'on a tous vomi. Lui répétait les mots : « Vingt-quatre ans », assis sur le lit, les mains sur sa canne, ne pleurait pas.³⁵³

Death is unspoken, unplanned, unuttered. It is simply known. The only reaction is that of vomiting, i.e. again a bodily expulsion of what one can no longer retain. In the silence of this death, Duras also emphasises twice that they remained together “sans parler d'elle, sans parler”. There are no possible words for the death of a young woman in the concentration camp and only silence remains: a silence that is nevertheless made explicit by Duras, as usual, and written into the text.

The next paragraph, begun with the usual anaphora, as if to justify what is about to be communicated, sees the delivery to Antelme of yet more sad news:

Un autre jour je lui ai dit qu'il nous fallait divorcer, que je voulais un enfant de D., que c'était à cause du nom que cet enfant porterait. Il m'a demandé s'il était possible qu'un jour on se retrouve. J'ai dit que non, que je n'avais pas changé d'avis depuis deux ans, depuis que j'avais rencontré D. Je lui ai dit que même si D. n'existait pas, je n'aurais pas vécu de nouveau avec lui. Il ne m'a pas demandé les raisons que j'avais de partir, je ne les lui ai pas données.³⁵⁴

Duras wants a divorce from Antelme. This, at first glance, appears to be in stark contrast to the spasmodic waiting that has been witnessed so far and the willingness to surrender her own life in place of her husband's. However, on closer inspection, the separation is linked to the irreparability of the break in the bond due to the concentration camp experience, which has indelibly marked the incommunicability between the two. The relationship now no longer exists because the people who got married are different from what they have become now. The very name of Antelme, which would hypothetically be passed on to a son of the couple, is unbearable for Duras, because it would be marked by the father's experience right down to the name, the first emblem of the subject's identity. Not only is the will to divorce communicated, but also the will to build a family with D., Robert L.'s best friend. Yet, this has little resonance in the text. Rather, Duras emphasises how this communication is again followed by silence: Robert does not ask for the reasons for Marguerite's

³⁵² Ibidem.

³⁵³ Ibidem.

³⁵⁴ Ivi, p. 80.

departure, and Marguerite does not provide them. The dialogue is almost superfluous: all motivation is omitted and only silence remains.

The following two paragraphs narrate episodes that are not defined in time, but only introduced by: “Une fois”³⁵⁵ and “Une autre fois”³⁵⁶. The time after the wait is indefinite; it is a single lapse of months and years that flow by without indication. The two episodes narrated are both about Antelme's emotion of anger and at the same time his silent attitude, his inability to speak.

In the first, set in August 1945 in Saint-Jorioz, Duras, D. and Robert L. learn together about Hiroshima. Antelme's reaction is furious: “On dirait qu’il veut frapper, qu’il est aveuglé par une colère par laquelle il doit passer avant de pouvoir revivre”³⁵⁷. At the same time, however, it is said of Robert L. that “il ne dit rien de ce qu’il pense. Il est dissimulé. Il est sombre”³⁵⁸.

In the second episode, Antelme finds himself at the Flore surrounded by some guys who want to greet him, but again he reacts with furious anger: “Et c’est à ce moment-là que je le revois, il crie, il martèle le sol avec sa canne. J’ai peur qu’il casse les vitres”³⁵⁹. Again, Duras also adds: “et puis je le vois s’asseoir et se taire longtemps”³⁶⁰.

In these two episodes, anger and silence merge together: anger at what Antelme has experienced boils up inside him like a volcano, but at the same time Robert L. has no words to hand over to others in order to get rid of these atrocious feelings. His reactions are uncontrolled and language fails to express the pain of trauma and fury at the injustice suffered. The incomprehension opens up between Antelme and the rest of the world like an uninhabitable and unbridgeable void, separating him from everyone and leaving him alone.

The last episode narrated in the journal is the one set in the summer of 1946 on an Italian beach. The journal thus seems to close according to a circular pattern in which the beach glimpsed at the beginning, during Duras's hallucinogenic visions of waiting, finally appears. This cyclical movement, however, does not end as the reader would have expected, namely with the hoped-for reunion between Antelme and Duras. Antelme is certainly alive, yet the separation between the two continues. Robert and Marguerite are no longer a couple, they are no longer married and their life together has ended. The reader never sees a happy picture of the two characters reunited. Closeness during the war is impossible for external reasons; closeness after the war is impossible because of the gulf between the two. The happy ending does not happen. However, the maritime setting imparts a rare sweetness to the last pages of this diary. Duras describes smells, sounds, images associated with

³⁵⁵ Ibidem.

³⁵⁶ Ivi, p. 81.

³⁵⁷ Ivi, pp. 80-81.

³⁵⁸ Ivi, p. 80.

³⁵⁹ Ivi, p. 81.

³⁶⁰ Ibidem.

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the sea, the wind, the sun and the beach and we find some relief after so many pages of agony. Robert L.'s slow movements³⁶¹ and above all his silence are highlighted:

Quelquefois il reste de longs moments sans parler, le regard au sol.³⁶²

Il ne parle jamais d'elle, il ne prononce jamais son nom.³⁶³

Il a écrit un livre sur ce qu'il croit avoir vécu en Allemagne : *L'Espèce humaine*. Une fois ce livre écrit, fait, édité, il n'a plus parlé des camps de concentration allemands. Il ne prononce jamais ces mots. Jamais plus. Jamais plus non plus le titre du livre.³⁶⁴

On entend toujours les joueurs. Robert L. lui, on ne l'entend toujours pas. C'est dans ce silence-là que la guerre est encore présente, qu'elle sourd à travers le sable, le vent.³⁶⁵

These short portraits of Antelme depict him as a tired, fatigued, serious, graceful, slow and above all silent man. Robert L.'s silence is linked to various circumstances. In the first quote, we see silence as a general condition of his new existence. His gaze is turned elsewhere, as is his thought. Antelme appears to be a man absent from the present, still immersed in a past too painful to leave behind and too traumatic to be told. In the second quotation, the silence is related to the death of his sister, about which Antelme is still in despair and disbelief and cannot get used to the idea. In the third quotation, silence is linked to the channel of orality: while in writing Antelme has recounted everything he believes he experienced, orally he does not speak of what happened and never utters words related to the concentration camp experience. Silence, in this case, is almost a physical effort to make sounds related to that dreadful memory: the trauma, which dissolves in the word, is only referable through writing. In the fourth and final quotation, Antelme's silence encapsulates the global experience of the war, which although over still makes itself felt, precisely in the silence, in the absence of a word capable of recounting it. Silence is therefore not, in this journal, a simple acceptance of the unspeakable: this diary writes silence, says it, explicates it, recounts it, graphically inserts it into the text through typographic blanks, ellipses and gaps. The diary speaks of pain to the limits of expressiveness, it is situated on the borders of sanity and madness and on the boundary between life and death.

³⁶¹ Cf. "Elle a l'impression qu'il se fatigue vite, elle le remarque surtout quand il marche, quand il nage, à cette lenteur qu'il a, si douloureuse". Ivi, p. 84.

³⁶² Ivi, p. 81.

³⁶³ Ivi, p. 82.

³⁶⁴ Ibidem.

³⁶⁵ Ivi, p. 83.

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The last issue worth dwelling on relates, once again, to the writer herself. In this final episode, the entire tension experienced during this diary is dissolved: “Dans cette lumière qui accompagne le vent, l'idée de sa mort s'arrête”³⁶⁶. The obsessive thought of Antelme's death that accompanies us from the very first lines of the journal finally ceases: in the joyful, peaceful and idyllic setting of the beach, the thought finds peace and the obsession stops. Duras seems to melt away, along with the waves of the sea, and return to life. For Antelme, however, several times in the text we find the words “pas encore”³⁶⁷. Robert still needs time to recover from the shock of the war and perhaps this will never happen. For Duras, on the other hand, the possibility of a new life seems to be looming, free from the trauma of death, released from the tension of waiting. And yet, a characteristic common to both is still there:

Dès ce nom, Robert L., je pleure. Je pleure encore. Je pleurerai toute ma vie. Ginetta s'excuse et se tait. Chaque jour elle croit que je pourrai parler de lui, et je ne peux pas encore. Mais ce jour-là je lui dis que je pensais pouvoir le faire un jour. Et que déjà j'avais écrit un peu sur ce retour. Que j'avais essayé de dire quelque chose de cet amour. Que c'était là, pendant son agonie que j'avais le mieux connu cet homme, Robert L., que j'avais perçu pour toujours ce qui le faisait lui, et lui seul, et rien ni personne d'autre au monde, que je parlais de la grâce particulière à Robert L. ici-bas, de celle qui lui était propre et qui le portait à travers les camps, l'intelligence, l'amour, la lecture, la politique, et tout l'indicible des jours, de cette grâce à lui particulière mais faite de la charge égale du désespoir de tous.³⁶⁸

Both Antelme and Duras are still unable to talk about their respective traumatic experiences. Robert still cannot pronounce the words 'concentration camp'; Marguerite still cannot hear the name 'Robert L.' without it causing her to weep. The writer claims that she cries, repeats this several times, and states that it will be a cry that will remain for the rest of her life, like an indelible wound. For Duras, too, the expression “pas encore” is finally used. Grief has times to be respected in order to be pronounced. At the time of writing the diary, this was not yet possible. Yet, as with Antelme, if in orality the tale is unspeakable, in writing the traumatic experience takes on the graphic form of the words we have read so far. Silence is broken on the written page. Duras also retains the hope of being able, in the future, to speak of what happened and of that love. In telling Ginetta that she is still unable to talk about it, in fact, Duras already writes what the subject of this missed speech will be: her love for Robert L., his particular grace, intelligence and all his qualities, and all the unspeakable of those days. In short, the missed speech with Ginetta is actually what the reader has read so far in the journal.

³⁶⁶ Ivi, p. 82.

³⁶⁷ Ivi, pp. 82, 83.

³⁶⁸ Ivi, p. 84.

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The final image of the journal is poetic, both in language and content, and resembles a *rêverie*. It stands in stark contrast to the atrocity of the stories described so far and the shamelessness of the language in certain passages of the journal and rather depicts the complicity of a glance between Robert L. and Marguerite:

Lui s'est levé et il a avancé vers la mer. Je suis venue près du bord. Je l'ai regardé. Il a vu que je le regardais. Il clignait des yeux derrière ses lunettes et il me souriait, il remuait la tête par petits coups, comme on fait pour se moquer. Je savais qu'il savait, qu'il savait qu'à chaque heure de chaque jour, je le pensais : « Il n'est pas mort au camp de concentration. »³⁶⁹

Perhaps it is precisely in this complicity of silent gazes, which they know understand each other, that all possible communication between the two lies: every experience, every trauma, every pain is finally spoken without words.

Now, in an attempt to emphasise the elements of trauma and silence in the analysis of the text, it is necessary to ask: what form does trauma take? How does silence take shape? What is said? What is unspoken? What is removed? What words are emphasised? In what way is it an impudent text? And what does the writing represent: catharsis or testimony? How are the themes of madness, violence and death treated? With what words and what silences is loss told? From which perspectives in the text do we have a memory of the concentration camps?

As already mentioned, the trauma for Duras is represented in the waiting, defined as “un combat sans nom”³⁷⁰. This is experienced and narrated as an immense pain, with not only psychological but also physical traits: Duras speaks of insomnia, lack of appetite, fever, hallucinations. In this spasmodic and almost delirious waiting, Duras's body lives in almost perfect harmony with that of her husband Antelme: she in Paris, devastated by waiting and doubt, he in the concentration camp, on the border between life and death. The main symptom experienced by Duras is that of annihilation, which provokes the reprobation of Dionys Mascolo, who visits Marguerite every day: “En aucun cas, on a le droit de s’abolir à ce point”³⁷¹; but also: “Vous êtes une malade. Vous êtes une folle. Regardez-vous, vous ne ressemblez plus à rien”³⁷². The nothingness achieved by Duras is representative of the annulment suffered by Antelme. Indeed, Duras writes: “Sa mort est en moi. Elle bat à mes tempes”³⁷³. Antelme's body has taken possession of that of his wife, who writes,

³⁶⁹ Ivi, p. 85.

³⁷⁰ Ivi, p. 48.

³⁷¹ Ivi, p. 33.

³⁷² Ibidem.

³⁷³ Ivi, p. 15.

in confirmation of this: “On n’existe plus à côté de cette attente”³⁷⁴. One exists, that is, only alongside a lack: the void left by Antelme is such that it leaves room only for that desperate waiting that is devouring Duras. The sense of annulment is such that, at the thought that Antelme is dead, Duras will affirm: “Plus de douleur. [...] Je n’existe plus. Alors du moment que je n’existe plus, pourquoi attendre Robert L. ?”³⁷⁵.

A coincidence thus emerges between grief, waiting and the identity of the writer: these three aspects are inextricably linked, and the conditions of existence of one determine those of the other. Pain is the expression of waiting, which in turn is the very essence of the writer, who lives only in function of her husband's return. It is no coincidence, in fact, that a few lines later the first person also disappears, replaced by the third: “Qu’est-ce qu’elle attend en vérité? Quelle autre attente attend-elle ? A quoi joue-t-elle depuis quinze jours qu’elle se monte la tête avec cette attente-là ? Que se passe-t-il dans cette chambre ? Qui est-elle ?”³⁷⁶. ‘Who is she?’ is the disturbing question that arises from this dispossession of the self, which no longer exists except in function of the other: in this case, the lack of the other.

Duras is not the only woman mentioned in the text to experience this wearing wait. The trauma thus does not only take on individual traits, but has a global character, affecting many women. Mme Bordes, Mme Kats, the wives of the deportees, the STO volunteers, the volunteers of the “personnel gaulliste”³⁷⁷ are all women immersed in this timeless wait, that of the return of the men. Beyond the female universe of the novel, the pain is shared with that of the French people severely tested by the war and, according to Duras, by the decisions of De Gaulle, who is condemned in the text for his political choices and because for him “le deuil du peuple ne se porte pas”³⁷⁸. Barely mentioned, it seems that Duras shares the idea that mourning can enable one to deal with grief and, ultimately, to make it stop. Collectively claimed, mourning then remains to be experienced individually, and this is much more difficult for Duras, who constantly isolates herself in relation to others and experiences a separation due to a very personal and particular suffering.

While waiting is the main theme of the journal, this is not the only form that trauma takes in these pages. The other trauma is, of course, that of the deportation experienced by Antelme, on which, however, we have an indirect glimpse, mediated by the writing of the one who is waiting. It is therefore a secondary trauma, not in terms of importance, in this journal, which among other things refers back to the reading of *L'Espèce humaine* in order to gain more direct access to the experience of deportation lived by Robert L.. *La douleur* thus profiles itself as a testimony of testimony.

³⁷⁴ Ivi, p. 46.

³⁷⁵ Ivi, p. 50.

³⁷⁶ Ibidem.

³⁷⁷ Ivi, p. 23.

³⁷⁸ Ivi, p. 46.

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Speaking of trauma, the article *Duras' War*³⁷⁹ by Lawrence D. Kritzman is interesting, which starts from the following premise:

The pain in question is a symptomatic manifestation of the threatening consciousness of the unresolved conflicts attributed to a split subject.³⁸⁰ The psychic grief produced by the monstrous and painful experiences of the war—be they "real" or imaginary—engenders a crisis of representation for the narrating subject. Although Duras' text apparently offers little resistance to remembering, the trauma associated with pain is only relieved in an extremely attenuated or unsentimental manner.³⁸¹

The psychic pain is that of a split subject, who can no longer recognise himself. The attenuated and unsentimental way of talking about the trauma is a form of decency that protects Duras's intimacy. At the same time, Kritzman speaks of an individual trauma, which although set in the collective context of the Second World War, deals with the subjectivity of a personal story: that of a person's waiting. Despite the imperative to ensure the testimonial value of historiographical discourse, set in a historical framework full of real dates, places and events, the story told is that of a writing subject who becomes the subject of history, a private story. Kritzman adds:

Far from being conceived of as a universal drama, the scene of witnessing in Duras' text declares the loss of its sense of communality; it tragically becomes a solitary endeavour provoked by the narcissistic separation from a lost object of desire.³⁸²

The narcissistic separation from the object of desire, represented by Antelme, is what causes the crisis of representation, which according to Shoshana Felman is integrally linked to the crisis of literature, because "literature becomes a witness, and perhaps the only witness, to the crisis within history which precisely cannot be articulated"³⁸³. As Kritzman argues, for Duras, literature reveals its inadequacy in representing history as it can only pronounce the unspeakable horrors of reality in an austere way and transcribe them in the form of fiction. As far as Duras is concerned, it is only through a writing full of ellipses, holes and indirect modes that the impact of pain on the narrating subject is revealed.

³⁷⁹ Lawrence D. Kritzman, "Duras' War", in *L'Esprit Créateur*, Spring 1993, Vol. 33, No. 1, *The Occupation in French Literature & Film, 1940-1992* (Spring 1993), pp. 63-73, Published by: The Johns Hopkins University Press, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26286598>.

³⁸⁰ Marguerite Duras, *La Maladie de la mort* (Paris: Minuit, 1982), in *Le Soleil Noir: Dépression et mélancolie* (Paris: Gallimard, 1987), Julia Kristeva discusses the unresolved mourning that characterizes Duras' work.

³⁸¹ Lawrence D. Kritzman, *Duras' War*, cit., p. 63.

³⁸² *Ibidem*.

³⁸³ Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, New York, Routledge, 1992, p. xviii.

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Duras' war memories examine from a variety of perspectives the act of testifying and witnessing history; they function as the origin and context of the psychic drama in which she is engaged. At its most basic level the Durassian narrative enacts a process of self-portraiture in which the writing subject bears witness to her distress through memories and fantasies, reactions to the historical context, that are not fully comprehensible. On another level, however, the narrative subject witnesses and records the testimonies of the other. In both cases testimony is implicated in the writing of history; its ethical imperative is subsumed by a moral crisis that is revealed by the text's failure to communicate absolute moral and ideological truths. The starkness of the text, the monotony and numbness associated with the Durassian rhythms of writing, attests to the collapse of a transparent form of historical witnessing.³⁸⁴

These two narrative levels are crucial to understanding the trauma experienced by Duras, which is not only the personal trauma of waiting bordering on madness, but also that of bearing, together with Antelme, the indirect burden of the concentration camp experience. On both levels there is a crisis of representation, which is evident in the impossibility of communicating everything and in the style of the text. Following Kritzman's article again, we read:

The representation of pain in the first story is excessive and yet strikingly simple. Victim of the suffocating presence of pain, the subject seeks asylum in the solitude of grief [...]. The imagined loss of Robert L. produces a series of symptoms ranging from numbness and silence to physiological disorders revealing a body invaded by the cancerous proliferation of lethargy and pain [...]. What translates the writer's pain is a certain compression of language attributed to a female subject whose obsessive and self-reflexive rhetoric reveal a feeling of emptiness resulting from the trauma of a hypothetical loss.³⁸⁵

The writing of pain in such a simple and immediate style reveals Duras's trauma, which takes on the characteristics of an illness that is as much psychic as physical. The symptoms are indicated in the text with the utmost elementarity and it is precisely the compression of language, which becomes essential, that denotes the psychological emptiness of the obsessed writer.

The hiatus, also marked by the typographic blank, that separates the obsessive waiting for Antelme from his return is characterised by a constant frenetic activity of research, with neurotic traits, that both keeps Duras busy but also exhausts her. The author constantly experiences anxiety and her thoughts are always in anticipation, as when she waits by the phone, draining all mental energy. Another element of trauma noted by Kritzman is the following:

³⁸⁴ Lawrence D. Kritzman, "Duras' War", cit., p. 64.

³⁸⁵ Ivi, p. 65.

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In order to lessen the sense of despair engendered by the acute consciousness of potential loss, Duras engages in a fantasy, a form of magical thinking, that isolates thinking from affect and denies the force of its emotional impact [...].

This hypothetical narrative allows the subject-in-pain to find temporary relief in the logic of repression. To be reasonable thus requires the transcendence of history's "reality principle" and implies replacing a painful idea (Robert L.'s failure to return) by its diametrical opposite.³⁸⁶

The magical thought referred to is the episode in which Duras imagines Antelme's return as something absolutely normal and not extraordinary. Clearly this hypothetical reasoning provides relief and at the same time follows the logic of the repression of reality, which is replaced, in thought, by a pleasant reverie. Yet, if this process seems to safeguard Duras's mental health, it is necessary to point out that the exact opposite also takes place, namely the self-conviction of Antelme's death, in a sort of simulated compulsion to repeat:

If the memorialist's defensive posture permits her to deny the extra ordinary nature of her husband's possible return, then the fantasy of his demise enables suffering to cease in order that death may be ultimately affirmed. After receiving an unsatisfactory response one evening from her lover D. (Dionys Mascolo) about Robert L.'s fate, gripped by fear, Duras flees her apartment in a quasi-paranoid state and engages in a hallucinatory reflection that permits her momentarily to circumvent the pain of his absence [...]

By enacting this fictional purgation of pain, the Durassian narrative uses the principle of repetition (realized by a series of probing questions) to establish as desire's goal the release of tension. The task of testimony in this case is to give first-hand knowledge of the relief that life will derive from the finality that is death. Desire is thus the wish for an end, the mastery of a painful historical reality to which the subject bears witness but is unable to control.³⁸⁷

The simulation of Antelme's death is mentally the moment of release from waiting and represents the end of a period of constant tension desired by Duras that is at the limit of endurance.

A further form assumed by the trauma in the narrative is that of separation anxiety which proceeds by anticipation:

Throughout the narrative separation anxiety dominates due to the anticipated mourning stemming from the absence of the desired object. Describing herself as severed from the bonds of love, Duras chronicles the solitude and existential anguish that she feels at the prospect of never being able to see her husband again [...]. Engaged in a struggle that seems doomed to failure, the desiring subject declares herself the target of a painful violence resulting from the terror of abandonment. "Je suis coupée du reste du monde avec un rasoir"³⁸⁸. The woman-in-

³⁸⁶ Ivi, pp. 65-66.

³⁸⁷ Ivi, p. 66.

³⁸⁸ Marguerite Duras, *La douleur*, cit., p. 59.

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love figured here is the victim of an imaginary mutilation, a process whereby her identity becomes increasingly reified and is constructed as the effect of male absence.³⁸⁹

The anxiety of separation, which has become the anguish of an existential loneliness, takes on the features of hallucination and vision when Duras writes incessantly about the “fossé noir”, and turns into an imagined mutilation when the writer feels cut off from the rest of the world through the image of a razor's clean cut.

Ultimately, we see in Duras a split subject:

In the pain of waiting Duras thus becomes a split subject; she is penetrated by an internal difference that gets outside herself. The act of testifying allows the writer to bear witness to a division within the self that functions as a dialogic means to impart a supplementary frame of reference. To be sure, the first-person narrator re-presents herself in the third person and in so doing momentarily brackets herself outside the "reality" of her story in order to ignore the time and space of history. The subject becomes her very own interlocutor whose magical thinking transforms speech into action that is destined for failure [...].

By depicting the otherness that constitutes her identity, the divided subject affirms the impotence of desire when reality confronts it with the pain of silence.³⁹⁰

The significant episode here is the one in which Duras confuses the first and third person singular by talking about herself and in so doing situates herself outside the painful situation she is experiencing by placing herself outside the story.

Christiane Kègle also takes an interest in psychic processes, pathological mourning and the melancholy experienced by Duras while waiting for Antelme in an article that lies on the borderline between trauma studies and literature. What seems relevant to this study is that it considers the theories of Freud, Lacan and Ricoeur for a psychological reading of *La douleur*. The starting point of this analysis is as follows:

La littérature testimoniale vise à réinstaurer le processus de subjectivité identitaire détruit par un appareil étatique de destruction massive. Ainsi la singularité du témoignage s'inscrit-elle dans une volonté indéfectible de contrer l'impensable de l'anéantissement totalitaire. Cependant, au-delà du « devoir de mémoire » le récit rend possible un véritable « travail de mémoire » au sens où le définit Paul Ricoeur dans « La mémoire exercée : us et abus » (2000). Le philosophe aborde alors la disposition réparatrice initiée sur le plan psychique par le travail de mémoire, au regard du deuil impossible de la Chose perdue et de la mélancolie selon Freud (1968).³⁹¹

³⁸⁹ Lawrence D. Kritzman, “Duras' War”, cit., pp. 66-67.

³⁹⁰ Ivi, p. 67.

³⁹¹ Christiane Kègle, “Écrire la douleur de la disparition. Marguerite Duras à propos de Robert Antelme”, in *Frontières*, Volume 27, numéro 1-2, 2015-2016, p. 1.

After this premise on testimonial literature and the psychic processes behind it, Kègle cites several examples of writers who have attempted to write the unspeakable and the inconceivable in the face of the ravages of wartime totalitarianism, but chooses to focus on Duras's text because it is emblematic of the timelessness and universality of psychological pain.

First and foremost, the emphasis is placed on the existential anguish linked to the experience of death in a concentration camp as experienced by a third person. This anguish translates, as already highlighted on several occasions, into physical discomfort: insomnia and lack of appetite. Related to this is how Duras's sometimes brutal writing invites the reader to question the psychic processes at work in the moment of mourning. Right from the choice of title, in fact, the writer places the accent on pain, on the intimate experience of suffering, which in this case has as its waiting horizon the abolition of the subject in the death of the other. Kègle points out how Freud had identified this mechanism, which he called “évidement du sujet” in his metapsychological explanation of melancholia related to mourning³⁹². Furthermore, while the diary is set in a historical temporality through references to recent events such as the bombing of Berlin and the advance of the Allies, it must also be emphasised that this information is provided without any contextualisation:

Il ne saurait s'agir pour elle d'établir une chronique des événements, mais, à partir d'annotations elliptiques et lacunaires, d'étayer son angoisse sur les événements tragiques de la fin de la Seconde Guerre et la libération des camps par les Alliés. Se rapprochant d'une écriture intime n'ayant pour seule énonciataire que la diariste elle-même, ces pages n'étaient pas du tout destinées à la publication. Elles furent d'ailleurs totalement effacées de la mémoire de Duras, ainsi qu'elle l'affirme dans une courte présentation liminaire tenant lieu de paratexte (Duras, 1985 p. 12). Fragmentaire, inachevé dans sa forme et son contenu, le journal intime fut retrouvé par elle à la faveur d'une commande de la revue *Sorcières*, en 1985.³⁹³

Kègle insists, in her analysis, on the ellipses, the gaps and the fragmentation of the text, which is indeed full of faults and does not report connections between events or thoughts. The only *fil rouge* of the narrative is Duras's torment. In fact, as far as reception is concerned, the painful psychological reality that emerges powerfully in these pages makes the reader assume the position of a “quasi témoinaire”³⁹⁴.

Kègle writes that, according to Waintrater, the clinic of *témoignage* allows the surviving witness to approach the trauma inscribed in him through the subjective enunciation of it. Borrowing the term “quasi témoinaire” from psychoanalysis, Kègle intends to emphasise the psychological

³⁹² Cf. Sigmund Freud, «Deuil et mélancolie», in *Métapsychologie*, Paris, Gallimard, 1968 (« Folio, essais, 30 ») [Imago, 1946].

³⁹³ Christiane Kègle, “Écrire la douleur de la disparition. Marguerite Duras à propos de Robert Antelme”, cit., p. 5.

³⁹⁴ Cf. Régine Waintrater. «Le pacte testimonial», in J.-F. Chiantaretto (dir.), *Témoignage et trauma. Implications psychanalytiques*, Paris, Dunod, 2004 (« Inconscient et culture »), p. 65-97.

work induced in the reader by reading testimonial accounts such as this. In Duras's work, one is often confronted with the psychological pain and the emptying of the subject that Freud spoke of and that Lambotte picks up on when he writes: “Or, tout se passe comme si le sujet mélancolique s'était trouvé dans un cadre vide à l'intérieur duquel il n'y avait pas d'image, mais simplement rien”³⁹⁵. As we attempted to point out earlier in the analysis of the text, Kègle also argues that it is precisely in this nothingness that Duras identified with while waiting for Antelme. However, echoing Lambotte, “[...] d'une part, le mélancolique sait qui il a perdu, mais non ce qu'il a perdu en l'objet disparu; d'autre part, il semble approcher la vérité de plus près que les autres, cette vérité qui fait qu'à son approche, on tombe nécessairement malade”³⁹⁶. To confirm this, Kristeva even writes “qu'il ne faut pas donner les livres de Duras aux lecteurs et lectrices fragiles”³⁹⁷ and about Duras's work she says: “*La douleur* déploie son microcosme par la réverbération des personnages. Ils s'articulent en doubles comme en des miroirs grossissant leurs mélancolies jusqu'à la violence et le délire”³⁹⁸.

In this illness and delirium, what makes the reader participate in the work of mourning is the extremely heavy emotional load poured onto the pages of *La douleur*: the absence of mediation on the part of the narrator generates an effect of proximity whereby the reader is constantly grappling with the ghost of the death of the other, whose image is that of the “fossé noir”. With regard to this, we again quote Kègle's article:

Dans « La douleur », la diariste, mise en position d'attente insoutenable, entièrement livrée à l'imagination délirante de la mort, se décrit comme une endeuillée sombrant dans la mélancolie ; elle apparaît au premier plan d'un tableau de figures statufiées par un Réel de plomb. Devant l'absence d'informations sur le sort de Robert L., après une attente interminable et fébrile, en proie au découragement, elle finit par se cloîtrer chez elle, refusant toute forme de nourriture. Littéralement avalée par le non-événement — le téléphone qui ne sonne pas, le nom de Robert L. qui n'apparaît pas sur les listes des déportés ayant commencé à arriver à l'hôtel Lutetia, la non-réception d'une lettre de lui —, ne supportant plus le silence implacable, elle finit par perdre la raison. Dès lors, tout son être s'abolit dans l'image d'un gisant, le corps mutilé de Robert L. imaginarisé à travers le fantasme d'un corps inerte au fond d'un fossé.³⁹⁹

Faced with Antelme's silence and lack of news, the diarist loses her mind and begins to fantasise about her beloved's death. In this regard, we take up Lambotte's theory that “il continue à vivre sous le coup d'une catastrophe dont il anticipe les effets de rupture, effets qui ressortissent à une

³⁹⁵ M. C. Lambotte, Article « Mélancolie » in Pierre Kaufmann, *L'apport freudien, éléments pour une encyclopédie de la psychanalyse*, Paris, Bordas, 2003, p. 230-235; p. 233.

³⁹⁶ Ivi, p. 232.

³⁹⁷ Julia Kristeva, *Soleil Noir: dépression et mélancolie*, Paris, Gallimard, 1987, p. 235.

³⁹⁸ Ivi, p. 263.

³⁹⁹ Christiane Kègle, “Écrire la douleur de la disparition. Marguerite Duras à propos de Robert Antelme”, cit., p. 8.

pathologie de l'abandon [... qui] consisterait pour le sujet à se préserver d'un retour possible de la catastrophe originelle en refusant tout investissement d'objet susceptible de le provoquer"⁴⁰⁰.

In addition to the anticipated thought of the other's death, Duras suffers, as described earlier, from a mimetic identification with Antelme whereby she portrays herself as a dying, debilitated subject, exiled from her own body and excluded even from her own mind. This recalls the narcissistic mirroring that Lacan speaks of in the construction, or deconstruction, of the subject⁴⁰¹. This narcissistic identification, however, makes the elaboration of mourning impossible according to Freud:

Pour Freud (1965, 1913)⁴⁰² le processus inconscient dans la mélancolie constitue un obstacle à un véritable travail de deuil, la douleur subjective atteignant un seuil critique, puisque toute médiatisation s'avère impossible en raison de la prévalence du signifiant troué. C'est pourquoi les civilisations accordent tant d'importance aux rituels de la mort (cf. Morin, 1970)⁴⁰³. Le travail de deuil, rendu possible par le processus de ritualisation, permettrait de traverser la mélancolie, cette maladie narcissique du sujet qui l'entraîne irrémédiablement vers un retour à l'état antérieur à la vie (pour reprendre les termes de Freud). Le philosophe et herméneute Paul Ricoeur (2000)⁴⁰⁴, relisant Freud, développe par ailleurs l'idée que le « travail de mémoire » s'avère essentiel à la traversée du trauma expérientiel : « Ainsi, le travail de mémoire, en luttant contre les résistances des pulsions de répétition (Freud), se conjugue au devoir de mémoire allant à l'encontre des stratégies d'oubli – ne pas voir, ne pas vouloir savoir. La rencontre des deux aspects modaux de la mémoire – devoir et travail – est susceptible de « faire émerger un souvenir actif, à la fois intelligible et supportable » (Ricoeur, 2002, p. 6) » (Kègle, 2012, p. 99).⁴⁰⁵

In conclusion, let us then see how Duras's trauma takes different forms throughout the narrative: identification with the object of desire, hallucination and vision, detachment and the perception of unreality, psychic disorder and the physical pain of an exhausted body, frenzied activity, existential anguish, neurotic obsession, separation anxiety, terror of abandonment, recourse to magical thinking, imaginary mutilation, paranoia, repetition compulsion, and splitting of the ego.

⁴⁰⁰M. C. Lambotte, « Mélancolie », cit., p. 234.

⁴⁰¹ Cf. Jacques Lacan, « Le stade du miroir comme formateur de la fonction du Je telle qu'elle nous est révélée dans l'expérience psychanalytique », dans *Écrits*, Paris, Gallimard (« Points »), tome 1, 1966, p. 89-97.

⁴⁰² Cf. Sigmund Freud, *Essais de psychanalyse*, Paris, Payot, « Petite bibliothèque Payot, 44 », 1965 [Article publié en 1913].

⁴⁰³ Cf. Edgar Morin, *L'homme et la mort*, Paris, Seuil, « Points », 1970.

⁴⁰⁴ Cf. Paul Ricoeur, « La mémoire exercée : us et abus », dans *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli*, Paris, Seuil, (« Points-Essais »), 2000, p. 67-111.

⁴⁰⁵ Christiane Kègle, *Écrire la douleur de la disparition. Marguerite Duras à propos de Robert Antelme*, cit., p. 9.

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Closely related to trauma, it is now interesting to analyse the silence that permeates these pages of Duras that tends at the same time to take refuge in it and to abolish it. As for the levels of silence in the text, these are multiple.

Firstly, there is the silence of Duras's spasmodic waiting, which communicates with the outside world only for what is essential, but whose flow of thoughts we constantly read as in a stream of consciousness characterised by continuous interruptions, through dots, pauses and gaps. It is up to the reader to fill in the unsaid and to connect the sentences, which often get lost only to find the connection again a few paragraphs later.

The second level of silence is the absence of news about Antelme: Duras experiences a real information vacuum dictated by the lack of words that say anything about her husband. No one has any relevant information for her because no one knows about him.

The third level of silence is Duras's non-communication of her feelings with D. or the outside world. Communication remains essential and plain, meagre, and there is never an opening up of her inner world or a sharing of the more emotional aspect, whose only guardian is the reader. There is a kind of discretion, which here takes on the features of tension and restraint, in revealing what one feels.

The fourth level of silence is the aesthetic, formal one: Duras's paratactic syntax is a form of *écriture maigre*, composed of short, dry, essential sentences without frills. The aesthetic level resonates strongly with the content level: themes and forms are reflected in a writing that aims at the essential, leaving the superfluous behind. The style is almost telegraphic, characteristic of less literary and more journalistic writing. Duras proceeds by subtraction, and this is also evident from the fact that certain passages, relating to religion, have been eliminated for publication: “Le principal [du] [...] travail pour la publication a été d’enlever, par exemple ce qui avait trait à la religion, à Dieu”⁴⁰⁶. Other cuts were those relating to anti-German sentiment⁴⁰⁷ and the radical critique of De Gaulle's policies, of which, however, several hints remain in the 1985 text, sweetened compared to the original.

Besides the syntax, typographic blanks also mark eloquent pauses in the narrative. In particular, significant are three blanks that divide the second part of *La douleur* into three paragraphs. The first is that which separates the moment of waiting from that of Robert L.'s return and rescue; the second is that of the episode of the survivor's treatment and the description of his sick body; the third is that relating to an Antelme who has defeated death, but who remains equally separated from Duras as the two divorce.

⁴⁰⁶ Marguerite Duras, « Entretien avec Marianne Alphant », *Libération*, 17 avril 1985.

⁴⁰⁷ Cf. Marguerite Duras, *Cahiers de la guerre et autres textes*, cit., p. 187.

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Still from an aesthetic point of view, the choice of truncating the names of the three main characters also seems interesting: Robert L., D., Madame L.. Clearly, Robert L. is the name of Robert Antelme, D. is that of Dionys Mascolo, and “the petite Marguerite”, also known as “Madame L. ”, is Marguerite Donnadiou, Antelme's wife, called Leroy for the Resistance, as well as her husband. The use of these truncated names is a poetic procedure by which on the one hand Duras assigns the person a function through naming, but on the other hand, by truncating them, she corrupts the identification with the real persons. The case of Antelme, among the three, is the most significant: the one Marguerite waits for in the diary is never only designated as 'Robert' or 'Antelme', but always as “Robert L.”, i.e. the one who is part of the Resistance. Given the importance of names in the celebration of those who died in war or deportation, it is significant that Duras never includes her husband's surname in the text: he, in fact “n’est pas mort au camp de concentration”⁴⁰⁸.

The fifth level is that of silence made explicit verbally with the word “silence”. This occurs at several points in the text: in telephone conversations⁴⁰⁹, in the pauses in singing the Marseillaise⁴¹⁰, in the pauses during interrogations of those returning from the war⁴¹¹, in Antelme's mute acceptance of the reprimand for not eating too much⁴¹², in Robert L.'s silence on returning from deportation⁴¹³. Of course, there are many other periphrases in the text that correspond to silence, such as the inability of the characters to speak, who often remain speechless in the face of painful events. Suffice it to mention the many: “Éviter”⁴¹⁴, “elle ne l’a pas dit”⁴¹⁵, “Je me tais”⁴¹⁶, “ils ne racontent pas”⁴¹⁷, “c’est mon secret”⁴¹⁸, “je n’ose pas lui dire”⁴¹⁹, “une douleur intense et muette”⁴²⁰, “on évite de parler”⁴²¹, “nous lui avions caché la nouvelle”⁴²², “sans parler d’elle, sans parler”⁴²³, “il ne dit rien de ce qu’il pense”⁴²⁴, “je le vois s’asseoir et se taire longtemps”⁴²⁵, “il ne prononce jamais ces mots”⁴²⁶.

The sixth level of silence is that of Antelme who, once he has returned home and regained his strength, after having spoken and written so much about his experience, no longer wants to and cannot

⁴⁰⁸ Marguerite Duras, *La douleur*, cit., p. 85.

⁴⁰⁹ Cf. Ivi, pp. 50, 51, 56.

⁴¹⁰ Cf. Ivi, p. 24.

⁴¹¹ Cf. Ivi, pp. 54, 55.

⁴¹² Cf. Ivi, p. 70.

⁴¹³ Cf. Ivi, p. 83.

⁴¹⁴ Ivi, p. 15.

⁴¹⁵ Ivi, p. 14.

⁴¹⁶ Ivi, p. 17.

⁴¹⁷ Ivi, p. 38.

⁴¹⁸ Ivi, p. 40.

⁴¹⁹ Ivi, p. 44.

⁴²⁰ Ivi, p. 70.

⁴²¹ Ivi, p. 77.

⁴²² Ivi, p. 79.

⁴²³ Ibidem.

⁴²⁴ Ivi, p. 80.

⁴²⁵ Ivi, p. 81.

⁴²⁶ Ivi, p. 82.

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speak about it. He closes himself in an angry silence that puts him at a distance from everyone, even his loved ones. Antelme, in the journal, goes through a parabola of alternating words and silences: at the beginning, while in the concentration camp, he is silenced by the S.S.; on his return, he begins to speak in a flood of words to recount and bear witness to what has happened; after some time, he can no longer even pronounce the title of the book he has written.

The seventh level of silence is that of the impossibility of communication between Duras and Antelme once he has returned. Their experience of separation due to the war has created a vortex of unspoken and unspeakable that the two can no longer tell each other. This lack of communication, which transforms the relationship between the two, ends in divorce and thus in the end of the love affair. This end of the story seems inescapable from the beginning of the tale, where, however, death would mark the separation. This conclusion gives Duras's text the connotations of the great love stories of her novels, which always end with a separation: the protagonists merely reach an already glimpsed and predestined end, characterised by separation, death or disappearance.

The eighth and final level of silence is that through which the writer speaks of pain: Duras succeeds in writing the unspeakable, overcomes the barriers of decency and shame, recounts madness, death, the obscene, the intimate. In extremis, therefore, *La douleur* is a text that constantly breaks the silence by saying it, sometimes even brutally. In this regard, Blanchot pointed out: “on raconte ce que l'on peut rapporter. On raconte ce qui est trop réel”⁴²⁷. The concept of “trop réel” is undoubtedly what Duras faces when she hears Antelme's footsteps on the stairs and runs away or when she describes his skeletal, almost transparent body. The very action of seeing with one's eyes what one does not recognise is of an exaggerated brutality. The journal, which helps Duras to mark Antelme's absence, at the moment of his return almost takes the form of putting at a distance, through writing, what is so brutal that it cannot remain before the eyes. In a kind of counterpoint to Antelme's *L'Espèce humaine*, Duras also seems to share what her husband writes in the preamble to this journal, namely that there is a “disproportion entre l'expérience que nous avons vécue et le récit qu'il était possible d'en faire”⁴²⁸.

Dealing with the theme of silence in Duras's work, Pascal Michelucci's observation is also interesting:

Dans une certaine mesure, il est exact que Duras possède son mythe personnel, sur lequel elle se livre à diverses variations depuis ses tout premiers romans : un individu accède à l'expression sur fond de silence ambiant — accession perverse car cette expression s'étouffe ou s'exacerbe en cri. Il n'y a guère de milieu dans l'univers

⁴²⁷ Maurice Blanchot, “Sur le journal intime”, cit., p. 254.

⁴²⁸ Robert Antelme, *L'Espèce humaine* (1947), Paris, Gallimard coll. “Tell”, 2007, p. 9.

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durassien : le choix d'un mode d'expression pour le personnage est entre la réduction au silence et le hurlement.⁴²⁹

This polarisation between silence and scream, with no middle ground, is certainly present in *La douleur*. As Michelucci points out, the presence of screams and silences in Duras's diegetic universe is such since *Moderato cantabile*, published in 1958, where the terms “cri” and “crier” appear no less than twenty-eight times, while “silence” twelve. With regard to *La douleur*, what we sense is the enforced silence of the German occupation⁴³⁰ that acts as a background to the neurotic crises of a screaming Madame L.. At the same time, we notice the shameful silence surrounding the death of Antelme's sister deported to Ravensbrück and De Gaulle's inadmissible silence about deportation and the gas chambers. In all this, Michelucci points out how “le texte de Duras ne parle pas de la manière dont il s’instaure ou de la façon dont il faudrait le lire”⁴³¹. In other words, Duras's writing is not very theoretical: there is no explanation of the *mise en écriture*, nor is there any spectacularisation or narrative games. The writing is immediate and unencumbered by any theory. On the contrary, Duras's reflective tendency operates abundantly in the author's comments on texts. Michelucci argues that this attitude is a kind of stance of the writer in a specific literary context, in opposition to the code of *bien-dire* and *bien-écrire*:

Les métaphores des cris et du silence, clairement inspirées de l'œuvre, sont les plus parlantes pour évoquer l'acte d'écrire, mais difficile à limiter à un sens précis. Ces métaphores inhabituelles pour parler de l'art noble et raisonné qu'est la littérature signifient le refus affiché par Duras d'une norme lexicale, la langue de bois adoptée par le discours critique institutionnel et le milieu intellectuel français, friand de précision rhétorique et de commentaires sur les mérites du beau style appréciés à l'envi dans le canon des belles-lettres.⁴³²

In *Écrire*⁴³³, which is Duras's most theoretical work and represents a kind of literary testament, Duras repeatedly says that her books are born out of solitude and silence:

J'ai compris que j'étais une personne seule avec mon écriture, seule très loin de tout.⁴³⁴

⁴²⁹ Pascal Michelucci, “La motivation des styles chez Marguerite Duras: cris et silence dans *Moderato cantabile* et *La douleur*”, in *Études françaises*, Vol. 39, n° 2, 2003, p. 95-107, URI: <http://id.erudit.org/iderudit/007039ar>, p. 95.

⁴³⁰ Cf. Marguerite Duras, *La douleur*, cit.: “La guerre sortait dans des hurlements. Six années sans crier”, p. 64.

⁴³¹ Pascal Michelucci, “La motivation des styles chez Marguerite Duras: cris et silence dans *Moderato cantabile* et *La douleur*”, cit., p. 98.

⁴³² Ivi, p. 97.

⁴³³ Marguerite Duras, *Écrire*, Paris, Gallimard, 1993.

⁴³⁴ Ivi, p. 13.

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Il faut toujours une séparation d'avec les autres gens autour de la personne qui écrit les livres. C'est une solitude. C'est la solitude de l'auteur, celle de l'écrit. Pour débiter la chose, on se demande ce que c'était ce silence autour de soi.⁴³⁵

On ne trouve pas la solitude, on la fait. La solitude elle se fait seule. Je l'ai faite. Parce que j'ai décidé que c'était là que je devrais être seule, que je serais seule pour écrire des livres.⁴³⁶

J'ai encore cette solitude, là, imprenable, autour de moi. Des fois je ferme les portes, je coupe le téléphone, je coupe ma voix, je ne veux plus rien.⁴³⁷

La solitude, c'était ça aussi. Une sorte d'écriture.⁴³⁸

Écrire c'est aussi ne pas parler. C'est se taire. C'est hurler sans bruit.⁴³⁹

Throughout the text we find many other similar statements, but what is important is that writing is produced in solitude and silence. Yet, if writing finds its origin in silence, it is in the scream that it continues, in a paradoxical and contradictory effect: “Écrire c'est aussi ne pas parler. C'est se taire. C'est hurler sans bruit”⁴⁴⁰. As Michelucci states: “Silence et cris, antonymes sémantiques, en arrivent curieusement à se juxter et à se substituer les uns aux autres”⁴⁴¹. One of her biographers, Alain Vircondelet, also writes about Duras: “Sa langue, c'est ce cri jusqu'au silence, cette bouche ouverte qui n'en peut plus de clamer la douleur”⁴⁴², and again:

En face d'elle, le cri. Ce cri qui parcourt comme une onde la vie de Duras, le cri au cœur de l'œuvre, dernier recours, dernière parole, absolue, sauvage, de ce mal de vivre, de cette incompréhension obscure du monde [...]. Alors il reste le cri, pour abolir cette fureur de la guerre, la barbarie des camps, le cri pour atteindre le silence.⁴⁴³

We can easily see that the tension towards silence and the scream is not only a continuous element in Duras's work, from *Moderato cantabile* to *La douleur*, but also that many critics and biographers have noted this propensity, as well as confirming it Duras herself in *Écrire*. The examples would be innumerable, but here it suffices to emphasise how silence is also perceived as a space that leads to truth: “Quand le discours s'abandonne à ses silences, à ses fractures, à ses blancs, à ses

⁴³⁵ Ivi, p. 15.

⁴³⁶ Ivi, p. 17.

⁴³⁷ Ivi, p. 18.

⁴³⁸ Ivi, p. 36.

⁴³⁹ Ivi, p. 28.

⁴⁴⁰ Ibidem.

⁴⁴¹ Pascal Michelucci, “La motivation des styles chez Marguerite Duras: cris et silence dans *Moderato cantabile* et *La douleur*”, cit., p. 100.

⁴⁴² Alain Vircondelet, *Duras. Biographie*, Paris, Éd. François Bourin, 1991, p. 121.

⁴⁴³ Ivi, pp. 139-140.

dérappages, [...] c'est qu'il entre dans cette vérité-là"⁴⁴⁴. Duras's writing is in fact characterised by “le glissements de la parole, le travail de l'informe, celui du silence en particulier”⁴⁴⁵. Stylistically, Duras reproduces the immediacy of expression and the spontaneity of the scream through sentences that seem to be written out of the blue. With regard to the reproduction of silence, however, certain stylistic marks are made evident by the *trous* and informational gaps in the texture of the discourse. These elements are significant of an aesthetics of excess, of which scream and silence are the two opposite poles within which it oscillates, without ever a middle ground. What seems interesting in this is that both scream and silence belong to the domain of orality, and not of writing.

If we think of *La douleur*, there is also a kind of decency in the writing, as the author points out in the exergue when she mentions “le désordre phénoménal de la pensée et du sentiment auquel je n'ai pas osé toucher et au regard de quoi la littérature m'a fait honte”⁴⁴⁶. Julia Kristeva, in *Soleil noir. Dépression et mélancolie*, devotes part of the text to Duras's despair and wonders: “Comment dire la vérité de la douleur, sinon en mettant en échec la [rhétorique apprêtée de la littérature], en la gauchissant, en la faisant grincer, en la rendant contrainte et boiteuse ?”⁴⁴⁷. Duras's answer to this question can be found in *Écrire*:

Je crois que c'est ça que je reproche aux livres, en général, c'est qu'ils ne sont pas libres. On le voit à travers l'écriture : ils sont fabriqués, ils sont organisés, réglementés, conformes on dirait [...]. J'entends par là la recherche de la bonne forme, c'est-à-dire de la forme la plus courante, la plus claire et la plus inoffensive. Il y a encore des générations mortes qui font des livres pudibonds. Même des jeunes : des livres *charmants*, sans prolongement aucun, sans nuit. Sans silence.⁴⁴⁸

Books without silence are thus, according to Duras, deprived of the night, that is, deprived of an opacity that brings a *plus* to the writing of *less* and allows a depth that *charmant* books lack. Irène Pagès analyses Duras's style by defining it as an opening to reverie, as a breach opened by the unspoken, since the aesthetics of the *minus* actually adds a *plus*:

[A]vec ce que Duras elle-même appelle une « matière à lire la plus décantée de style » possible, répondrait une intention précise de la part de l'écrivaine: refuser l'effet pour obtenir l'effet, créer une poétique du dénuement et camper des univers d'autant plus ouverts aux fantasmes qu'ils sont opaques, imprécis.

Il s'agit bien de fantasmes en effet. Pour ma part, je pense qu'il y a plus encore, dans cette écriture qui pourrait passer pour affectée. L'écrivaine me semble en effet cultiver le non-dit afin de pratiquer un trou dans la toile du

⁴⁴⁴ Ivi, p. 239.

⁴⁴⁵ Pascal Michelucci, “La motivation des styles chez Marguerite Duras: cris et silence dans *Moderato cantabile* et *La douleur*”, cit., p. 101.

⁴⁴⁶ Marguerite Duras, *La douleur*, cit., p. 12.

⁴⁴⁷ Julia Kristeva, *Soleil noir. Dépression et mélancolie*, cit., p. 233.

⁴⁴⁸ Marguerite Duras, *Écrire*, cit., p. 34.

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texte pour un débordement de sens, pour permettre à un « trop-plein » de s'épancher, ce trop-plein étant la marque même du désir féminin qui ne saurait contenir à l'intérieur du « raisonnable » ou encore dans les marges du discours de la raison.⁴⁴⁹

The poetics of *dénuement*, i.e. that of the imprecise, the opaque, the phantasmal, is a way of emphasising the unspoken, of creating a hole in the text so that from this crack there can be an overflow of meaning. Duras's "style blanc"⁴⁵⁰ eschews the code of fine letters in order to integrate the formless, the excess, the silence into its own form. In contrast to the premeditated, calculated and syntactically well-constructed sentence, Duras opposes a neutral, bare, simple and spontaneous style. As Michelucci argues, "la phrase têtue et déjetée de Duras, faite de retours, de parataxes, dite d'un trait, repose sur des formes pré-linguistiques, frisant l'inarticulé, comme ces dialogues larvés de Moderato"⁴⁵¹. It is precisely this type of writing that Duras aspires to when she says:

Je ne peux rien dire.

Je ne peux rien écrire.

Il y aurait une écriture du non-écrit. Un jour ça arrivera. Une écriture brève, sans grammaire, une écriture de mots seuls. Des mots sans grammaire de soutien. Égarés. Là, écrits. Et quittés aussitôt.⁴⁵²

This writing of the unspoken, without grammar, with only words is the writing of *La douleur*. A silent writing, full of holes and white spaces, without connectives, with gaps that it is up to the reader to fill in. It is a *langage zéro* that through pregnant silences provides meanings that it places in its blanks. Ellipses abound, because Duras does not say everything. We need only think of Antelme's waiting: events are recounted between one void and another, like the return of the beloved who is late in coming. Often the text is interrupted and the continuation is only several paragraphs later, but it never completes the totality of the action that took place in between. The continuity of the story is broken, crumbled, fragmented. Michelucci concludes his article with a sharable observation:

Les pistes tracées ici doivent être prises en compte si on veut saisir l'originalité du créateur contemporain, au fur et à mesure que des questions nouvelles viennent bouleverser la notion établie de ce qui constitue le style littéraire. On pensera par exemple à la question du fragment ou à celle de l'inachèvement qui ont connu un intérêt certain depuis 1990. Il faut surtout insister sur ce qu'il y a de positif dans cette écriture de plains et déliés ; pas simplement constater que Duras est une auteure en lutte avec le silence, marquée par l'obsession de l'indicible, par ce que Kristeva appelle un « vertige de l'innommable » qui se heurte à l'écriture catastrophique. Ce serait

⁴⁴⁹ Irène Pagès, *Marguerite Duras dans les trous du discours*, Halifax, APFUCC, 1987, p. i.

⁴⁵⁰ Pascal Michelucci, "La motivation des styles chez Marguerite Duras: cris et silence dans *Moderato cantabile* et *La douleur*", cit., p. 103.

⁴⁵¹ Ivi, p. 104.

⁴⁵² Marguerite Duras, "La mort du jeune aviateur anglais", in *Écrire*, cit., p. 71.

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faire plus grande justice à Duras que de signaler en quoi elle renouvelle à sa manière les valeurs établies de la littérature, particulièrement par cette thématique quelque peu curieuse du cri et du silence qu'il faut relier au style qu'elle choisit pour l'exprimer, qui, nous pensons l'avoir montré, est aussi une question formelle importante. Créatrice par la forme, Duras le demeure profondément.⁴⁵³

The cohabitation of silences and screams in Duras's text is thus not only innovative in form, renewing literary values already established by the canon, but also emblematic of her obsession with the unspeakable which, as Kisteva points out, is in constant struggle with silence.

On the same wavelength, i.e. the valorisation of silence, let us consider the previously cited article by Kritzman:

Duras' account of chronic pain constitutes what might be characterized as a "telling silence", a narrative tension that ironically maintains the anonymity and pervasiveness of the struggle at hand. "Nous sommes à la pointe d'un combat sans nom, sans armes, sans sang versé, sans gloire à la pointe de l'attente. Derrière nous s'étale la civilisation en cendres, et toute la pensée, celle depuis des siècles amassée"⁴⁵⁴. In *La Douleur* suffering is made to speak and the expression of that pain is the way in which loss and namelessness are signified. Paradoxically, language becomes a vehicle for that which cannot be articulated; it materializes what Blanchot⁴⁵⁵ has described as the relationship between writing and disaster for it functions as a reminder of what has happened, but what we will never really know.⁴⁵⁶

'Telling silence' is thus the operation carried out by Duras throughout *La douleur*: the attempt to make pain speak and the expression of suffering are the ways in which the unspeakable and loss are pronounced. Language is pushed beyond the limits of modesty and writes what one did not think could be articulated.

Kègle, in the article cited above, also discusses silence in Duras as an element related to traumatic experience and the processing of grief, and writes that Duras has "une propension à se réfugier dans le silence, à se blottir dans la douleur amoureuse de l'absent, à se lover dans l'image terrifiante de sa décomposition"⁴⁵⁷. In this panorama, it should be pointed out that there are different stratifications of memory⁴⁵⁸, occurring through oral testimony, which allow trauma to break the silence and become a word. Jurgenson, a specialist in concentration camp literature, observes that at the moment when Antelme, on the journey to Paris, tells Mascolo about his concentration camp

⁴⁵³ Pascal Michelucci, "La motivation des styles chez Marguerite Duras: cris et silence dans *Moderato cantabile* et *La douleur*", cit., p. 106.

⁴⁵⁴ Marguerite Duras, *La douleur*, cit., p. 48.

⁴⁵⁵ Cf. Maurice Blanchot, *L'Écriture du désastre*, Paris, Gallimard, 1980.

⁴⁵⁶ Lawrence D. Kritzman, "Duras' War", cit., p. 67.

⁴⁵⁷ Christiane Kègle, "Écrire la douleur de la disparition. Marguerite Duras à propos de Robert Antelme", cit., p. 9.

⁴⁵⁸ Cf. Luba Jurgenson, *L'expérience concentrationnaire est-elle indicible?*, Monaco, Rocher, 2003.

experience without ever stopping talking, time 0 of death and time 1 of the testimonial word were blurred⁴⁵⁹. In reference to this, Kègle proposes a temporal triad in *La douleur*:

soit le temps premier de l'écriture blanche, où la violence des affects engendre une confusion de la pensée et des sentiments ; le temps second de l'amnésie après le retour de Robert L., dont le corps terriblement fragilisé ne peut générer chez Marguerite que passivité, cris et fuites en avant (p. 68-69) ; puis, quelque quarante années plus tard, ce troisième temps de la décision de publier son journal, même inachevé, l'éthique du bien-dire abolissant tout critère de littéarité (cf. Duras : « au regard de quoi la littérature m'a fait honte », supra).⁴⁶⁰

Following this partition, we also observe the evolution and timing of silence in the work: firstly, *écriture blanche*, flat, neutral, unmediated; secondly, the scream; thirdly, the publication of the diary.

In the final analysis, it seems appropriate to leave the floor to Kristeva, who in *Soleil noir, dépression et mélancolie* connects neurotic and psychotic phenomena with the deadly situations of our civilisation, and about Duras's disconnected writing, imagined death through introjection of the other in herself and the nothingness in which she finds herself, she writes:

S'il est encore possible de parler de « rien » lorsque l'on tente de capter les méandres infimes de la douleur et de la mort psychique, sommes-nous toujours devant rien face aux chambres à gaz, la bombe atomique ou au goulag ? Ni l'aspect spectaculaire de l'explosion de la mort dans l'univers de la Seconde Guerre mondiale ni la dissolution de l'identité consciente et du comportement rationnel échouant dans les manifestations asilaires de la psychose, elles aussi souvent spectaculaires, ne sont en cause. Ce que ces spectacles, monstrueux et douloureux, mettent à mal, ce sont nos appareils de perception et de représentation. Comme excédés ou détruits par une vague trop puissante, nos moyens symboliques se trouvent évidés, quasi anéantis, pétrifiés. Au bord du silence émerge le mot « rien », défense pudique face à tant de désordre, interne et externe, incommensurable.⁴⁶¹

This insistence on silence, on emptiness, on the nothingness that emerges is confirmed by Duras, when in *Écrire* she writes:

Se trouver dans un trou, au fond d'un trou, dans une solitude quasi totale et découvrir que seule l'écriture vous sauvera. Être sans sujet aucun de livre, sans aucune idée de livre c'est se trouver, se retrouver, devant un livre. Une immensité vide. Un livre éventuel. Devant rien. Devant comme une écriture vivante et nue, comme terrible, terrible à surmonter. Je crois que la personne qui écrit est sans idée de livre, qu'elle a les mains vides, la tête vide,

⁴⁵⁹ Luba Jurgenson et Alexandre Prstojevic, *Des témoins aux héritiers. L'écriture de la Shoah et la culture européenne*, Paris, Éditions Pétra (« Usages de la mémoire »), 2012.

⁴⁶⁰ Christiane Kègle, « Écrire la douleur de la disparition. Marguerite Duras à propos de Robert Antelme », cit., p. 10.

⁴⁶¹ Julia Kristeva, *Soleil noir: dépression et mélancolie*, cit. pp. 230-231.

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et qu'elle ne connaît de cette aventure du livre que l'écriture sèche et nue, sans avenir, sans écho, lointaine, avec ses règles d'or, élémentaires : l'orthographe, le sens.⁴⁶²

In the emptiness of meaning produced by loneliness and trauma, for Duras writing is the only saving element. Writing, however, does not mean knowing what to write: it means finding oneself in front of emptiness, nothingness, the silence of the blank page. This void with which the writer is confronted is immense, just as immense are the possibilities of narratives to be made. Being in front of nothingness provokes living, bare, abrupt writing, like that of *La douleur*, where the diary-keeper is in fact a woman with empty hands, since she is waiting to hold her beloved, with an empty head, since she is now deprived of reason, alone with her waiting and her pain. Duras in fact writes: "il faut être plus fort que soi pour aborder l'écriture, il faut être plus fort que ce qu'on écrit"⁴⁶³.

The strength of which the writer speaks is that which allows one to stand in front of one's own emptiness and give words to that silence by writing it down. This operation is exactly what Duras does in the diary we have just analysed: to say silence, to say the unspeakable, to say madness, to say death, to say pain. Duras seems to argue that it is always necessary to write, despite, or perhaps because, this requires a "perdition de soi"⁴⁶⁴: "Écrire quand même malgré le désespoir. Non : avec le désespoir. Quel désespoir, je ne sais pas le nom de celui-là"⁴⁶⁵. Despair has no name, but it is the ingredient of writing that saves, that writing which, as already mentioned, is shouting without making noise. The nothingness Kristeva writes about and Duras is confronted with is so insurmountable that she has to write about it in order to be able to stand in front of it: "Je vais parler de rien. De rien"⁴⁶⁶. Duras knows the effect of those confronted with this abyss and knows that the only possible epilogue is madness, like the one experienced during Antelme's waiting:

La solitude est toujours accompagnée de folie. Je le sais.⁴⁶⁷

Donc c'est toujours la porte ouverte vers l'abandon. Il y a le suicide dans la solitude d'un écrivain. On est seul jusque dans sa propre solitude. Toujours inconcevable. Toujours dangereux. Oui. Un prix à payer pour avoir osé sortir et crier.⁴⁶⁸

⁴⁶² Marguerite Duras, *Écrire*, cit., p. 20.

⁴⁶³ *Ivi*, p. 24.

⁴⁶⁴ *Ivi*, p. 29.

⁴⁶⁵ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁶⁶ *Ivi*, p. 46.

⁴⁶⁷ *Ivi*, p. 44.

⁴⁶⁸ *Ivi*, p. 31.

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Ç a va très loin, l'écriture... Jusqu'à en finir avec. C'est quelquefois intenable. Tout prend un sens tout à coup par rapport à l'écrit, c'est à devenir fou. [...] C'était sans doute simplement que j'étais déjà, un peu plus que les autres gens, fatigué de vivre. C'était un état de douleur sans souffrance.⁴⁶⁹

Si je n'avais pas écrit je serais devenue une incurable de l'alcool. C'est un état pratique d'être perdu sans plus pouvoir écrire... C'est là qu'on boit. Du moment qu'on est perdu et qu'on n'a donc plus rien à écrire, à perdre, on écrit.⁴⁷⁰

On peut parler d'une maladie de l'écrit [...]. Il y a une folie d'écrire qui est en soi-même, une folie d'écrire furieuse mais ce n'est pas pour cela qu'on est dans la folie. Au contraire.⁴⁷¹

Duras speaks of madness, suicide, pain, the struggle to live, the loss of self. Writing at the same time immerses the writer in these states of mind, but equally saves her. Being faced with emptiness, going through pain and silence, is what allows one to emerge stronger from what one has written. We are faced with a writing of resistance, in a way: not the political resistance that Duras was part of, but resistance in the face of suffering, the resistance that allowed Duras to stand in front of the silence and write it down, going through madness and despair as well. Writing saves not because it takes shortcuts, avoids pain, but precisely because it forces one to immerse oneself in it. Writing means confronting silence and writing it down. This is why Duras, in a very interesting and meaningful juxtaposition, compares solitude to writing and companionship to music:

Ici quand je suis seule, je ne joue pas du piano. Je joue pas mal, mais je joue très peu parce que je crois que je ne peux pas jouer quand je suis seule, quand il n'y a personne d'autre que moi dans la maison. C'est très difficile à supporter. Parce que ça paraît avoir un sens tout à coup. Or il n'y a que l'écriture qui a un sens dans certains cas personnels. Puisque je la manie, je la pratique. Tandis que le piano est un objet lointain encore inaccessible, et pour moi, toujours, tel. Je crois que si j'avais joué du piano en professionnelle, je n'aurais pas écrit de livres. Mais je n'en suis pas sûre. Je crois aussi que c'est faux. Je crois que j'aurais écrit des livres dans tous les cas, même dans ce cas de la musique parallèle. Des livres illisibles, entiers cependant. Aussi loin de toute parole que l'inconnu d'un amour sans objet.⁴⁷²

Duras maintains that she could never have written books if she had played the piano. There is only room for writing in her personal case, as if it were oxygen to breathe. She seems to contradict herself when, a few lines later, she writes that perhaps music and writing could have co-existed in her life, but returns to her initial statement when she concludes that if she had played the piano, her books

⁴⁶⁹ Ivi, p. 25.

⁴⁷⁰ Ivi, p. 22.

⁴⁷¹ Ivi, p. 52.

⁴⁷² Ivi, pp. 18-19.

would have been unreadable, because whole. Music fills in the faults that writing leaves open, and it is precisely those holes, those blanks, those fragments, those ellipses, those gaps that characterise Duras's texts that ensure that in the silence of her writing we find something more, which is not to be filled in. This is why the writer concludes *Écrire* by declaring:

Écrire.

Je ne peux pas.

Personne ne peut.

Il faut le dire : on ne peut pas.

Et on écrit.

C'est l'inconnu qu'on porte en soi : écrire, c'est ça qui est atteint. C'est ça ou rien [...].

L'écriture c'est l'inconnu. Avant d'écrire on ne sait rien de ce qu'on va écrire [...].

Si on savait quelque chose de ce qu'on va écrire, avant de le faire, avant d'écrire, on n'écrirait jamais. Ce ne serait pas la peine.

Écrire c'est tenter de savoir ce qu'on écrirait si on écrivait - on ne le sait qu'après - avant, c'est la question la plus dangereuse que l'on puisse se poser. Mais c'est la plus courante aussi.

L'écrit ça arrive comme le vent, c'est nu, c'est de l'encre, c'est l'écrit, et ça passe comme rien d'autre ne passe dans la vie, rien de plus, sauf elle, la vie.⁴⁷³

Writing is both impossible and necessary. No one can do it, but one writes. One must write what one does not know, and before writing one does not know what one will write, otherwise one could not write. What Duras argues seems a continuous paradox, a list of sentences, in the text divided by typographical blanks, that cannot coexist. Yet, in the light of reading *La douleur*, we are certain that this is the case: Duras wrote on the spur of the moment, spontaneously, without knowing what she was going to talk about. The writing of pain is naked, without calculation, without frills. It is a writing that, in making itself verb, says the silence and nothingness that inhabit the writer. Only in saying that silence and in crossing that void is writing salvific. Finally, it is no coincidence that, as in the conclusion of *La douleur*, in this literary testament that is *Écrire*, the final image is the poetic one of the wind, as on a beach, in front of the beloved, without words: "C'est dans ce silence-là que la guerre est encore présente, qu'elle sourd à travers le sable, le vent"⁴⁷⁴. The wind carries both the silence of war and the ink of writing.

⁴⁷³ Ivi, pp. 51-52-53.

⁴⁷⁴ Marguerite Duras, *La douleur*, cit., p. 83.

III. *W ou le souvenir d'enfance*: “Une parole absente à l’écriture”

It is in the hidden folds, in the *contraintes* of the texts, in the apparent ordering principle that governs the writing of Perec's structured novels and in the narrative faults, that his most intimate sufferings actually lurk. Every rule speaks, every absence reveals a presence. Silence and the unspoken, in Perec, are certainly far more significant than what is verbally displayed in the text.

The choice of autobiographical material in Perec is almost unlimited, since in each of his writings, there are references to the author's life and intertextual links that not only recall other works, but also provide puzzle pieces that allow the reader to understand hidden and unspoken parts. However, for an analysis that focuses on the notions of trauma and silence, the text to be privileged is undoubtedly *W ou le souvenir d'enfance*, for a number of reasons that we will go on to analyse.

As a brief introduction, it is necessary to recall that the text was published in 1975, after having been published in *feuilletons*, and that it is a text that alternates chapters of fiction, written in italics, and autobiographical chapters, apparently not communicating. In reality, the autobiographical data, particularly concerning the trauma experienced by Perec who was orphaned after losing his father in 1940 in the war and his mother in 1943 in Auschwitz, shed light on the fictional material in the book's conclusion. We therefore understand from the start that the text lies in areas of silence that need to be interpreted and that the reader is only able to grasp at the end of the reading. Moreover, the alternation of chapters creates faults and splits in the text, i.e. silent zones in which the reader finds himself disoriented and the consequential reading of events is constantly interrupted. This fragmentary writing leaves ample space for the blanks, ellipses, unspoken words and silences with which the text is imbued. Finally, it should be emphasised from the outset that the most significant element for the purposes of this study is undoubtedly the split in the middle of the novel. This is in fact divided into two parts that are separated by three parenthetical suspension points in the middle of a blank page. These suspension points represent the fissure from which the text arises and assume enormous significance for the writer. This caesura also marks a change in the narration of the fictional chapters: in fact, whereas in the first part Perec told of a character named Gaspard Winckler, in the second part his name disappears to make way for the description of the island of W, a fictional land in which Perec sets the novel.

W is thus a novel that strongly innovates the autobiographical genre. In this regard, Philippe Lejeune writes: “Sur ce point, la tentative de Perec est pratiquement sans précédent”⁴⁷⁵. As Perec explains in the back cover, this is a text that alternates two narrative strands, at first seemingly unconnected, but in reality inextricably linked, neither of which can do without the other or exist in

⁴⁷⁵ Philippe Lejeune, *La Mémoire et l'Oblique. Georges Perec autobiographe*, Paris, P.O.L., 1991, p. 85.

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an autonomous form. One sheds light on the other: meaning can only be found in the fragile intersection of the two.

Il y a dans ce livre deux textes simplement alternés ; il pourrait presque sembler qu'ils n'ont rien en commun, mais ils sont pourtant inextricablement enchevêtrés, comme si aucun des deux ne pouvait exister seul, comme si de leur rencontre seul, de cette lumière lointaine qu'ils jettent l'un sur l'autre, pouvait se révéler ce qui n'est jamais tout à fait dit dans l'un, jamais tout à fait dit dans l'autre, mais seulement dans leur fragile intersection. L'un de ces textes appartient tout entier à l'imaginaire : c'est un roman d'aventures, la reconstruction, arbitraire mais minutieuse, d'un fantasme enfantin évoquant une cité régie par l'idéal olympique. L'autre texte est une autobiographie : le récit fragmentaire d'une vie d'enfant pendant la guerre, un récit pauvre d'exploits et de souvenirs, fait de bribes éparses, d'absences, d'oublis, de soutes, d'hypothèses, d'anecdotes maigres. Le récit d'aventures, à côté, a quelque chose de grandiose, ou peut-être de suspect. Car il commence par raconter une histoire et, d'un seul coup, se lance dans une autre : dans cette rupture, cette cassure qui suspend le récit autour d'on ne sait quelle attente, se trouve le lieu initial d'où est sorti ce livre, ces points de suspension auxquels se sont accrochés les fils rompus de l'enfance et la trame de l'écriture.⁴⁷⁶

One of the two texts belongs entirely to fantasy: it is an adventure novel set on an imaginary island called W where an Olympic and hierarchical order reigns, founded on the values of sport and meticulously governed by strict and rigid laws. The other text is Perec's actual autobiography: it is the fragmentary account of his life as a child during the war, made up of scattered scraps of memories, absences, doubts, assumptions and forgetfulness. For Perec, everything is autobiographical: “non esiste riga, parola e forse neppure sillaba pubblicata da Perec che non sia il nodo di connessioni innumerevoli che rimandano alla totalità dell'opera di Perec stesso”⁴⁷⁷. On the contrary, the parallel tale is, in its tone and the events narrated, magnificent. There is something suspicious about it, for it begins by telling one story but soon breaks off to launch into another. It is precisely in this narrative fault, in this break that suspends the tale, that one finds “le lieu initial d'où est sorti ce roman”: the ellipsis, emblematically represented by the three suspension points dividing the two parts of the book. “Les fils rompus de l'enfance” and the plot threads of the writing thus appear to be stitched together by this linguistic device. Only in the final chapter will the relationship between the two alternating texts be made explicit: the society described in the fictional tale turns out to be a metaphor for the horror of the extermination camps.

⁴⁷⁶ Georges Perec, *W ou le souvenir d'enfance*, Paris, Gallimard, coll. L'Imaginaire, 2017, pr. éd. Denoël, coll. *Les Lettres Nouvelles*, 1975, p. 1.

⁴⁷⁷ Ferdinando Amigoni, “Un mucchio di reliquie”. *Perec e Pontalis: dall'assenza di memoria alla memoria dell'assenza*, in *Psicoterapia e Scienze Umane*, 2011, XLV, 3: 333-354, p. 333.

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Pendant des années, j'ai dessiné des sportifs aux corps rigides, aux faciès inhumains ; j'ai décrit avec minutie leurs incessants combats ; j'ai énuméré avec obstination leurs palmarès sans fin.

Des années et des années plus tard, dans *L'Univers concentrationnaire*, de David Rousset, j'ai lu ceci [...].⁴⁷⁸

It is therefore to a novel that Perec entrusts his family history and the intimacy of his grief. It seems that in writing Perec not only seeks lost memories, but attempts to save others and himself. There is no nostalgic regret of a childhood carefreeness never experienced, there is no Proustian search for lost time, but rather an attempt to revive the other through literature. Literature is a source of life, it is our chance to relive something. As DeLillo said: "Fiction is all about reliving things. It is our second chance"⁴⁷⁹. Thus, through writing, Perec becomes a parent to his parents and gives them back the life that was taken from them.

The two stories intertwined in *W* create a complex whole that is greater than the sum of its parts, and which lends itself to various interpretations. Firstly, it must be said that Perec's project is consciously literary; he himself writes:

Le projet d'écrire mon histoire s'est formé presque en même temps que mon projet d'écrire.⁴⁸⁰

The childhood memories that the writer wants to preserve are not meant to be a mere flat list of details, but a literary work. It is necessary then to reflect on the existential act implicit in the genesis of the work: Perec, without childhood memories and without history, will be born through writing.⁴⁸¹ Not just any writing, however, and not even a simple or immediate decision. The incipit, entrusted to the voice of Gaspard Winckler, denotes the author's hesitation before embarking on this path:

J'ai longtemps hésité avant d'entreprendre le récit de mon voyage à W.⁴⁸²

The imperious need to write and the anguish that describing entails are co-present and exposed in Winckler's interposed character. Perec *hesitates* before embarking on the journey that will lead him into his childhood memories: this reticence to say and the delay in writing are aspects of silence that characterise this text, to be read, in this case, as modesty.

⁴⁷⁸ Georges Perec, *W ou le souvenir d'enfance*, cit., p 221.

⁴⁷⁹ Don DeLillo, *The Power of History*, The New York Times Company, 1997.

⁴⁸⁰ Georges Perec, *W ou le souvenir d'enfance*, cit., p 45.

⁴⁸¹ Il bianco "segnala al tempo stesso un vuoto da riempire, una morte cui deve essere data vita, ed è la vita stessa rispetto alla negazione del nero"; Alberto Castoldi, *Bianco*, Firenze, La Nuova Italia, 1998, p. 49.

⁴⁸² Georges Perec, *W ou le souvenir d'enfance*, cit., p. 13.

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According to a partition proposed by Robert Misrahi, the book could be divided into four sections that mirror each other: two sections of *W*, one dedicated to the story of Gaspard Winckler and the other to the description of the island *W*; two sections of *P* - one relating to the lack of childhood memories, the other containing memories of the war years - divided into two parts by the ellipsis of the three famous suspension points.

Winckler's search for his missing namesake introduces the pattern of the investigative novel, which is common to both narrated stories. The parallels between the investigation into Winckler's disappearance and Perec's search, through photographs and old documents, for an orphaned self who no longer remembers anything, are evident. Gaspard Winckler's journey in search of his missing namesake is the same as Georges Perec's search for a child self, who in parallel plunges into a psychological analysis to find his lost childhood. It is, in both cases, a matter of recovering a stolen identity. Moreover, both Winckler's and Perec's mother bear the same name, Cécile, and both narrative voices use similar language to describe their search:

Je n'ai pour étayer mes souvenirs improbables que le secours de photos jaunies, de témoignages rares et de documents dérisoires.⁴⁸³

Longtemps j'ai cherché les traces de mon histoire, consulté des cartes et les annuaires, des monceaux d'archives.⁴⁸⁴

Besides these, other similar phrases are used in both narratives:

Dans le témoignage que je m'apprête à faire, je fus témoin, et non acteur. Je ne suis pas le héros de mon histoire.⁴⁸⁵

L'événement eut lieu, un peu plus tard ou un peu plus tôt, et je n'en fus pas la victime héroïque mais un simple témoin.⁴⁸⁶

The structural parallels in the first two sections are clearly intentional, but the second half of the book is alien to this evidence. Indeed, the second half of *W*, in which island life is described, shows no reference to Winckler's story. The two narratives seem to be completely disconnected: two non-communicating fragments. In the description of *W*'s athletic system there is then a further fragmentation of the text because there are two descriptive modes: the first, the initial one, presents

⁴⁸³ Ivi, pp. 21-22.

⁴⁸⁴ Ivi, p. 10.

⁴⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁸⁶ Ivi, p. 109.

purely geographical and historical descriptions of the place, which allow a positive sentiment to seep out; the second, on the other hand, from chapter XVIII onwards, becomes the voice of a dangerously despotic and barbaric system, through an increasingly subjective and scandalised narrator.

The novel ends with a finale that openly reveals the condemnation of W's tyrannical system, which is manifestly compared to the Nazi extermination camps through the explicit quotation of David Rousset, from his *L'Univers Concentrationnaire*.

La structure des camps de répression est commandée par deux orientations fondamentales : pas de travail, du « sport », une dérision de nourriture. La majorité des détenus ne travaille pas, et cela veut dire que le travail, même le plus dur, est considéré comme une planque. La moindre tâche doit être accomplie au pas de course. Les coups, qui sont l'ordinaire des camps « normaux », deviennent ici la bagatelle quotidienne qui commande toutes les heures de la journée et parfois de la nuit. Un des jeux consiste à faire habiller et dévêtir les détenus plusieurs fois par jour très vite et à la matraque ; aussi à les faire sortir et entrer dans le Block en courant, tandis que, à la porte, deux S.S. assomment les Haeftlinge à coups de Gummi. Dans la petite cour rectangulaire et bétonnée, le sport consiste en tout : faire tourner très vite les hommes pendant des heures sans arrêt, avec le fouet; organiser la marche du crapaud, et les plus lents seront jetés dans le bassin d'eau sous le rire homérique des S.S. ; répéter sans fin le mouvement qui consiste à se plier très vite sur les talons, les mains perpendiculaires ; très vite (toujours vite, vite, *Schnell, los Mensch*), à plat ventre dans la boue et se relever, cent fois de rang, courir ensuite s'inonder d'eau pour se laver et garder vingt-quatre heures des vêtements mouillés...»

J'ai oublié les raisons qui à douze ans, m'ont fait choisir la Terre de Feu pour y installer W : les fascistes de Pinochet se sont chargés de donner à mon fantasme une ultime résonance : plusieurs îlots de la Terre de Feu sont aujourd'hui des camps de déportation.⁴⁸⁷

After this necessary preamble on the structure of *W*, in order to grasp the hidden meanings of the text and attempt to attribute meaning to its silences, we must start with the dedication of the novel. It is no coincidence that this reads: "Pour E". The E, for Perec, represents that silent French sound that speaks of a lack: E could be an abbreviation of Elle, 'she', the lost mother; or of Eux, or 'they'. The E could represent all those who disappeared in the concentration camps. It is precisely from the search for those who disappeared that *W* springs, the novel that transcends history and horror and becomes a narrative of the unspeakable.

Besides the explicit reference to the concentration camps, the caesura between the two parts of the novel is the most significant aspect from an autobiographical and aesthetic point of view. In itself, these are simply three suspension points. However, in the back cover, Perec himself emphasises this *cassure*, calling it "le lieu initial d'où est sorti ce livre". Roche, in her analysis of *W*, attempts to fill this blank page with meaning and argues that in this space, where nothing is said, Winckler's

⁴⁸⁷ Ivi, pp. 221-222.

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fictitious character leaves for the island of W and the young Perec leaves for Villard, leaving behind a mother he will never see again. All this, however, is speculation on the part of critics, because it is not made explicit in the novel, which remains silent on this aspect. The suspension points mark the unspeakable fracture of Perec as a child separated from his mother, a separation followed by the loss of all childhood memories. In this seemingly silent blank page is thus the explosion of meaning of the universe, fictional and real, on which the entire text is based. It is an ellipsis that represents a zero level of the novel, a neutral plane, a suspension. Suspension is precisely the sensation that Perec recalls several times when describing his departure from the Gare de Lyon:

Je fus précipité dans le vide ; tous les fils furent rompus ; je tombai, seul et sans soutien.⁴⁸⁸

There is here that childhood anguish of abandonment, due to being left on a train, orphaned and exiled, at a traumatic moment in his life. However, it is precisely in this suspension, in this emptiness, that there is the birth of Perec the writer: in going through the death of his parents, he is reborn through writing. His artistic imagination is in fact an unconscious attempt to remedy the loss of his mother. The words *cassure* and *rupture* are frequent in Perec's writing, and he himself associates rupture and non-linearity with his writing style:

Ils sont comme cette écriture non liée, faite de lettres isolées incapables de se souder entre elles pour former un mot.⁴⁸⁹

Hence the obsessive use of images that suggest suspension, dislocation, fracture: these components of Perec's literary imagery form the basis of his poetics, which would evolve to blossom into the puzzle device of *La vie mode d'emploi*.

The broken threads and isolated letters render the image of a fragmentation of the self and of writing that leaves room for many silences: the suspensions, the reticence in saying, the absence of explanation, the emptiness in the text and in the contents of the text. The constant metaphors of rupture and emptiness refer to an aesthetic of silence, which is given precisely in the interstices of the written words.

We can thus point out how both parts of the text are ellipses: the first is typographically marked; the second is instead an invisible and silent ellipsis, since it concerns the disappearance of the mother in an extermination camp, which, however, is not explicitly stated but remains outside the text and is placed in a cryptic space that only a careful reading can unearth. This text, then, is not only

⁴⁸⁸ Ivi, p. 81.

⁴⁸⁹ Ivi, p. 97.

structured by this alternation of fictional and autobiographical chapters, but also by the white spaces that constitute it and that, through the gaps and silences, speak of that *disparition* that the text both silences and communicates.

The symbolic fracture also comes to be represented in concrete terms when Perec recounts an incident from his childhood, during which he claims to have broken his shoulder. He later notes that it was not himself but another boy; what is relevant, however, is Perec's need to find these *thérapeutiques imaginaires*: the metaphor of a physical break is ineffective in describing the far more traumatic and profound break that lies at the heart of his life. The real wound, only whispered in a low voice, is the absence of a mother.

Plus simplement, ces thérapeutiques imaginaires, moins contraignantes que tutoriales, ces points de suspension, désignaient des douleurs nommables et venaient à point justifier des cajoleries dont les raisons réelles n'étaient données qu'à voix basse.⁴⁹⁰

In fact, Perec invented imaginary incidents to replace the trauma of his parents' death with other, lesser, more bearable traumas. The lie was thus consubstantial to the truth, and absolutely necessary to live. The cuddling, whose real reasons were only whispered, had to be justified by a less unspeakable expedient than being an orphan: that was the reason for these imaginary therapies. Again, Perec keeps something silent by communicating something else entirely. In these contrivances, however, it is all the more necessary to interpret what remains in silence.

Finally, returning to the parallelism of the two narrating voices, one can conclude that Winckler's and Perec's investigations lead to two different points of arrival: one finds the extermination camp; the other finds writing. Perec expresses the relationship between experience and writing in precisely these moving and authentic terms:

Je ne sais pas si je n'ai rien à dire, je sais que je ne dis rien ; je ne sais pas si ce que j'aurais à dire n'est pas dit parce qu'il est l'indicible (l'indicible n'est pas tapi dans l'écriture, il est ce qui l'a bien déclenchée); je sais que ce que je dis est blanc, est neutre, est signe une fois pour toutes d'un anéantissement une fois pour toutes.⁴⁹¹

The fact that Perec insists on having nothing to say is significant: his saying nothing is in fact an attempt to break the silence of his parents' deaths. Indeed, it is precisely by saying that he says nothing that Perec is saying something: what is unspeakable remains hidden, is not told, but is at least

⁴⁹⁰ Ivi, p. 114.

⁴⁹¹ Ivi, p. 63.

verbalised. Recognising the impossibility of saying something is itself saying something. The resulting writing is neutral, flat.

Perhaps it is precisely in this neutrality that the lesson of the degree zero of writing theorised by Barthes returns. Precisely in this impossibility of saying the unspeakable in artificial terms lies the connection: between a reparative writing and the Oulipo, between a profoundly human wound and the attempt of writing to weave the stitches of the scar in order to perhaps make a jigsaw puzzle out of it. Writing is exactly this reorganisation into a jigsaw puzzle of the imaginary and the autobiographical. The relationship between reality and fiction then becomes central because it is precisely in the connection between the two that Perec's true story is realised, his story: the story of a love he did not receive because it was annihilated by death, the story of a lack of belonging that makes him feel “non pas différent des autres, différent des miens”⁴⁹², the story of a nostalgia that regrets that “protection chaleureuse, amour et rempart infranchissable”. In this sense, the proper autobiographical genre is outmoded and acquires a new, innovative dimension, where it is the imaginary that speaks of the real and fills in the gaps.

The initial and paradoxical observation of “Je n’ai pas de souvenirs d’enfance” is extremely significant because the writing of the imaginary goes precisely to replace those absent memories of a child who has lost everything and, in particular, has lost the memories of a parental tenderness and affection towards him. Autobiographical writing, in the paradox of having no childhood memories, becomes reticent: Perec needs emotionally detached writing, where the litotes reinforces the possibilities of the unspoken by giving it an interesting illocutionary force. Detachment is an argumentative strategy: the litotes means that behind the reticence in saying, emotions so strong that they cannot find words to say are actually hidden. Thus, it is paradoxically through silences that Perec shows his feelings.

Perec also makes use of the necessary inauthenticity of many of his memories: the questioning of reality is a revelation of the impossible authenticity of memory where there is a void, and it is precisely in this fracture between true and false that the imaginary is inserted. But that is not all: where words do not arrive, it is silence that speaks, screaming the scandal of that emptiness and that wound that Perec always carries inside himself and outside himself on the page:

Je ne retrouverai jamais, dans mon ressassement même, que l’ultime reflet d’une parole absente à l’écriture, le scandale de leur silence et de mon silence : je n’écris pas pour dire que je ne dirai rien, je n’écris pas pour dire que je n’ai rien à dire. J’écris : j’écris parce que nous avons vécu ensemble, parce que j’ai été un parmi eux, ombre au milieu de leurs ombres, corps près de leurs corps ; j’écris parce qu’ils ont laissé en moi leur marque

⁴⁹² Georges Perec, Robert Bober: *Récits d’Ellis Island. Histoires d’errance et d’espoir*, Paris, INA/Editions du Sorbier, 1980, p. 59.

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indélébile et que la trace en est l'écriture: leur souvenir est mort à l'écriture; l'écriture es le souvenir de leur mort et l'affirmation de ma vie.⁴⁹³

It is precisely the absent word in the writing that we need to look for: in the silence, in what is hushed up, removed, removed from the text, lies the essence of *W*. The scandal of which Perec speaks - or rather, of which he does not speak - is the silence that surrounds the deaths of his parents and which, consequently, also surrounds his writing, which is all about this emptiness. It is no coincidence that in Perec we find the motif of the shadow, which Jung was so fond of as an archetype. Perec's writing is always oblique, never saying directly what it is pointing towards: it caresses the core, without ever making it explicit. Yet, here, Perec claims that writing is the only way he has to say he has nothing to say, like Duras. This oblique writing is an attempt to take possession of what he lacks. To say a lack is to fill a void. The writing, although lacking an object to say, is a written trace of his parents' death and an affirmation of Perec's life. Perec's entire poetics is concentrated in these lines: the novel is an existential effort, on the part of the author, to accept his past and to affirm the present and the future by taking upon himself the burden and the responsibility of remembering his missing parents and, consequently, his lost childhood.

The trauma for Perec lies not only in having lost both his parents, but also in the silence about his mother's death: his upset, as a child, is also linked to the fact that no one says anything about this death; everyone whispers in a low voice and looks at him with pity, but no one utters a word about his mother's death. The fact that Perec's mother was not buried in a grave⁴⁹⁴, neither verbally nor physically, does not prevent Perec from constructing a memorial to her, in the form of literature: his journey to *W*, through the horrors of an imagined death camp, fills the scandalous silence of those deaths and words become the funeral of that painful absence. The death of his mother was never told to the child and would only be learnt by him later, when he imagined the sportsmen of *W*, only to be made official in October 1958, when Perec was twenty-two. Perhaps it is precisely the need to concretise this death and to give it a weight, a tangibility, a voice that drives Perec to write. However, it is an absence of weight and presence that is felt, sometimes nostalgically: "Moi, j'aurais aimé aider ma mère à débarrasser la table de la cuisine après le dîner"⁴⁹⁵.

It is not trivial that the only memory Perec has of his mother is of the moment of separation, when Cyrla manages to entrust Perec to a Red Cross convoy that will take him to safety:

⁴⁹³ Georges Perec, *W ou le souvenir d'enfance*, cit., pp. 63-64.

⁴⁹⁴ "Ma mère n'as pas de tombe. C'est seulement le 13 octobre 1958 qu'un décret la déclara officiellement décédée, le 11 février 1943, à Drancy (France)". Ivi, p. 62.

⁴⁹⁵ Ivi, p. 99.

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De ma mère, le seul souvenir qui me reste est celui du jour où elle m'accompagna à la gare de Lyon d'où, avec un convoi de la Croix-Rouge, je partis pour Villard-de-Lans : bien que je n'aie rien de cassé, je porte le bras en écharpe. Ma mère m'achète un Charlot intitulé Charlot parachutiste : sur la couverture illustrée, les suspentes du parachute ne sont rien d'autre que les bretelles du pantalon de Charlot.⁴⁹⁶

The reference to the parachutist recalls that symbolic jump into the void that Perec will experience as an orphan, deprived of the secure and affective bond with his mother. In fact, the same memory will return sixteen years later, in 1958, when Perec will become a paratrooper during his military service:

Je pus lire, dans la minute même du saut, un texte déchiffré de ce souvenir : je fus précipité dans le vide ; tous les fils furent rompus; je tombai, seul et sans soutien. Le parachute s'ouvrit. La corolle se déploya, fragile et sûr suspens avant la chute maîtrisée.⁴⁹⁷

The theme of emptiness is therefore central. Perec's work, however, does not remain confined to the traumas of the ego or personal suffering, but rather opens up to a collective dimension: just think of *Je me souviens*. Moreover, although the work of recovering childhood lost in oblivion was certainly therapeutic for Perec even during the many years he spent in analysis with Pontalis, it is undeniable that his writing is not only at the service of its author but becomes a testimony to History. Note that among Pontalis's writings, *L'Amour des commencements*⁴⁹⁸ stands out, where one can read the case of a certain Pierre G. who is none other than his patient, Georges Perec. Returning to the latter, Perec's manifestation of suffering becomes an act of denunciation of the system that caused it, in the same way as a Primo Levi or other writers-witnesses of the Holocaust who speak directly of their first-hand experiences in the extermination camps. The value of Perec's texts is therefore not only literary, but also historical. In a way, it returns to that dimension of *engagement* that was also characteristic of Calvino. Perec's writing gives voice to a profoundly human suffering and restores the memory of something that was profoundly inhuman.

First of all, it is the testimony of a Jewish child during the years of the Second World War: the neutral language, almost exclusively factual, seems to play the role of the documentary filmmaker who tries not to alter historical facts and to restore the 'purity' and authenticity of reality deprived of the subjective expression of emotions and feelings.

In addition to this, there is also the personal resolution of Perec's identity crisis, as through the narrative he takes responsibility for the history of which he is a victim. It is a psychological and

⁴⁹⁶ Ivi, p. 45.

⁴⁹⁷ Ivi, p. 81.

⁴⁹⁸ Jean-Bertrand Pontalis, *L'Amour des Commencements*, Paris, Gallimard, 1986.

literary work, in which he is committed body and soul, using reality and *fictio*, and, at times, a fictitious narrator who is merely the alter-ego through which he protects himself in narrating horrific events on the verge of the tellable.

Gaspard Winckler, Perec's double, is the bearer of the two abilities that the author himself refuses: the word, because he chooses writing, where emotion can be more easily concealed; emotion, which he strives to mitigate in the act of writing an autobiography.

Perhaps it is precisely in these linguistic devices - the neutrality of language and the use of a fictitious narrator's voice that says I instead of him - that Perec manages to place himself at the right distance from himself in order to be able to tell his story. The staging of reality is indeed extremely painful and requires almost oulipistic tricks in order to be told. This is the same principle he derived from the lesson of Roland Barthes: that telling of things by stealth, those seemingly disconnected fragments, that oblique and indirect glance at the real that allows more facets to be grasped, that degree zero of writing.

As Perec said, "l'écriture dit qu'elle est là et rien d'autre"⁴⁹⁹: there is a conscious desire to avoid the explicitness of any emotion in the approach to truth. What appears as a neutral, cold, aseptic, distant language is precisely the expedient Perec needs to go through the suffering of a story that cannot be told in other terms. Perec seems to make himself an adult witness of the child he no longer is: it is therefore impossible to play the role of the victim and feel sorry for himself. The adult victim, aware that he still has the life that was snatched from his own, chooses a detached language, paradoxically, precisely to get closer to the child he was. The technical expedients to achieve this neutrality are various: short nominal sentences, presence of negations, expressions of doubt, imprecise temporal indications, use of the conditional. It almost appears to be an ethnological reportage divorced from any subjective expression. All these elements seem to insist on the systematic doubt that characterises the entire novel. The veracity of memories is continually questioned, and in this Perec resembles the deportees in the absence of reference points. The questioning through syntactic and lexical choices leads to the evidence of emptiness: the absence of memories is a death that the author carries within himself. The author's desire to be honest with himself shines through in each statement of these doubts: Perec is aware that writing conceals and reveals at the same time.

Une fois de plus, je fus comme un enfant qui joue à cache-cache et qui ne sait pas ce qu'il craint ou désire le plus : rester caché, être découvert.⁵⁰⁰

⁴⁹⁹ Georges Perec, "Les gnocchis de l'automne ou Réponse à quelques questions me concernant", in *Je suis né*, Paris, Seuil, coll. La Librairie du XX siècle, 1991, p. 73.

⁵⁰⁰ Georges Perec, *W ou le souvenir d'enfance*, cit., p. 18.

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Playing hide-and-seek through writing is exactly the gesture performed by Perec, who hides his innermost meanings in the folds of the text. It is up to the reader to be 'the one who counts', that is, the one who patiently searches in the interstices for what Perec has hidden from a superficial reading. The essential is found in the depths of the text, in the unspoken, in the silences that both conceal and reveal. Indeed, despite the coldness of the narration, it is possible to discern several points in which a subjective, participatory voice confides strong feelings that surface in the text:

De tous les souvenirs qui me manquent, celui-là est peut-être celui que j'aimerais le plus fortement avoir: ma mère me coiffant, me faisant cette ondulation savante⁵⁰¹.

or else:

rêvasser pendant deux heures sur la longueur de la capote de mon papa.⁵⁰²

These references are rare, but sufficient to reveal the pain of an adult Perec. Writing shows and conceals at the same time, but most of all it protects, as Perec reveals in 1972:

L'écriture me protège. J'avance sous le rempart de mes mots, de mes phrases, de mes paragraphes habilement enchaînés, de mes chapitres astucieusement programmés.⁵⁰³

Writing protects because it does not say directly, therefore it creates a kind of envelope around that which gives rise to it and which lies at the centre of Perec's entire poetics. Since the centre consists of a void, this whirling of words that constantly hint at the void but do not say it, these disconnected letters, alternating chapters, fractures in the text, suspension points, serve precisely to protect Perec, who could not say, in an explicit and direct manner, the trauma of his parents' deaths and the total absence of belonging. However, immediately after this statement, he corrects himself and, sternly, writes:

Il faudra bien, un jour, que je commence à me servir des mots pour démasquer le réel, pour démasquer ma réalité.⁵⁰⁴

⁵⁰¹ Ivi, p. 74.

⁵⁰² Ivi, p. 63.

⁵⁰³ Georges Perec, "Les gnocchis de l'automne", cit., p. 73.

⁵⁰⁴ Ibid.

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The project of *W* seems to be dedicated to this revelatory intent: to unmask a reality through fictional mechanisms. If the alternating chapters of *W* are an imagined allegory and leave room for fantasy, the final chapter is instead an open denunciation of a historical truth: explicitly showing the connection to the terrible reality of the Shoah and Nazi rule is a courageous act of denouncing evil. Perec seems to ask the reader to collaborate with him to access the unbearable truth of the Holocaust. The rules, *contraintes*, that Perec imposes on the organisation of the text are aimed precisely at this: “C’est une machinerie à laquelle le lecteur doit collaborer pour accéder à l’insupportable, à cette vérité qui n’est pas dite et qu’il doit prendre en charge”⁵⁰⁵. Once again, the unspoken returns and it is the reader who must interpret the text - as argued by Iser in the aesthetics of reception - and find the hidden meanings of the silences. The reading is therefore a call, an invitation to share that historical drama and to get a small idea of Perec's personal tragedy and the collective tragedy of an entire people.

Tout cela est une approche de ma propre histoire mais dans la mesure seulement où elle est collective, partageable. (...) et dans le grand ensemble de nos souvenirs chacun pourrait se choisir une configuration unique. C’est la description d’un tissu conjonctif, en quelque sorte, dans laquelle toute une génération peut se reconnaître.⁵⁰⁶

The ever-present motif of the jigsaw puzzle, of the fabric, of the connection between fragments returns: no longer just the personal ones, but those of a much broader horizon that includes the collective of the Jewish people, in which Perec also fits.

In short, the style Perec chooses to narrate is one of distance and detachment. On a technical level, this distancing also manifests itself from a purely structural point of view. It is in fact a text that is split over and over again, bringing the fictional and the autobiographical into dialogue. The reader often feels estranged, abandoned: Perec makes us perceive, through the form of the novel, the most pregnant meaning of fault, of *cassure*. He refuses to connect what cannot be connected, there is no fluidity of text to compensate for the lack of memories. The poetics of the fragment does justice to the voids of his existence. The book and sentence structures conform to the discontinuity of memories, which we as readers experience through reading. Innocent writing, a notion that Barthes explicitly makes his own, offers no refuge: the neutrality of actions, the repetition of the same minimal operations, the saturation and rhythmic scansion of words are the voice the author chooses to express his suffering and anguish over the madness of a world that is unspeakable except through the channel

⁵⁰⁵ Philippe Lejeune, *La mémoire et l’oublique*, cit., p. 61.

⁵⁰⁶ Georges Perec, “Le travail de la mémoire”, in *Je suis né*, cit., p. 92.

of neutrality. The transparent writing becomes the bearer of Perec's obsession with emptiness, which speaks of a destruction that concerns him but that he has not experienced first-hand.

The detachment of neutral writing thus takes us to a place where autobiography is *a priori* impossible. Perec's strategy of connecting the two alternating narratives draws the reader into the perception of emptiness: the point of contact of the two events is the extermination camp; the point of tangency of the two texts are the points of suspension: the phantasmagoria, the absence, the impossibility of anchoring oneself to History. *W* is a unique work of its kind because it leads the reader to collaborate in a work on himself, in an effort of memory that attempts to deliver a biography in spite of everything. Reading then becomes an active and playful, dynamic gesture: by eliminating any explicit reference point on the relationship between reality and fiction, Perec obliges the reader to construct that place - the ellipsis - in which the alternation of the two texts makes sense. Reading, in this context, properly refers back to the Latin etymology of the term: *legere*, i.e. to bind, to unite.

Thanks to blanks and rhetorical figures such as the ellipsis or the litotes, Perec stages a veritable aesthetics of silence: the text creates an invisible dialogue with the reader, where the unspeakable paradoxically represents the very material of the writing. The silence is eloquent: blanks and voids are the privileged places for the reader's interpretation.

In Perec, we notice how blanks are also typographic, imprinted on the page, which remains empty. Precisely because of this urgent need to say, paradoxically, the text is saturated with absence, lack, blanks and silences. *W* is composed of a series of fragments with no apparent continuity: Perec entrusts the reader with the difficult role of recomposing them in an attempt to imagine the unspeakable. It is through this 'pact' that Perec is able to let his own personal trauma, that of the loss of both his parents, spill out of the text. The novel is all about the need to fill Perec's empty word, that is, to find someone to listen to the unspeakable, someone to read the unexpressed.

Je ne sais pas si je n'ai rien à dire, je sais que je ne dis rien ; je ne sais pas si ce que j'aurais à dire n'est pas dit parce qu'il est l'indicible (l'indicible n'est pas tapi dans l'écriture, il est ce qui l'a bien avant déclenchée); je sais que ce que je dis est blanc, est neutre, est signe une fois pour toutes d'un anéantissement une fois pour toutes.⁵⁰⁷

It can be seen here that silence, the blank, is the driving force behind the autobiographical narrative, which is inevitably structured in this dual alternation of fiction and reality, both of which contain the author's truth. The only means of restoring a consistency to the blank is precisely writing. According to Perec's analyst, Jean-Bertrand Pontalis, the writer found precisely in emptiness the engine of writing:

⁵⁰⁷ Georges Perec, *W ou le souvenir d'enfance*, cit., p. 63.

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Ses deux parents sont morts dans ses premières années : déportés, disparus. Il voit dans cette double disparition la cause de son « amnésie infantile ». ⁵⁰⁸

Pontalis adds that Perec, called Simon, often returns to it because: “J’ai été si tôt orphelin”⁵⁰⁹. Writing thus becomes redemptive in breaking the wall of silence built around his childhood. In other words, the parents have dragged the living child into death. All he has left is to survive and, according to Pontalis, what survives is an extraordinary machine for producing dreams (not dreaming), for playing with words (rather than letting them play), for recording everyday life (provided it remains congealed).

Paradoxalement, c’est parce que la douleur psychique était chez Simon singulièrement manquante – et même les formes les plus habituelles de l’angoisse – qu’il m’a fait percevoir ce que pouvait signifier l’expérience de la douleur et le refus organisé d’aller à sa rencontre.⁵¹⁰

Pontalis goes on to explain that Perec has set up a sort of “camp de concentration mental”⁵¹¹, a closed system that both protects and locks him up, that serves to keep hidden, intact within him and untouched, the link of his mother to the bruised little child, hence the enclosure, the closing in on oneself, the withholding that is peculiar to him⁵¹². In proof of this, in *Je me souviens* Perec writes:

Tout ce travail autobiographique s’est organisé autour d’un souvenir unique qui, pour moi, était profondément occulté, profondément enfoui et d’une certaine manière nié.⁵¹³

If in *La Disparition* we witness the disappearance of the letter E - the mute and unpronounceable letter, pregnant with meaning -, in *W* the most obvious blank is the blank page with the simple inscription “(...)”, which marks the end of the first part of the novel. The most significant novelty is that in the next part there is no longer any mention of Perec's mother. It almost seems as if this ellipsis is symbolic of an impossibility of language to narrate a loss. It is for this reason that the interstices of the text must be investigated, seeking the origin of this void without stopping at its graphic evidence. Suspension points indicate the unspoken. Similarly, in the Jewish tradition of the Midrash, white spaces were places of hermeneutic urgency. Indeed, as David Banon claims, white

⁵⁰⁸ Jean-Bertrand Pontalis, « Sur la douleur », *Entre le rêve et la douleur*, Paris, Gallimard, 1977, p. 172.

⁵⁰⁹ Ibidem

⁵¹⁰ Ivi, p. 261

⁵¹¹ Ivi, p. 172

⁵¹² Cf. Stéphanie Orace, *L’expression muette de deuil*, in *Deuil et Littérature*, Pierre Glaudes, Dominique Rabaté, Presses Universitaires de Bordeaux, 2005, pp. 375-392

⁵¹³ Georges Perec, *Je me souviens*, Hachette/POL, 1978, p. 82

space plays an extremely important implicit role, because it is the bearer of the unspoken. White space is what allows language to be decipherable. Also, it is the void that the reader has to fill with a reserve of meaning that the text conceals. Banon suggests that the white space allows the opening in which transformations are introduced, therefore it is an invitation to interpretation through the unspoken⁵¹⁴. Brief, white space is the bearer of the unspoken: all *W* is played out on the architecture of an absence, which entrusts the reader with the role of revealing it. Perec's writing climbs over the figures of white and void, in the challenge of communicating what is impossible to say.

The publication of *W ou le souvenir d'enfance* in 1975, first in the form of a *feuilleton* and later as a novel, thus marks a turning point in the writer's literary journey. By mixing a real plane - the autobiographical one - and a fictional one, he finally manages to tell the story of his childhood through writing. It is Perec himself, right from the back cover, who warns us of the importance of the rupture that lies in the middle of the novel, which structurally is not only divided into two parts by the famous suspension points, but also sees a significant alternation of characters to emphasise the difference between the fictional and non-fictional chapters. That the central rupture to the novel is the place from which it springs is evident: the unspoken is so important that even the fictional narrative, in the second part, changes in tone and content. Finally, after following Gaspard's story, the reader is plunged into *W*'s universe, and the first sensation is that of disorientation in the face of such a marked change and a lack of continuity with the previous narrative that creates an unbridgeable gap. The reader thus finds himself in the same shoes as Perec, who from a certain point in his life onwards experienced a profound laceration that separated him forever from his previous life, namely his childhood.

The fact that Perec wrote this text with the aim of recounting his unknown, unspeakable and repressed childhood, following a period of great personal crisis and psychoanalytic journey with Pontalis is significant for the purposes of our study. Perec recounts his experience of psychoanalysis in *Les Lieux d'une ruse*⁵¹⁵ and speaks of it in these terms:

Chaque mot que je posais n'était pas jalon, mais détour, matière à rêvasser. Pendant ces quinze mois, j'ai rêvassé sur ces mots-méandres...⁵¹⁶

Pendant longtemps, on croit que parler cela voudra dire trouver, découvrir, comprendre, comprendre enfin, être illuminé par la vérité. Mais non : quand cela a lieu, on sait seulement que ça a lieu ; c'est là, on parle, on écrit : parler, c'est seulement parler, simplement parler, écrire, c'est seulement écrire, tracer des lettres sur une feuille blanche.

⁵¹⁴ Cf. David Banon, *La Lecture infinie: les voies de l'interprétation midrachique*, cit., pp. 203-204.

⁵¹⁵ Geroges Perec, "Les Lieux d'une ruse", in *Penser/Classer*, Paris, Seuil, coll. La Librairie du XX siècle, 2003.

⁵¹⁶ Ivi, p. 60.

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Est-ce que je savais que c'était cela que j'étais venu chercher ? Cette évidence si longtemps non dite et toujours à dire, cette seule attente, cette seule tension retrouvée dans un bredouillement presque intangible ? [...]

Je pose au départ comme une évidence cette équivalence de la parole et de l'écriture, de la même manière que j'assimile la feuille blanche à cet autre lieu d'hésitations, d'illusions et de ratures que fut le plafond du cabinet de l'analyste.⁵¹⁷

Je vins pendant quatre ans m'enfoncer dans ce temps sans histoire, dans ce lieu inexistant qui allait devenir le lieu de mon histoire, de ma parole encore absente.⁵¹⁸

Il fallait d'abord que s'effrite cette écriture carapace derrière laquelle je masquais mon désir d'écriture, que s'érode la muraille des souvenirs tout faits, que tombent en poussière mes refuges ratiocinants. Il fallait que je revienne sur mes pas, que je refasse ce chemin parcouru dont j'avais brisé tous les fils.

De ce lieu souterrain, je n'ai rien à dire. Je sais qu'il eut lieu et que, désormais, la trace en est inscrite en moi et dans les textes que j'écris. Il dura le temps que mon (histoire se rassemble : elle me fut donnée, un jour, avec surprise, avec émerveillement, avec violence, comme un souvenir restitué dans son espace, comme un geste, une chaleur retrouvée. Ce jour-là, l'analyste entendit ce que j'avais à lui dire, ce que, pendant quatre ans, il avait écouté sans l'entendre, pour cette simple raison que je ne lui disais pas, que je ne me le disais pas.⁵¹⁹

Once again, the writing is linked to the theme of deep self-inquiry, trauma, psychoanalysis and madness. It should also be pointed out that in 1971, a few months before embarking on his psychoanalytic journey with Pontalis, Perec attempted suicide. *W*, published in 1975, the year that coincided with the conclusion of his psychoanalytic journey, is situated at the crossroads of a series of themes: writing as a salvific and cathartic means; psychoanalysis as a zone of access to the unconscious and fragmentary self-knowledge; trauma that needs to be said, or written down, in order to be overcome; emptiness as existential anguish to be covered and filled through the therapeutic and literary word; silence as a place of identity rupture and as a fault or source from which words can flow.

Écrire : essayer méticuleusement de retenir quelque chose, de faire survivre quelque chose: arracher quelques bribes précises au vide qui se creuse, laisser, quelque part, un sillon, une trace, une marque ou quelques signes.⁵²⁰

In Perec's case, there is no need to insist further on the theme of trauma, which has already been dealt with extensively in many studies and partially reported on in the preceding pages. The

⁵¹⁷ Ivi, p. 61.

⁵¹⁸ Ivi, p. 65.

⁵¹⁹ Ivi, pp. 70-71.

⁵²⁰ Georges Perec, *Espèces d'espaces*, Paris, Galilée, 2007, p. 123.

writer's entire life revolves around the notion of trauma, death and silence. It is precisely silence that we are now interested in investigating, because this autobiographical text makes extensive use of various formal and thematic devices that have to do with this aspect. Silence is not only expressed aesthetically through suspension points and various rhetorical figures, but is also named and takes on importance precisely because it conceals, hides, protects, removes and at the same time reveals the unspoken. Paradoxically, despite being a silent and demure text, the reader finds himself discovering much more about Perec than is actually verbalised through words. The research questions are therefore: what form does the trauma take? What is said? What is removed? What is alluded to, without it being said? What forms does this silence take? Is it possible to give meaning to the suspension points in the middle of the novel? In Perec's absence of memories, is silence the defeat or victory of memory?

Two articles by Matteo Moca are of interest for the purposes of this study because they analyse the aesthetic aspect of white spaces in Perec and the defeat of language in the narration of evil in *W*. It is necessary to start from a premise that coincides with the hermeneutics of the literary text as the filling of white spaces. According to Wolfgang Iser, in his studies on the aesthetics of reception, the text represents a potential effect that is realised during the reading process⁵²¹ and thus concerns the interaction between the text and the reader. If we take this perspective, it is clearly the reader who is invested with the role of filling in the white spaces, called blanks by Iser. Two consequences follow from this: firstly, there is no meaning of the text without reading it; secondly, the places of indeterminacy of the text, i.e. the blanks, can never be completely filled in by the reader⁵²². This second point is decisive in our reading of *W*. Indeed, the text becomes a critical desire and can only induce research ideas, as Roland Barthes argued in response to Deleuze analysing Proust's *Recherche*, since it is inexhaustible material, not because it is always new, but because it always comes back out of place. Everything is exhausted in the spectre of research⁵²³. Following Iser, we are shown that the meaning of a work cannot be extrapolated from the substance of the hidden meaning, but from appearances and their interpretation: the most concrete substance for the reader is the only means of bringing to light something that never existed before⁵²⁴. Merleau-Ponty also maintains that to interpret a text is to inhabit it to the point of being spiritually involved in it and adds that reading is the means given to me to be absent from myself, to witness from within the fission of Being, at the end of which

⁵²¹ Cf. Wolfgang Iser. *Der Akt des Lesens. Theorie ästhetischer Wirkung*, cit., p. 25.

⁵²² Cf. Matteo Moca, "Iser, Lacan e l'ermeneutica del testo letterario come riempimento degli spazi bianchi. Un'applicazione in Tommaso Landolfi e Georges Perec", *Enthumema*, XVIII 2017, p. 106.

⁵²³ Cf. Gilles Deleuze, *Deux régimes de fou. Textes et entretiens 1975-1995*, tr. Deborah Borca, Torino, Einaudi, 2010, pp. 18-19.

⁵²⁴ Cf. Wolfgang Iser. *Der Akt des Lesens. Theorie ästhetischer Wirkung*, cit., p. 37.

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I alone close in on myself⁵²⁵. Interpretation is thus constituted by a moment of estrangement and stepping out of oneself to enter the text, which then ends in a re-entering of oneself, formulating responses. The reader is therefore part of a performance: he or she must create a code of reference, in the absence of knowledge of the author's intentions. The reader therefore has an active role in the hermeneutics of the literary text and, according to Eco, is “parte del quadro generativo del testo stesso”⁵²⁶. The privileged places for the reader's interpretation of the text are the blanks, the empty spaces, the ellipses that he fills with his projections, which, however, cannot be free but must be anchored to the text to avoid interpretative failure: “naturalmente la cooperazione testuale viene prevista e veicolata dalle mosse strategiche di chi ha generato il messaggio”⁵²⁷. Iser concludes that communication in literature is thus a process initiated and regulated not by a given code but by a mutually limiting and amplifying interaction between the explicit and the implicit, between revelation and concealment⁵²⁸. Moca points out that this is in the very nature of language, where the absence of a sign can itself be a sign:

Nella tradizione letteraria, non diversamente da quella pittorica, il bianco può assumere una valenza iniziatica, quale emblema di un'assenza che virtualmente contiene ogni possibile nascita, ogni attualizzazione.⁵²⁹

This absence, i.e. white space, thus becomes the place of the text's openings and all its potentialities. Absences are the places to which the reader clings in order to bring the text to life:

Nous sentons très bien que notre sagesse commence où celle de l'auteur finit, et nous voudrions qu'il nous donnât des réponses, quand tout ce qu'il peut faire est de nous donner des désirs. Et ces désirs, il ne peut les éveiller en nous qu'en nous faisant contempler la beauté suprême à laquelle le dernier effort de son art lui a permis d'atteindre. Mais par une loi singulière et d'ailleurs providentielle de l'optique des esprits (loi qui signifie peut-être que nous ne pouvons recevoir la vérité de personne, et que nous devons la créer nous-même), ce qui est le terme de leur sagesse ne nous apparaît que comme le commencement de la nôtre, de sorte que c'est au moment où ils nous ont dit tout ce qu'ils pouvaient nous dire qu'ils font naître en nous le sentiment qu'ils ne nous ont encore rien dit.⁵³⁰

According to Moca, these textual gaps exhort reading and constitute the pivot on which the relationship between reader and text is based, as they leave open the connections between textual

⁵²⁵ Cf. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *L'Oeil et l'Esprit*, cit., p. 56.

⁵²⁶ Umberto Eco, *Lector in fabula. La cooperazione interpretativa nei testi narrativi*, (1979), Milano, Bompiani, 2010, p. 7.

⁵²⁷ Federico Bertoni, *Il testo a quattro mani. Per una teoria della lettura*, Milano, Ledizioni, 2010, p. 56.

⁵²⁸ Cf. Wolfgang Iser, *Der Akt des Lesens. Theorie ästhetischer Wirkung*, cit., p. 248.

⁵²⁹ Alberto Castoldi, *Bianco*, cit., p. 15.

⁵³⁰ Marcel Proust, *Sur la Lecture*, La Bibliothèque électronique du Québec, Collection *À tous les vents*, Volume 401: version 1.02, p. 40.

depths and invest the reader with the task of interpreting them. It is therefore in the unspoken, in that which is not made explicit in the surface, that what is to be sought: “un testo postula il proprio destinatario come condizione indispensabile non solo della propria capacità comunicativa concreta ma anche della propria potenzialità significative”⁵³¹. Hermeneutic activity therefore starts from these white spaces, from the barely hinted at clues, from the mute parts of the text: attention must be paid to the marginal, to what is removed, to what is hidden beneath the surface of the text, to the “zone privilegiate – spie, indizi – che consentono di decifrarla”⁵³². Indeed, as Iser points out in the preface to *The Act of Reading*, a text is a product whose interpretative fate must be part of its own generative mechanism⁵³³. If we consider, like Moca, that the reader assumes a role similar to that of the psychoanalyst, then the distinction Lacan proposes between the full word and the empty word is interesting. The full word is the one that can be interpreted and is also the one that gives the reader the coordinates in order to be understood, unlike the empty word, which opens gaps in the text that only the hermeneutic effort of the reader can fill. Following Iser and Lacan, it is therefore up to the reader-psychoanalyst to interpret the white spaces of the text and the words, full and empty.

Michel Servant's article⁵³⁴ analyses Perec's text from the same perspective as this work, thus investigating its silences through formal and content expedients. The starting point of his analysis is that *W* is not simply an autobiographical puzzle, but also a *roman feuilleton*, of whose nature the cut, the ellipses, the suspensions and the blank are fundamental components. Perec himself, writing about his project to Maurice Nadeau, said:

Je me suis dit que la forme qui conviendrait le mieux [...] était celle du roman-feuilleton [...] m'obligeant chaque jour à une nouvelle invention, à la construction d'épisodes dont chacun conclurait heureusement celui qui précède et préparerait, dans le mystère et le suspens (ou suspense), celui qui suit.⁵³⁵

It is thus evident from the outset that the novel makes use of sequence cuts and internal divisions.

Furthermore, *W* is defined as a “fiction autobiographique” that exhibits an *écriture blanche*. The alternation of autobiographical chapters and adventure novel creates a succession of 37 chapters divided by the central ellipsis between chapters XI and XII. This generating blank of the book is

⁵³¹ Umberto Eco, *Lector in fabula. La cooperazione interpretativa nei testi narrativi*, cit., p. 51.

⁵³² Carlo Ginzburg, *Miti, emblemi, spie. Morfologia e storia*, Torino, Einaudi, 2012, p. 191.

⁵³³ Cf. Wolfgang Iser, *Der Akt des Lesens. Theorie ästhetischer Wirkung*, cit., p. 25.

⁵³⁴ Michel Servant, “Blanc, coupe, énigme : « auto(bio)graphies ». *W ou le souvenir d'enfance* de Georges Perec”, in *Littérature*, n°98, 1995, *Biographismes*, pp.3-23; <https://doi.org/10.3406/litt.1995.1574>.

⁵³⁵ Georges Perec, “Lettre à Maurice Nadeau”, in *Je suis né*, cit., p. 63.

defined by Sirvent as a *tomo(topo)graphique* space and by Jean Ricarou as a *matéριο-rupture*⁵³⁶. Analysing the structure of *W* more closely, Sirvent points out that there is a structural anomaly. In the first part there are 6 fictional and 5 autobiographical chapters; in the second part there are 13 italicised chapters dedicated to the description of *W*'s island and as many autobiographical sections. The hinge between the two parts marks the only infraction. This anomaly, according to Mireille Ribière means that: “La fiction vient occuper, au chapitre XII, la place que le principe d'alternance attribuait à l'autobiographie”⁵³⁷. Sirvent conceives of the rupture at the centre of the novel in these terms:

Avec cette coupure, il ne s'agit plus seulement d'un espace vide, mais à la fois d'un seuil et d'une suite : le récit est suspendu « autour d'on ne sait quelle attente ». Cet espace signalé comme « vacant » suspend non seulement le récit mais, au lieu même où ils se disposent, les points de suspension remarquent sa fonction signifiante. Ceux-ci, entre parenthèses, soulignent une deuxième fois qu'à la limite ils auraient pu ne pas être remarqués. Suivant le principe de redoublement qui règle apparemment l'ensemble de l'ouvrage, l'on peut affirmer que cette seconde ouverture « (...) », en répondant à la formule « pour E » de la première partie, se verrait ainsi attribuée le rôle d'une seconde dédicace. Si l'on peut supposer que le E majuscule de la première renvoie à une personne réelle, la tante Esther par exemple, la lettre joue aussi bien le rôle d'une véritable dédicace intertextuelle. Le montage péritextuel place en équivalence une lettre, l'objet d'un intertexte lipogrammatique (*La Disparition*), et des signes diacritiques, dont la fonction n'est plus seulement ruptrice et suspensive mais emblématique. En effet, cette section « disparue » de l'espace de *W* que suggère en filigrane la structure (celle qui eût été la douzième) joue ce même rôle d'aporie structurelle que le chapitre V de *La Disparition*.⁵³⁸

In light of these considerations, it is important to note how the number of chapters in *W* corresponds to that of *La Disparition*, as if there were a *myse en abyme*.

The entire book is played out on the structure of the double and on dichotomies: the book is divided into two parts; Chapter VIII is divided into two texts: one dedicated to the photo of the father, the other to the mother; *W* is a bifid letter, a double V, which in the title already anticipates the structure of the novel thanks to the conjunction “ou”; there are two characters in the writing; there are two dedications, two epigraphs referring to two time categories (past and future) and two incipits:

Cette brume insensée où s'agitent des ombres, comment pourrais-je l'éclaircir ? (Première partie)
cette brume insensée où s'agitent des ombres, — est-ce donc là mon avenir ? (Deuxième partie)

J'ai longtemps hésité avant d'entreprendre le récit de mon voyage à *W* (I, 9).

⁵³⁶ “Avec les matéριο-rupteurs vides, ce qui s'insère dans le texte, ce n'est plus du texte: ce sont des blancs, en général réglés”. Jean Ricardou, “La Révolution textuelle”, *Esprit* 12, 1974, p. 940.

⁵³⁷ Mireille Ribière, “L'autobiographie comme fiction”, *Cahiers Georges Perec* n° 2, Textuel 34/44, n° 21, 1988, p. 27.

⁵³⁸ Michel Sirvent, “Blanc, coupe, énigme : « auto(bio)graphiques ». *W ou le souvenir d'enfance* de Georges Perec”, cit., pp. 5-6.

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Je n'ai pas de souvenirs d'enfance (II, 13).

In the conclusion of the two incipits, Sirvent notes, are the two pieces of the book's title. The conjunction then becomes the emblem of the caesura, translated by the suspension points in the middle of the novel.

Like the fictional story, the autobiography also doubles up: not only from the separation from the mother, but also from the first attempt at writing. Sirvent argues that there is a *before* and *after* vocation to write that is revealed when Perec writes, “pour un journal de classe”, “un feuilleton policier”⁵³⁹. In the second chapter there is on the one hand the absence of childhood memories, and on the other the invention of a story:

Je n'ai pas de souvenirs d'enfance.⁵⁴⁰

À treize ans, j'inventai, racontai et dessinai une histoire.⁵⁴¹

The story of *W* is thus the fiction of Perec's childhood for which no memory exists. Around this void there is a further division, this time geographical, in Chapter XIII: Vilin on one side and Villard on the other. Again, the double V and the double life return.

The analysis of *W*'s structure is crucial because we derive certain considerations from it concerning the silences, what is kept mute, and the enigmas it is full of. First of all, we can see that it is not only Perec's biographical story that is constantly fragmentary, but also the writing: there are repetitions, parentheses, suspensions under the sign of the double. That is why, if “l'Histoire avec sa grande hache”⁵⁴² deprived Perec of memories with which to tell his story, in their place is a “métadiscours de l'inénarrable-autobiographique”⁵⁴³. Sirvent claims: “C'est sous le démon de la division et de la répétition que prendrait forme une écriture « de » — plutôt que « sur » — la « disparition »”⁵⁴⁴. It is Perec himself who reveals to us the mechanism of writing:

Une fois de plus, les pièges de l'écriture se mirent en place. Une fois de plus, je fus comme un enfant qui joue à cache-cache et qui ne sait pas ce qu'il craint ou désire le plus : rester caché, être découvert.⁵⁴⁵

⁵³⁹ Philippe Lejeune, *La Mémoire et l'oblique*, cit., pp. 111-113, p. 114: Documents 10 and 11.

⁵⁴⁰ Georges Perec, *W ou le souvenir d'enfance*, cit., p. 17.

⁵⁴¹ Ivi, pp. 17-18.

⁵⁴² Ivi, p. 17.

⁵⁴³ Michel Sirvent, “Blanc, coupe, énigme : « auto(bio)graphies ». *W ou le souvenir d'enfance* de Georges Perec”, cit., p. 10.

⁵⁴⁴ Ibidem.

⁵⁴⁵ Georges Perec, *W ou le souvenir d'enfance*, cit., p. 18.

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Sirvent, on this subject, writes:

Les répliques, lexicale que souligne telle unité composée (« cache-cache»), syntaxique (les deux relatives : « un enfant qui joue/et qui ne sait pas » ; puis à nouveau la subdivision : « ce qu'il craint / ou désire »), le double infinitif actif / passif, antithétique (« rester caché / être découvert »), créent une forme d'énoncé alternatif dont le sujet / l'objet sont peut-être aussi bien l'existence que l'écriture : l'on raconte pour mieux cacher ce que l'on veut taire ou pour mieux exhiber ce que l'on ne peut dire tout en se masquant davantage. Le même en se divisant rencontre l'autre ou, l'un, en se dédoublant, produit son contraire : si je raconte son histoire, ce n'est pas cette histoire que je peux raconter mais une autre, celle qui se dérobe sous cette unité nominale, son objet, l'« histoire », mais aussi bien, le « sujet » qui la narre. L'on est toujours déjà deux, singulier et général, individuel et historique. Sous chaque titre, sous chaque lettre, sous chaque mot et sous chaque énoncé, dès qu'on y pense, s'en faufile un autre qui le partage. Écrire, c'est diviser.⁵⁴⁶

Perec's paradoxical aim seems to be to say something in order to conceal what one wants to keep silent. He does this not only through the concealment of certain meanings in the words or structure of the book, but also through certain narrative ellipses. If we consider the two fictional parts - the account of Gaspard Winckler's journey and the description of W's island - we notice that Gaspard's mission is suspended. Corresponding to this omission and interruption is a geographical ellipsis: we move from Germany to Tierra del Fuego. As Sirvent notes, on an enunciative level Winckler's disappearance corresponds to his exit from the scene. At the conclusion of the dialogue with Otto Apfestahl, in fact, the words “Je me tus”⁵⁴⁷ appear, which correspond to the elocutionary disappearance of the character, or to some extent to the suicide of the apparent narrator. Here Winckler's story remains in suspense, whose fate we will not know and whose outcome we will not know. After the suspension points that split the novel, another story opens up, located in another place, told by another narrator: Winckler, the autodiegetic narrator⁵⁴⁸, is in fact replaced by a narrator whose presence in the story is completely obliterated: his presence is not marked in the discourse, he appears rather as an ethnographic guide. Thus, the subject Winckler is replaced by a topographical subject, the island of W. Both names begin with W. Sirvent draws this conclusion:

On constate alors que cette bipartition générale, évidente sur le plan typographique, annoncée dès la couverture, accentuée sur le plan tomo(topo)graphique, masque, sur le plan diégétique, une manière de triptyque. Entre les

⁵⁴⁶ Michel Sirvent, “Blanc, coupe, énigme : « auto(bio)graphies ». *W ou le souvenir d'enfance* de Georges Perec”, cit., pp. 10-11.

⁵⁴⁷ Georges Perec, *W ou le souvenir d'enfance*, cit., p. 87.

⁵⁴⁸ Cf. Gérard Genette, *Nouveaux discours du récit*, Seuil, coll. « Poétique », 1983, p. 69.

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deux textes visibles, on l'a signalé, la partition centrale signale un espace tiers, celui qu'aurait occupé un troisième texte, un texte en quelque sorte « disparu », un texte « perdu ».⁵⁴⁹

It is precisely this missing and lost text that the reader must try to locate: all the deeper meaning of *W* is to be found in the unspoken, in the silence, in what is omitted and hidden. The work of reading must be done in this *entre-deux*:

La recherche de sens produite dans *W* par la conjonction-disjonction des textes (l'italique et le romain, les deux parties de l'italique jointes et disjointes par les points de suspension, etc.) et l'énigme de leur rapport.⁵⁵⁰

Emblematic of this search to be carried out in the interstices and seemingly empty spaces of the text is the Hebrew letter that Perec mentions and graphically inserts into the text. Numerous studies have been carried out on the hidden meanings of this letter, but here it is only interesting to point out that the letter has a side that is not traced, it is somehow left open or unfinished. This refers to all those textual structures that are left unfinished, interrupted or omitted, just like the missing chapter in *La Vie, mode d'emploi*⁵⁵¹ or chapter 5 of *La Disparition*, or the autobiographical central chapter of *W ou le souvenir d'enfance*. All these texts follow what Sirvent called in his article an economy of suppression, of which the letter W seems to be the emblem, as it recalls the open and cryptic structure of the book.

Precisely from the strictly autobiographical works that all revolve around the idea of a suppression and a lack, Sirvent and Ribière tend to analyse the so-called 'narrative perturbations':

Les perturbations narratives que l'on y relève s'apparentent bien, elles aussi, à la suspension. Le récit autobiographique leur assigne donc indirectement une cause : elles seraient le symptôme d'un traumatisme dont l'autobiographie révèle, en creux, l'existence.⁵⁵²

What emerges from Sirvent's analysis is the following:

En général, l'on tend à interpréter toutes les matèrio-ruptures, et le montage de *W*, comme les figurations spatiales d'un « manque » préexistant, d'ordre précisément psycho-existential (*W* s'est écrit « dans le prolongement de la

⁵⁴⁹ Michel Sirvent, "Blanc, coupe, énigme : « auto(bio)graphies ». *W ou le souvenir d'enfance* de Georges Perec", cit., p. 12.

⁵⁵⁰ Geneviève Mouillaud-Fraisse, « Cherchez Angus, W : une réécriture multipliée », *Cahiers Georges Perec* n° 2, cit., p. 87.

⁵⁵¹ "C'est le chapitre 66 qui disparaît ou plus exactement ce qui aurait dû être le chapitre 66, car il y a évidemment un chapitre 66 dans le roman, mais c'est celui qui aurait dû être le chapitre 67 ». B. Magné, « Le Puzzle, mode d'emploi, petite propédeutique à une lecture métatextuelle de *La Vie, mode d'emploi* de Georges Perec », Texte 1, 1982, note 2, p. 77.

⁵⁵² Mireille Ribière, "L'autobiographie comme fiction", cit., p. 27.

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psychothérapie faite en 1949 »⁵⁵³), comme s'il s'agissait d'une suspension imposée apparemment par l'Histoire (« le grand naufrage de l'Holocauste ») ou l'histoire individuelle (la disparition de la mère) sur la forme du récit. Ainsi interprète-t-on les « silences » et les « trous » du récit comme un « montage de symptômes, laissant le lecteur affronter seul le problème de l'interprétation ». Davantage, de Burgelin à Lejeune, on réduit les séries fictionnelles à la catégorie de « fantasme » : la fiction est fantasme. Or, si le système de *W* est bien issu d'« un fantasme enfantin », il est surtout devenu, tel qu'il se donne à lire, une « reconstitution ».⁵⁵⁴

The link between silences in the text and trauma is thus explicitly highlighted: the narrative disturbances, the *matéριο-ruptures* of the text, the blanks and omissions are all linked to a previous lack of a psychological and existential nature, tied to Perec's personal history. Indeed, *W* is sometimes regarded as an extension of the psychotherapy carried out in 1949. The difference in the interpretation of the text with respect to those of Burgelin and Lejeune is thus linked to the shift of attention from the phantasmal to the reconstitution: if it is true that *W* stems from the experience of an "infantile phantasm", it is equally true and proper to recognise that the text is placed in the perspective of the reparation of a suffered trauma.

However, taking other positions into consideration, Sirvent goes beyond this:

Pour d'autres critiques, même si l'on s'attache à montrer comment le récit autobiographique « prend à son compte les procédés d'écriture à l'œuvre dans la fiction » pour conclure qu'« au-delà des différences génériques, l'écriture autobiographique ne se distingue pas fondamentalement de l'écriture fictionnelle », c'est le plus souvent sous l'angle de la série autobiographique que se déchiffre la fiction : celle-ci en est réduite à n'être que la transposition de données biographiques.⁵⁵⁵ Non seulement la série fictionnelle se décrypte en fonction d'allusions à l'histoire personnelle ou collective mais le récit autobiographique lui-même en est réduit à ses matériaux.⁵⁵⁶ Si l'écriture de l'autobiographie s'est accomplie comme une « lecture », une « extension du récit de fiction »⁵⁵⁷, le fait que Perec ait conservé la priorité de la fiction dans l'ordre du volume qui est celle de son antériorité génétique conduit bien à envisager, de façon plus décisive, ainsi que le souligne Mireille Ribière, comment « l'autobiographie travaille les données biographiques de la même manière que la fiction »⁵⁵⁸ et, plus largement, quels sont les liens textuels qui articulent, au-delà des différences génériques, typographiques, de leur découpe et de leur espacement, les multiples séries.⁵⁵⁹

⁵⁵³ Philippe Lejeune, *La Mémoire et l'oblique*, cit., p. 68.

⁵⁵⁴ Michel Sirvent, « Blanc, coupe, énigme : « auto(bio)graphies ». *W ou le souvenir d'enfance* de Georges Perec », cit. p. 15.

⁵⁵⁵ « Ainsi de la naissance de Winckler qui transpose des événements biographiques tels que la date de naissance de l'auteur et celles du décès de ses parents ». M. Ribière, « L'autobiographie comme fiction », cit., p. 26.

⁵⁵⁶ « Les points de repère biographiques, matériau transformé dans et par l'écriture, ne génèrent pas seulement l'anecdote fictionnelle, ils fournissent le système numérique qui ordonne à la fois le récit de fiction et l'ensemble du volume dans lequel il s'inscrit ». Encore : « le récit de fiction devient un document autobiographique au même titre que les textes de jeunesse largement annotés du chapitre VIII ». Ivi, p. 26-27.

⁵⁵⁷ « L'insert autobiographique assure ainsi, en partie, la lisibilité du récit de fiction [...] ». Ivi, p. 25.

⁵⁵⁸ Ivi, p. 32.

⁵⁵⁹ Michel Sirvent, « Blanc, coupe, énigme : « auto(bio)graphies ». *W ou le souvenir d'enfance* de Georges Perec », cit., pp. 15-16.

A further relationship thus becomes apparent: not only that between autobiographical text and trauma, but also that between autobiography, trauma and fiction. The fiction is deciphered from the autobiographical data, which in turn, being traumatic, are transposed into a fictional universe: what is not said in the autobiographical chapters is encrypted in another code that gives light to Perec's fictional world. Bernard Magné points out how the two texts, autobiographical and fictional, are in a hierarchical relationship in which fiction, although it occupies the first position in the reading chronology since the first chapter is fictional, is subservient to autobiography.⁵⁶⁰ Indeed, if the so-called contiguous textual sutures in the heterographic chapters attest to an underlying continuity in the work, let us equally assume that fiction constitutes an element of the autobiographical narrative.

Bref, les composants de la fiction ne sont retenus qu'en tant qu'ils représentent, que ce soit de façon cryptée, indirecte ou allusive, des événements biographiques. On y trouve une « origine » du côté de l'expérience biographique, étant entendu que tout dispositif *graphique* n'en serait qu'une *traduction*, d'où la valorisation de la série existentielle en réduisant un tout, en l'occurrence polylogique, à l'une de ses parties. On connaît le credo, l'existence précède toujours l'écriture.⁵⁶¹

Fiction then represents biography: if life always precedes writing, in Perec's case, as in that of other writers, the fictional material is in turn the only means of saying what experience, marked by numerous traumas, has rendered unspeakable. At the same time, in order to read the meanings encrypted within them, the intertextual links of Perec's works are crucial. The links between *W*, *La Disparition* and *La Vie, mode d'emploi* are numerous, but will not be dealt with in this study. Here, it is interesting to note first of all that the lipogram in *La Disparition* is closely connected to the disappearance of Perec's mother, which is somehow revealed in *W*:

S'il était licite de se hasarder à noircir cette page blanche, on pourrait dire que, dans cet espace où rien n'est dit, le faux Gaspard Winckler part pour W et le petit Georges Perec part pour Villard, quittant sa mère qu'il ne reverra jamais (elle mourra à Auschwitz). En fait, dans cette page blanche, c'est l'explosion de l'univers (fictif, pour Winckler, « réel • pour Perec), qui fonde le texte. En ce sens, *W* pourrait aussi s'appeler *La Disparition*. C'est dire que les liens des deux (deux ?) textes n'apparaîtront qu'à des lectures successives.⁵⁶²

⁵⁶⁰ Cf. Bernard Magné, « Les sutures dans W ou le souvenir d'enfance », *Cahiers Georges Perec* n° 2, Textuel 34/44, n° 21, 1988, p. 41.

⁵⁶¹ Michel Sirvent, « Blanc, coupe, énigme : « auto(bio)graphies ». *W ou le souvenir d'enfance* de Georges Perec », cit., p. 16.

⁵⁶² Anne Roche, « Souvenir d'enfance », *Magazine littéraire*, Numéro spécial « G. Perec, mode d'emploi », mars 1983, n° 193, pp. 27-28.

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The two texts speak to each other, but they do so in silence: it is up to the reader to find the unspoken connections, the implicit meanings, the plots hidden between the pages of the text, which Perec never explicitly reveals. Perec's texts are silent precisely in this: nothing is ever revealed, everything is always concealed. The effort required of the reader is that of research, just like Gaspar Winckler. Warren Motte writes:

Concluons : la lettre chez Perec renvoie aux origines. Le E de *la Disparition* figure ses parents ; le W est souvenir d'enfance, caractère de la judéité. La lettre devient aussi signe de la mort, de l'exil, du vide, et signe de clôture textuelle : le E tue les personnages de *la Disparition*, l'histoire de l'île de W finit dans les camps, Bartlebooth meurt un W à la main.⁵⁶³

The hallmark that links *La Disparition* to *W* is that of absence, death, and emptiness, which are at the centre of Perec's life as well as in his texts, which are an opaque reflection of it.

The character of Bartlebooth is equally significant in this sense. The unfinished business of this Melville character who dies at his workbench is reminiscent of the unfinished text of *La Vie, mode d'emploi*:

Le dernier trou à combler dans le quatre cent trente-neuvième puzzle a la forme d'un X, mais la dernière pièce qui reste à poser a la forme d'un W.⁵⁶⁴

Every intertextual connection, from *Moby Dick* to *Don Juan*, however, leads to a common denominator, which Motte defines as “absence absolue”⁵⁶⁵, catalysed around the letter, not coincidentally silent, E:

Puisque E figure les parents de Perec, et que la littérature forme pour lui une parenté retrouvée, il s'ensuit que E, la lettre, mène à la littérature.⁵⁶⁶

If E leads us to literature, it is because, as Perec wrote in the postscript of *La Disparition*: “Ainsi naquit, mot à mot, noir sur blanc, surgissant d'un canon d'autant plus ardu qu'il apparaît d'abord insignifiant pour qui lit sans savoir la solution, un roman...”⁵⁶⁷. Sirvent, about this black on white writing, writes:

⁵⁶³ Warren Motte, « Le Catalogue d'une vie », *Magazine littéraire*, 193, 1983, p. 122.

⁵⁶⁴ Ibidem.

⁵⁶⁵ Ibidem.

⁵⁶⁶ Ivi, p. 123.

⁵⁶⁷ Georges Perec, *La Disparition*, Paris, Gallimard, coll. “L'Imaginaire”, 2006, p. 333.

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Écriture noire « pour blanc », qu'il s'agisse de puiser dans l'intertexte perecquien, tout ce qui est allusion aux « moyens », aux conditions matérielles de la représentation, est réduit, de façon toute monosémique, à n'être que le signe d'un manque inaugural d'ordre existentiel.⁵⁶⁸

The motif of lack and incompleteness is thus the characteristic feature of Perec's writing, which also has an autobiographical purpose in its fictional material:

Il y aurait une *finalité autobiographique* de l'œuvre perecquienne qui rendrait compte aussi bien de toutes les aventures « métatextuelles » en reversant au chapitre de l'Histoire ou de l'histoire individuelle tous les récits de fiction dont l'unique fonction serait de matérialiser un certain paradigme de l'omission.⁵⁶⁹

The paradigm of omission is closely linked to the theme of silence and in the case of *W*, in order to *read* the text, it is necessary to go beyond the material that can *actually be read* and look rather for what is *not* there: silences say more than words. The text is all built around this principle: that of absence. Sirvent writes: “Le texte *imprime* plutôt qu’il n’*exprime* le vide”⁵⁷⁰. While the unspeakable is what provided the impetus for writing⁵⁷¹, writing itself produces the sense of the inexpressible⁵⁷². Here the teaching of Rachel Boué returns, according to whom 20th century writing is all about silence and the inexpressible, which become its driving force. Sirvent comments further:

L'écriture révèle alors ce qui l'a déclenchée : « l'indicible », « l'irréparable ». La nouvelle de Melville, *Bartleby*, était pour Perec le parfait exemple d'un texte qui suscite telle impression de vide « non pas comme une fin, mais en tant que tel » : *Bartleby* a ceci de particulier qu'il est, pour moi, tout entier contenu dans ce sentiment trouble — l'étrangeté, l'éloignement, l'irréparable, l'inachevable, le vide, etc. »⁵⁷³. Il est moins question, finalement, de « dire l'indicible », de redonner un simulacre de « voix » à une absence de « vie » (« l'écriture est le souvenir de leur mort et l'affirmation de ma vie », VIII, 59) — ce qui reconduit toujours plus ou moins la « structure » à une métaphysique de l'inexprimable — que de donner à parcourir l'espace du « récit » d'où quelque chose ne se représente pas (comme l'expression d'un quelque chose que l'on ne peut pas dire), mais se présente, depuis la partition des séries, comme l'effet d'un inscriptible (un quelque chose qu'on peut effectivement lire comme étant absent de ce qui est écrit).⁵⁷⁴

⁵⁶⁸ Michel Sirvent, “Blanc, coupe, énigme : « auto(bio)graphies ». *W ou le souvenir d'enfance* de Georges Perec”, cit., p. 17.

⁵⁶⁹ Ivi, p. 18.

⁵⁷⁰ Ivi, p. 19.

⁵⁷¹ Cf. “L’indicible n’est pas tapi dans l’écriture, il est ce qui l’a bien avant déclenché”. Georges Perec, *W ou le souvenir d'enfance*, cit., p. 63.

⁵⁷² Cf. “Je sais que je ne dis rien”, Ibidem.

⁵⁷³ “Lettre inédite, à Denise Getzler”, *Littératures* n 7, Université de Toulouse-Le-Mirail, 1983, p. 63.

⁵⁷⁴ Michel Sirvent, “Blanc, coupe, énigme : « auto(bio)graphies ». *W ou le souvenir d'enfance* de Georges Perec”, cit., pp. 19-20.

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It is therefore not just a matter of saying the unspeakable, but of expressing emptiness: and how to express it if not through an actual absence, of content and form? Perec chooses *not to represent* something in the text, so that this absence speaks from itself and of itself. What is represented in *W* is above all what is not said: telling his story, for Perec, amounts to lipogrammatic writing where, paradoxically, it is above all what is missing that tells us something. It is not only what Perec wishes to keep silent or what cannot be said because it is not remembered, but what is necessarily kept silent so that something else can be said.

Furthermore, the figure of Gaspard Winckler and the island of W deserve some further considerations. First of all, a significant fact for us is that the child Gaspard Winckler is deaf-mute, due to a traumatic event, and therefore lives in a totally silent universe that imposes a discrete isolation on him. To attempt an extreme rescue from this condition, the mother - who in the opera is a singer and is called Caecilia, a name similar to Perec's mother, Cyrla - organises a voyage at sea to discover the world in the hope that her son will gain access to speech again. This metaphorical rescue can be associated with the actual rescue attempt made by Cyrla, Perec's mother, when she left him on the Red Cross train to save him from the Nazis. The fate of the mothers, as well as that of their children, is identical: Caecilia dies on the sea voyage, Cyrla dies in the death camps. Furthermore, Gaspard Winckler is the only survivor of the tragic accident at sea, and according to various theories we find him, although absent from the text, on the island of W in Tierra del Fuego. At the same time, Perec also somehow survives but loses his mother and his memories. In fact, after the ellipsis that splits the book in half, there is a total absence of the mother figure, no longer present in Perec's memory. There is thus a parallelism of silence between what is hushed in the autobiographical world and in the fictional one.

Secondly, although the congruence between the island of W and the extermination camp is omitted until the very last page of the book, the attentive reader can discern the clues right from the start. There are in fact two key elements that, despite not being explicit, can recall the terrible world of Auschwitz between one silence and another. Firstly, W's athletes wear "un large triangle d'étoffe blanche"⁵⁷⁵, reminiscent of the Star of David. Secondly, one characteristic is that "les Athlètes en exercice n'ont pas de noms, mais de sobriquets"⁵⁷⁶, just as the prisoners in the camps were deprived of their names, a founding characteristic of personal identity, and were associated with numbers. Finally, the island of W recalls, due to various characteristics such as the strongly hierarchical structure and the lack of rights, the totalitarian regime established in the concentration camps. The important fact for our study is that even this association is not really made explicit: Perec never writes

⁵⁷⁵ Georges Perec, *W ou le souvenir d'enfance*, cit., p. 134.

⁵⁷⁶ *Ibidem*.

that *W* is Auschwitz. When we reach the end of the book and read Rousset's quotation, we are puzzled precisely because, again, in extremis, it is up to us readers to make the connection. Everything is hushed to the end and every web of meaning remains silent:

Dans les récits perecquiens, les ellipses syntaxiques engendrent un brouillage du discours : en supprimant volontairement des mots ou des groupes de mots, l'auteur confère une place privilégiée au lecteur. Ce dernier se transforme en un véritable co-énonciateur et devient un déchiffreur du sens caché. L'interaction entre les omissions du texte et le récepteur du non-dit crée une scénographie discursive atypique qui privilégie les jeux de pistes sémantiques. Dès lors, il s'agit de savoir comment les ellipses participent à asseoir cette écriture du silence tout en établissant un dialogue direct avec le lecteur.⁵⁷⁷

Monia Ben Jalloul identifies three ways in which Perec is silent in her texts: suspension points, ellipsis, the litotes and the irony that often follows. If we have already dealt at length with ellipsis and suspension, it will be worth dwelling on a couple of instances of the use of the litotes in the text. First, we will use a couple of definitions:

Un trope par lequel on se sert de mots qui à la lettre, paraissent affaiblir une pensée dont on sent bien que les idées accessoires feront sentir toute la force : on dit moins par modestie, par égard, mais on sait que ce moins réveillera l'idée du plus.⁵⁷⁸

La litote consiste à dire moins pour faire entendre davantage, c'est-à-dire à choisir une expression atténuée de manière à renforcer l'information. Elle a donc une orientation de valeur inverse à celle de l'euphémisme, qui cherche à amoindrir l'information.⁵⁷⁹

What emerges in both cases is the illocutionary force of this rhetorical figure, which involves the enunciation of something that deliberately conceals implicit information to be discovered and thus requires an interactive context in which the reader is urged to participate.

So far, we have considered how reticent Perec's autobiographical writing is: it not only conceals content, but also hides emotions. Perec's style in *W ou le souvenir d'enfance* is almost entirely devoid of emotional overtones and favours neutrality and detachment. In this perspective, Jalloul writes, the litotes reinforces the unspoken. One example among many is in Chapter VIII, in which Perec describes his father:

⁵⁷⁷ Monia Bel Jalloul, "Les figures à l'épreuve du silence: cas de la litote et de l'ellipse dans l'oeuvre de Georges Perec", in *Quêtes littéraires n 7*, Université Clermont Auvergne, 2017, p. 171.

⁵⁷⁸ César C. Du Marsais (1818), *Des tropes ou des différents sens dans lesquels on peut prendre un même mot dans une même langue*, Paris, Slatkine, 1967, pp. 145-146.

⁵⁷⁹ Georges Molinié, *Dictionnaire de rhétorique*, Paris, Le livre de poche, 1992, p. 207.

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Le cimetière est bien entretenu. Dans un coin pourrissent quelques bouts de bois avec des noms et des matricules. J'allais une fois sur ce que l'on peut appeler la tombe de mon père. C'était un premier novembre. Il y avait de la boue partout.

Il me semble parfois que mon père n'était pas un imbécile. Je me dis que ce genre de définition, positive ou négative, n'a pas une très grande portée. Néanmoins, cela me conforte un peu de savoir qu'il y avait en lui de la sensibilité et de l'intelligence.⁵⁸⁰

The first distance is given by the sentence: "ce que l'on peut appeler la tombe de mon père". In fact, as Jacqueline Authier-Revuz argues, it is a form of "représentation de la non-coïncidence du discours à lui-même"⁵⁸¹ which, by detaching itself from 'je', creates distance between the enunciator and the target of his utterance. The indefinite pronoun 'on', which recalls an indeterminate community, emphasises that Perec does not imply himself in his utterance. Furthermore, we note how the father's grave, and thus the figure of the father, of whom he remembers nothing, does not stand out at all from the surrounding graves. The use of the gloss reinforces the indeterminate character of the father figure who is in fact evanescent. Nevertheless, Perec uses the litotes "mon père n'était pas un imbécile" through which the question of paternal intelligence is investigated. In this way, the reader deduces that in spite of everything, Perec has an attachment to his father, which he wishes to enhance. This, however, is concealed, like many other elements, and it is up to the reader to discover this through the clues in the text.

A second case of litotes is the following, this time concerning the mother:

Elle tenta plus tard, me raconta-t-on, de passer la Loire. Le passeur qu'elle alla trouver, et dont sa belle-sœur, déjà en zone libre, lui avait communiqué l'adresse, se trouva être absent. Elle n'insista pas davantage et retourna à Paris. On lui conseilla de déménager, de se cacher. Elle n'en fit rien. Elle pensait que son titre de veuve de guerre lui éviterait tout ennui. Elle fut prise dans une rafle avec sa sœur, ma tante. Elle fut internée à Drancy le 23 janvier 1943 puis déportée le 11 février suivant en direction d'Auschwitz. Elle revit son pays natal avant de mourir. Elle mourut sans avoir compris.⁵⁸²

As with his father's account, Perec also uses a detached style with regard to his mother's terrible death and makes almost a list of events without any affective tone. This distance is also given through the use of phrases such as "me raconta-t-on" and "on lui conseilla", where the discourse is entrusted to others. The use of the *passé simple* also reinforces the progression of the flow of events, as in a rapid news report, which are projected into an era long gone. Here again, however, the

⁵⁸⁰ Georges Perec, *W ou le souvenir d'enfance*, cit., p. 49.

⁵⁸¹ J. Authier-Revuz, *Ces mots qui ne vont pas de soi, boucles réflexives et non-coïncidences du dire*, Paris, Larousse. Vol. 2, 1995, p. 269.

⁵⁸² Georges Perec, *W ou le souvenir d'enfance*, cit., p. 53.

enunciator's apparent distance is called into question by a phrase: “Elle revit son pays natal avant de mourir”. This sentence, according to Jalloul, mitigates the tragic nature of deportation as it turns the latter into a kind of return to one's origins and the verb “revit” reveals an idea of happy nostalgia. The irony, however, is that the country of her birth also ends up being the one that gives her death.

From these two lithotypes, we can deduce that the detachment of Perec's writing is a strategy:

En ne révélant aucun affect, Perec retient l'attention du lecteur qui cherche à comprendre les motifs de ce détachement. La litote confirme que derrière cette réticence du dire se cache en réalité des émotions tellement intenses qu'elles ne trouvent pas de mots pour les exprimer.⁵⁸³

We can conclude that silence also plays a fundamental role here: it is thanks to silence and what is not said in the text that Perec shows his feelings, which can only be revealed in an oblique and undirected writing, which makes use of the litotes to attenuate a reality that is the bearer of deeper senses.

The reference to silence, if one looks closely, is present from the very second page of the novel, in the novelistic section. Perec writes of “le silence, le silence glacial”⁵⁸⁴ that inhabited the ghost town of which he was, through the character of Winckler, “le seul dépositaire”⁵⁸⁵. Precisely to save that place from oblivion, the narrator allows himself to be invaded by memories and decides to retrace the stages of his journey, which led him to the island of W.

The word silence continues to be recalled explicitly throughout the book, but it is at the conclusion that it comes back to forcefully impose itself. Describing the island of W, Perec writes that among the athletes, although some continue to shout, most remain silent, stubbornly⁵⁸⁶. Silence becomes a strategy to endure the unspeakable for concentration camp prisoners, just as it becomes a strategy for him, in childhood, to save himself. However, the adult Perec then seems to have realised that memories, especially traumatic ones, needed to find a place and a meaning⁵⁸⁷: hence *W ou le souvenir d'enfance* was born. The re-elaboration of the trauma takes place through writing, which becomes a tool to exist and to signal a lack, amidst the gaps and silences of the text.

Still with respect to Perec's chosen conclusion, it is necessary to dwell on the quotation he chose from David Rousset. This, in fact, deals with the camps but has no direct relation to the death of his mother, which occurred in a gas chamber. In fact, the chapter of Rousset's book from which

⁵⁸³ Monia Bel Jalloul, “Les figures à l'épreuve du silence : cas de la litote et de l'ellipse dans l'oeuvre de Georges Perec”, cit., p. 174.

⁵⁸⁴ Georges Perec, *W ou le souvenir d'enfance*, cit., p. 14.

⁵⁸⁵ Ibidem.

⁵⁸⁶ Cf. “Quelques-uns ne cessent de hurler, mais la plupart se taisent, obstinément”. Ivi, p. 191.

⁵⁸⁷ Cf. Emanuela Cacchioli, “Perec e i silenzi della sua identità: un vuoto da colmare con artifici grafici e creativi”, in Elephant & Castle, n 6 – *Il silenzio*, settembre 2012, p. 25.

the quotation is taken also bears the trace of the reading that Perec must have done. The quotation from *L'Univers concentrationnaire* in *W* precedes the evocation of the camps of Jews and Poles and the descriptive passage about the opening of the gas chambers. *This* would therefore have been Perec's favourite part in choosing a quotation with which to speak of his mother's death. However, Perec, just as in *La Disparition*, makes this information disappear, creating a new kind of blank or silence:

Ici, la citation décrit le cercle de l'impossibilité de dire, en rejetant la mise à mort dans le hors champ du texte et la laissant en suspens. Ce qu'aucun mot, aucune phrase ne parvient à dire, Perec, en « marranisant » la langue, l'exprime comme le cryptage d'un douloureux secret.⁵⁸⁸

In addition to this secret that is both painfully concealed and at the same time pointed out in the text, Perec thus echoes the invisible ellipsis concerning the disappearance of his mother halfway through the novel. Indeed, returning to the structural imbalance of the book, composed of 37 chapters, an odd number, it is useful to consider the following observation:

Sauf à considérer que cette page (presque) blanche désigne l'emplacement autobiographique d'un chapitre absent, ou bien elle signifie que ce chapitre est présent par son absence même et que cette absence fait signe au lecteur. S'il en est ainsi, l'équilibre de l'alternance est préservé et l'on peut admettre que l'autobiographie n'a pas toujours besoin de mots pour s'écrire, qu'elle peut tout à fait s'écrire entre les mots, ou hors des mots en passant par d'autres signes qui sont silencieux sans être véritablement muets.

Ainsi, « (...) » signifie, sans le dire, qu'il y a du non comptabilisable dans cette vie, du manque auquel cette vie est appendue, dont les mots ne peuvent rendre compte – mais qui ne doit pas pour autant être maintenu hors du langage. Car il en va de la survie du sujet d'intégrer l'absence et ses hantises dans un langage qui se prête particulièrement à cet accueil : le langage littéraire, l'expression artistique.⁵⁸⁹

Literary language thus becomes the spokesperson for a lack that winks at the reader and makes itself present precisely because of its very absence. Perec never explicitly names the real referent and this creates a difficulty in the reader on the one hand, and a curious enquiry on the other.

The book therefore ends with a symmetry between the end of the first part and the end of the second, which also marks the conclusion of the novel. Both endings are two ellipses: the first typographical, the second intertextual, since they refer to another text outside *W*. This creates a game of resonances on a par with that of alternating autobiographical and fictional chapters. The structure of the book is punctuated not only by these two narrative strands, but also by the blanks that language creates by cancelling itself out and making way for silences and disappearances.

⁵⁸⁸ Philippe Mesnard, "L'écriture testimoniale au-delà de la temporalité narrative", in *Etudes Romanes de Brno* 31, 2, 2010, pp. 11-12.

⁵⁸⁹ *Ivi*, p. 12.

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Thus, if Perec wondered, at the beginning of the novel, how to write a book about something - memories, a life experience - that he is missing, the answer seems to have been found: precisely because it has not been lived, language will try to embrace absence, emptiness and silence.

Pierangela Adinolfi, dealing with *W ou le souvenir d'enfance* and the question of absence, speaks of a “creazione negativa, cioè [ad] una creazione che nasce dallo spazio bianco e dalla soppressione del testo”⁵⁹⁰ and goes on to argue that: “Il foglio bianco diventa altamente significante, non vuol dire che nel vuoto non ci sia nulla, bensì esattamente il contrario”⁵⁹¹. The emptiness inscribed in the text by Perec corresponds to the inner emptiness caused by the loss of parents:

All'interno di questa struttura narrativa, Perec compie il tentativo di nominare l'innominabile, di far sussistere attraverso briciole di memoria la presenza evanescente dei genitori e di riempire il vuoto dell'assenza materna. Nella sua vicenda, il significato dell'esistenza nasce dal vuoto e dal silenzio e si concretizza nella scrittura. La neutralità del ricordo corrisponde all'annullamento, alla morte, alla distruzione dell'identità materna che torna lentamente alla vita per mezzo del potere immaginativo del figlio.⁵⁹²

If it is from silence that writing originates, it is no coincidence that it is inhabited by the shadows, or rather the ghostly and evanescent presences, of his dead parents. The theme of death is as central as that of imagination, which makes up for the shortcomings and augments the meagre information on the reality of the Schulevitz family, that of Perec's mother. The writing itself takes on an evanescent style and becomes fragmentary, made up of unconnected and dislocated sentences:

Désormais, les souvenirs existent, fugaces ou tenaces, futiles ou pesants, mais rien ne les rassemble. Ils sont comme cette écriture non liée, faite de lettres isolées incapables de se souder entre elles pour former un mot, qui fut la mienne jusqu'à l'âge de dix-sept ou dix-huit ans, ou comme ces dessins dissociés, disloqués, dont les éléments épars ne parvenaient presque jamais à se relier les uns aux autres, et dont, à l'époque de W, entre, disons, ma onzième et ma quinzième année, je couvris des cahiers entiers: [...] les jambes des athlètes étaient séparées des troncs, les bras séparés des torsos, les mains n'assuraient aucune prise. Ce qui caractérise cette époque c'est avant tout son absence de repères : les souvenirs sont des morceaux de vie arrachés au vide. Nulle amarre. Rien ne les ancre, rien ne les fixe. Presque rien ne les entérine.⁵⁹³

Perec's memories and writing resemble the bodies of athletes, whose parts are disunited and who lack references on which to anchor themselves and lack grip and security.

⁵⁹⁰ Pierangela Adinolfi, «Ricordo o immaginazione: l'assenza della madre in “W ou le souvenir d'enfance” di Georges Perec», *Studi Francesi* [Online], 165 (LV | III) | 2011, <http://journals.openedition.org/studifrancesi/4877>, p. 567.

⁵⁹¹ Ibidem.

⁵⁹² Ivi, p. 569.

⁵⁹³ Georges Perec, *W ou le souvenir d'enfance*, cit., pp. 97-98.

Cécile De Bary dedicates an article precisely to Perec's writing style⁵⁹⁴ and points out how at the end of chapter VIII of *W* he makes explicit the use of a “blanche” and “neutre”⁵⁹⁵ writing, his difficulty in “dire je”⁵⁹⁶ and “une parole absente à l’écriture”⁵⁹⁷. About this passage, Claude Burgelin writes: “Il importe absolument à Perec de maintenir la distinction entre écrire et dire, entre écrire et parler”⁵⁹⁸. This observation is closely reminiscent of an observation that Perec made about himself:

Je vais d’abord vous dire une chose tout à fait évidente, c’est que je suis écrivain et je ne suis pas orateur. J’écris et je ne parle pas, et non seulement je ne parle pas, mais je ne parle pas de ce que j’écris, moi, je déteste ça. [...] lorsque j’écris, tous les sentiments que j’éprouve, toutes les idées que j’ai ont déjà été broyés, ont déjà été passés, ont déjà été traversés par des expressions, par des formes qui, elles, viennent de la culture du passé. Alors, cette idée en amène encore une autre, à savoir que tout écrivain se forme en répétant les autres écrivains. C’était une idée un peu taboue. On disait d’un écrivain, tel écrivain s’inspire de... il n’a pas encore trouvé sa vraie voix, v-o-i-x, il n’a pas encore trouvé sa vraie parole, il n’a pas encore trouvé cette espèce d’oiseau au-dessus de sa tête qui va lui dicter ce qu’il a à dire, ni sa Muse qui vient chanter pendant qu’il dort.⁵⁹⁹

Writing, as for Marguerite Duras, originates from silence and is accompanied by silence: the scandal of his parents' silence and his⁶⁰⁰. Indeed, De Bary points out that Perec does not remember his parents' words and does not speak the language they spoke, as he himself writes in *Récits d'Ellis Island*:

Quelque part, je suis étranger par rapport à quelque chose de moi-même ; quelque part, je suis « différent », mais non pas différent des autres, différent des « miens » : je ne parle pas la langue que mes parents parlèrent, je ne partage aucun des souvenirs qu’ils purent avoir, quelque chose qui était à eux, qui faisait qu’ils étaient eux, leur histoire, leur culture, leur espoir, ne m’a pas été transmis.⁶⁰¹

The silence associated with orality and the sound memory of language is reflected in a writing that is crumbled and disconnected, as it is not handed down by firm memories. To compensate for this, in Chapter XXXI of *W* we find the discovery of literature as a place of salvation:

⁵⁹⁴ Cf. Cécile De Bary, *L’Écriture ou la voix, Perec et le style*, Le Seuil | « Poétique », 2014/1 n° 175 | pp. 59-72, ISSN 1245-1274, ISBN 9782021153828.

⁵⁹⁵ Georges Perec, *W ou le souvenir d’enfance*, cit., p. 63.

⁵⁹⁶ « Ce n’est pas, comme je l’ai longtemps avancé, l’effet d’une alternative sans fin entre la sincérité d’une parole à trouver et l’artifice d’une écriture exclusivement préoccupée de dresser ses remparts ». Ivi p. 62-63; « Il faudrait dire Je. Il voudrait dire Je ». Philippe Lejeune, *La Mémoire et l’Oblique*, cit., p. 24.

⁵⁹⁷ Georges Perec, *W ou le souvenir d’enfance*, cit., p. 63.

⁵⁹⁸ Claude Burgelin, *Les Parties de dominos chez Monsieur Lefèvre*, Lyon, Circé, 1996, p. 90.

⁵⁹⁹ Georges Perec, « Pouvoirs et limites du romancier français contemporain », conférence prononcée le 5 mai 1967 à l’université de Warwick, 1990, rééd. in *Entretiens et conférences*, Nantes, Joseph K, 2003, Vol. I, p. 77-82.

⁶⁰⁰ Cf. “Le scandale de leur silence et de mon silence”. Georges Perec, *W ou le souvenir d’enfance*, cit., p. 63.

⁶⁰¹ Georges Perec et Robert Bober, *Récits d’Ellis Island, histoires d’errance et d’espoir*, cit., p. 59.

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C'est de cette époque que datent les premières lectures dont je me souviens. Couché à plat ventre sur mon lit, je dévorais les livres que mon cousin Henri me donnait à lire. [...] source d'une mémoire inépuisable, d'un ressassement, d'une certitude: les mots étaient à leur place, les livres racontaient des histoires; on pouvait suivre; on pouvait relire, et, relisant, retrouver, magnifiée par la certitude qu'on avait de les retrouver, l'impression qu'on avait d'abord éprouvée: ce plaisir ne s'est jamais tari: je lis peu, mais je relis les livres que j'aime et j'aime les livres que je relis, et chaque fois avec la même jouissance, que je relise vingt pages, trois chapitres ou le livre entier: celle d'une complicité, d'une connivence, ou plus encore, au-delà, celle d'une parenté enfin retrouvée.⁶⁰²

Perec was, to all intents and purposes, nourished by the words of the writers he avidly read as a child, making the wisdom and sensibilities of others his own. Not only were they an emotional nourishment, but they also gave him that feeling of security and stability that only comes from that which does not change, like the pages of books, in which one can always find the same words once read. Perec was indeed an avid reader, who often reread novels almost as if to verify that the stories and letters remained constant, always in place. This certainty comforted him in the face of the instability of everyday life, and assured him a place where he could find stillness and complicity.

Not only did Perec find fictional parents in writers and novels, but he applied fictional characteristics to his real parents. In *W ou le souvenir d'enfance*, in the absence of authentic memories, Perec in fact appealed to a fictional universe. With regard to his mother in particular, he placed her in a scenario that was as expressive as it was artificial:

Il me semble de la voir, lorsque je pense à elle, une rue tortueuse du ghetto, avec une lumière blafarde, de la neige peut-être, des échoppes misérables et mal éclairées, devant lesquelles stagnent d'interminables queues. Et ma mère là-dedans, petite chose de rien de tout, haute comme trois pommes, enveloppée quatre fois dans un châle tricoté, traînant derrière elle un cabas tout noir qui fait deux fois son poids.⁶⁰³

In this almost fairy tale-like description, it is clear that Perec invented utopian images in which to situate imagined and perfect type-characters that echoed his ideal of parenthood. The portrait of his mother was drawn using the paradigms and narrative patterns of the novels that inhabited the world of his childhood, from which he drew literary characters. Thus, the mother recalls the figure of Andersen's *Little Match Girl* but also that of Cosette from Hugo's *Misérables*.

Je n'arrive pas à préciser exactement les sources de cette fabulation ; l'une d'entre elles est certainement La Petite marchande d'allumettes d'Andersen ; une autre est peut-être l'épisode de Cosette chez les Thénardier; mais il est probable que l'ensemble renvoie à un scénario très précis.⁶⁰⁴

⁶⁰² Georges Perec, *W ou le souvenir d'enfance*, cit., pp. 193-195.

⁶⁰³ Ivi, p. 50.

⁶⁰⁴ Ivi, p. 60.

Although Perec claims not to be able to find precisely the source of this continuous fabulation, the comparisons drawn between the fictional and real characters once again reinforce that omnipresent link in the writer's poetics between reality and *fictio*.

The father also underwent the same imaginative distortion and, in the absence of real documents or memories, the son reinvented a story for him inspired by childhood readings. The fate reserved for the father is that of a soldier, probably derived from the young Perec's passion for toy soldiers: "A une certaine époque de ma vie [...] l'amour que je portais à mon père s'intégra dans une passion féroce pour les soldats de plomb".⁶⁰⁵ In addition, reading Dumas's *Vicomte de Bragelonne* allowed him to compare his father to d'Artagnan because of the sacrifice of both during the war: d'Artagnan was killed immediately after his elevation in rank to marshal and, by a similarly tragic fate, Perec's father died at the Armistice Vigil. This is why Perec stated: "C'est la mort de d'Artagnan qui me transportait le plus"⁶⁰⁶. In this regard, David Bellos comments on this particular silence of Perec:

Le silence de Perec [...] sur son œuvre autobiographique, est tellement frappant qu'il constitue un vide palpable, éloquent, et il n'est pas vraiment surprenant que les lectures se soient tournées vers les œuvres de fiction, qui contiennent effectivement quelques clés, pour percer les sentiments de Perec sur ce sujet crucial.⁶⁰⁷

Likewise, Perec found literary correspondents for himself and identified with different imaginary characters. All of them, however, had common characteristics: Perec found himself, above all, in the plight of orphans, as David Bellos noted⁶⁰⁸. First of all, he found a familiarity with Verlaine's Gaspard Hauser: an orphan hero who aroused compassion and empathy in him, precisely because of the common fate he shared with this one. The name Gaspard will later return several times in Perec's work, and it is no coincidence that it is the same name as the main character in *W*. From this it is clear that Perec's autobiographical writing represents, first and foremost, an identity *quête*. As David Bellos wrote:

Il n'était pas le seul jeune écrivain à prendre l'autobiographie comme matériau de fiction, ou à utiliser la fiction comme quête d'identité ou rempart de défense. Perec ne devait d'ailleurs chercher l'originalité en tant que telle. En fait, il ne devait jamais chercher autre chose que lui-même.⁶⁰⁹

⁶⁰⁵ Cf. *Ivi*, p. 48.

⁶⁰⁶ Cf. *ivi*, p. 197.

⁶⁰⁷ David Bellos, *Georges Perec. Une vie dans les mots*, Paris, Seuil, 1994, p. 116.

⁶⁰⁸ *Ivi*, p. 129.

⁶⁰⁹ *Ivi*, p. 218.

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Precisely because it was himself he was seeking, Gaspar Hauser was not the only fictional character with whom Perec identified. Other examples symptomatic of this tendency are certainly Meursault, or Camus's *Etranger*⁶¹⁰, but also, as Claude Burgelin noted, Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*: Perec would thus resemble a modern-day Robinson, deprived of everything and forced to construct a language and a network of relationships for himself⁶¹¹. In these legendary heroes, Perec finds the same character traits, the same living conditions and the same deficits. Literature thus becomes a repertoire from which to extract characters that help him forge an identity: from reading and acquiring ideas from direct confrontation with great authors, Perec will then move on to writing, through which he himself will create new identities and characters. De Gary defines this operation on language in these terms:

Faire entendre le silence tout en retrouvant la parenté de la littérature, ce serait donc faire taire la parole au profit de l'intertexte.⁶¹²

The parenthood found in writing thus echoes a trauma-related silence, from which the experience of writing springs: the importance of the word in Perec is as vital as that of silence.

C'est cela que je dis, c'est cela que j'écris et c'est cela seulement qui se trouve dans les mots que je trace, et dans les lignes que ces mots dessinent, et dans les blancs que laisse apparaître l'intervalle entre ces lignes.⁶¹³

The last element relating to silence that it seems necessary to investigate is the theme of modesty, dealt with extensively by David Bellos⁶¹⁴. Critics have so far insisted on Perec's discretion linked to the absence and death that relate to his experience as an orphan, the son of Jews, and thus to the absences that history provoked in his childhood life and that Perec reports, in a veiled and demure manner, in his texts. Bellos's article, however, draws on other considerations and in particular researches what Perec does not, or hardly ever, deal with in his novels: sex and amorous passion. For this analysis, it will be necessary to go momentarily beyond *W ou le souvenir d'enfance* and investigate the author's life and some works that are significant for this aspect.

The critic wonders why this theme is almost never present in the author's texts and postulates the hypothesis that Perec, unable to have stable relationships with women due to a lack of self-

⁶¹⁰ Cf. Ivi, p. 139.

⁶¹¹ Cf. Claude Burgelin, *Georges Perec*, Paris, Seuil, coll. Les contemporains, 1988, p. 227.

⁶¹² Cécile De Bary, *L'Écriture ou la voix, Perec et le style*, cit., p. 65.

⁶¹³ Georges Perec, *W ou le souvenir d'enfance*, cit., p. 63.

⁶¹⁴ Cf. David Bellos, "La Pudeur de Perec", in *Poésie* 2002, n 94 (2002): 39-49.

confidence that leads him to be almost impotent, avoids the theme because he does not know how to talk about it, as it is too addictive.

Bellos points out that indeed Perec's writing is no stranger to passions or impulses: just think of his passion for catalogues, lists, enumerations, things, collections, history, words. Yet there are no love stories in his novels, with the exception of *Les Revenentes* and *La Boutique Obscure*. These two texts have a peculiar history, however, because they were written at the time when Perec was being analysed by Pontalis and both demonstrate a rather aggressive, or at least uncooperative, relationship with the analyst. *Les Revenentes* would respond to sexual 'ghosts' explored during analysis, but reported in the text with an ironic exaggeration towards the analyst. *La Boutique Obscure*, on the other hand, reports a series of dreams that are published and sometimes written down with the intention of being transcribed, i.e. rewritten, ending up no longer being useful material for the purposes of therapy. With respect to this, Pontalis writes that the dead parents are behind Perec's psychological problems, masquerading under the name of Stéphane⁶¹⁵. Indeed, Perec was already aware of this in his twenties and wrote:

Où trouver chaque soir assez d'espoir pour avoir envie de vivre le lendemain ?

La cause superficielle : la solitude

La cause profonde : l'impuissance

La cause première : le manque de confiance

La cause cachée : le manque de tendresse

... et je n'ai même pas connu ce qui pour moi est le principal parce qu'originellement j'en ai été privée par la mort de ma mère...⁶¹⁶

We note how absence is certainly a hallmark of Perec's life and work, but it is not solely attributable to the death of his mother: an important element in Perec's adult life is also a lack as a man, an element that is totally absent from his writings and about which he is silent.

Another text that deals with a love story is *L'Attentat de Sarajevo*, which recounts, with strongly autobiographical elements, the passion between a young Frenchman and a Yugoslavian university student. Yet, in this novel, it is not the love for Mila that is the vital driving force of the male protagonist's story, but rather his relationship with his friend Branko, for whom he feels a desire to emulate. Perec himself, in one of his letters to his friend Jacques Lederer, will say: "L'amitié aura été ma grande passion"⁶¹⁷. Indeed, none of his love affairs were lasting, and the question has often

⁶¹⁵ Cf. J.-B. Pontalis, « A partir du contre-transfert : le mort et le vif entrelacés », *Nouvelle Revue de psychanalyse* 12 (automne 1975) : 81-82.

⁶¹⁶ *Lettre autographe de Georges Perec*, printemps 1956; in D. Bellos, *Georges Perec. Une vie dans les mots*, cit., p 170.

⁶¹⁷ Georges Perec et Jacques Lederer, "Cher, très cher, admirable et charmant ami...", *Correspondance Georges Perec et Jacques Lederer*, Paris, Flammarion, 1977, p. 302.

been raised as to whether an unconfessed homosexual desire was behind Perec's love troubles⁶¹⁸. In general, Bellos draws the conclusion that Perec's choice not to deal with the theme of love in his novels is a choice to differentiate himself: the writer will only deal with marginal themes.

Et de toutes ces aventures, le sexe et l'amour sont bannis. Le mot n'est pas trop fort, il me semble ; il ne s'agit pas du tout de refoulement, mais d'une volonté claire et nette de ne pas tomber dans le déballage de soi, dans le roman psychologique, ou dans le nouveau roman.⁶¹⁹

The causes of this reticence lie not only in the obvious shortcomings of childhood, but also in deeper places. In the years leading up to the publication of several novels, including the *feuilleton* of *W*, Perec's life became more and more tiring, so much so that in early 1971 he attempted suicide by slitting his wrists. Perec's close friends were well aware that the cause of such despair was linked to a disappointment in love due to a broken relationship. To get out of it, Perec began the aforementioned therapy with Pontalis. The break-up of the relationship, however important, was not the only cause of that attempt:

De la honte du rejet, de la colère qu'il en ressentit, et de sa part de responsabilité dans ce débâcle, Perec ne souffle mot dans son œuvre. L'absence de passion amoureuse des grandes œuvres de la maturité ne provient pas d'une vie menée à l'abri de la tempête, mais au contraire d'une vie trop peu abritée de la violence destructrice de la folie amoureuse. En tant qu'écrivain Perec va regarder ailleurs ; ou faire semblant, tout au moins.

Cette tactique du silence et du déplacement est illustrée de façon émouvante dans une lettre adressée par Perec à Suzanne Lipinska, après la rupture.⁶²⁰ Perec y parle des menues activités d'une vie déboussolée sur un ton d'une si extrême platitude que l'émotion transparait à chaque tour de phrase.⁶²¹

The absence of the love theme is therefore not linked to a life too dedicated to it, but to a lack that provokes silence. From the testimonies of some of the women associated with Perec, it seems that he was incapable of giving physical pleasure and therefore felt the main culprit in the end of his relationships⁶²². This is what drove him to the analysis with Pontalis.

La condition dont il s'agit est peut-être le symptôme d'une inhibition ; la trace littéraire du symptôme lui-même, par contre, est un silence quasi-total sur tout ce qui concerne le sexe et l'amour.⁶²³

⁶¹⁸ Cf. David Bellos, *Georges Perec. Une vie dans les mots*, cit., p. 148.

⁶¹⁹ David Bellos, *La Pudeur de Perec*, cit., p. 5.

⁶²⁰ A paraître dans les actes du *Colloque de Rabat sur Le Mythe de Perec*, sous la direction de Jean-Luc Joly.

⁶²¹ David Bellos, *La Pudeur de Perec*, cit., p. 6.

⁶²² Cf. David Bellos, *Georges Perec. Une vie dans les mots*, cit.

⁶²³ David Bellos, *La Pudeur de Perec*, cit., p. 7.

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Bellos, about this silence and absence in his volumes, returns to *W* and writes:

Le manque que Perec cache tout à fait consciemment à l'époque de la rédaction de *W ou le souvenir d'enfance* et de *La Vie mode d'emploi*, la blessure dont il n'a vraiment pas envie de parler, est un manquement en tant qu'homme. [...] A la différence d'un Robbe-Grillet, il ne se met pas en scène ; à la différence d'un Stendhal, il ne crée pas à partir de sa souffrance. Il s'impose une discrétion presque totale, et construit une œuvre dans les vastes espaces qui restent à l'extérieur de cette zone d'ombre et d'insatisfaction. La pudeur de l'œuvre – un aspect primordial de sa nouveauté et une raison considérable de l'affection dont il jouit auprès de lecteurs – est donc à la fois un choix volontaire, et l'expression d'une personnalité qui pour des raisons assez pénibles préférerait « ne pas parler de ça ». ⁶²⁴

The right question to ask then is: what is missing in the texts? What theme is completely absent? The answer, already analysed, says a lot about Perec and his life. It is no coincidence that in *W*, which is the author's most autobiographical work, there is a lack of this theme.

In the first handwriting of chapter XXI of *W* we can read:

Une autre fois [...] nous étions en train de jouer quand quelqu'un vint en courant m'avertir que ma tante était là. Je courus vers une silhouette vêtue de sombre qui, venant du collège, se dirigeait vers nous à travers champs. Je m'arrêtai pile à quelques mètres d'elle. C'était une dame que je ne connaissais pas. C'était ma tante Berthe [...] pourtant je garde avec une netteté absolue le souvenir du sentiment d'incrédulité difficilement exprimable : dévoilement d'une « vérité » élémentaire (désormais il ne viendra à toi que des étrangères ; les lieux ni les êtres ne seront à toi ; tu les chercheras et tu les repousseras sans cesse ; ils ne t'appartiendront pas car tu les tiendras à part) dont je ne crois pas avoir fini de suivre les méandres. ⁶²⁵

The parenthetical sentence, however, in the final script has been revised and has become:

Désormais il ne viendra à toi que des étrangères ; tu les chercheras et repousseras sans cesse ; elles ne t'appartiendront pas, tu ne leur appartiendras pas, car tu ne sauras que les tenir à part. ⁶²⁶

What changes is the problem to be explained: in the first case, it is a general disposition; in the second, the author's inability to have relationships with women is highlighted. Regarding this, Bellos comments:

⁶²⁴ Ivi, pp. 7-8.

⁶²⁵ Stockholm, Kung. Biblioteket, ms 1997/10. Cf. "The 'Third Dimension' of Perec's *W ou le souvenir d'enfance*", *French Studies Bulletin* 70.1 (Spring 1999): 1-3.

⁶²⁶ Georges Perec, *W ou le souvenir d'enfance*, cit., pp. 141-142.

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Perec ne savait pas comment parler de ses problèmes de relations ; mais ce que l'on ressent de cette réécriture de l'interprétation du souvenir de la tante Berthe, c'est qu'il se croyait obligé de faire un effort dans ce sens. Le manuscrit montre à quel point la liaison entre l'enfance et la difficulté des rapports féminins de l'adulte n'est pas spontanée, mais réfléchie et voulue. « L'insuffisance amoureuse » est donc tout aussi « textualisée », pour reprendre le terme restrictif de Magné, que la fausse latéralisation, la date du 11 février 1943 ou les autres « autobiographèmes ». ⁶²⁷

Perec's silences and discretion therefore reveal significant traits of the writer's personality in his literary choices. Perec was aware that he was going against the grain of the literary fashions of the time, yet he still chose to avoid dealing with romantic passion.

Ce choix de l'inhibition repose beaucoup moins qu'on ne l'a dit sur la blessure de la shoah, l'oubli de la mère, et le drame et les conséquences de l'adoption. Elle repose dans une mesure que nous avons essayé d'indiquer sur un manque de confiance, malheureusement fondé, dans sa capacité de donner satisfaction dans l'amour, particularité fort difficile à assumer ouvertement dans le milieu « rive gauche » qui était le sien avant et après mai 68. ⁶²⁸

Certainly, from a psychoanalytic perspective, the death of the mother is linked to Perec's inability in love relationships as well as the thematic and structural shortcomings we notice in his work. However, Bellos argues, “qu'il est de toute évidence impossible de cantonner la « difficulté d'être » exprimée par l'écrivain notamment dans *W ou le souvenir d'enfance* dans le seul domaine des « thèmes juifs »” ⁶²⁹. Reading *W* as a literary monument that plays hide-and-seek with the theme of death and history is therefore not enough and does not do justice to the integrity of Perec's person, who certainly suffered from the absence of his parents, but whose adult life was also marked by other failings, first and foremost that of a satisfying love relationship. It is Perec himself who points out that literature and life are two communicating aspects:

Mais la littérature n'est pas une activité séparée de la vie. Nous vivons dans un monde de parole, de langage, de récit. [...] La littérature est, indissolublement, liée à la vie, le prolongement nécessaire de l'expérience, son aboutissement évident, son complément indispensable. Toute expérience ouvre à la littérature et toute littérature à l'expérience, et le chemin qui va de l'une à l'autre, que ce soit la création littéraire ou que ce soit la lecture, établit cette relation entre le fragmentaire et le total, ce passage de l'anecdotique à l'historique, ce va-et-vient entre le général et le particulier, entre la sensibilité et la lucidité, qui forment la trame même de notre conscience. ⁶³⁰

⁶²⁷ David Bellos, “La Pudeur de Perec”, cit., p. 9.

⁶²⁸ Ibidem.

⁶²⁹ Ibidem.

⁶³⁰ Georges Perec, “Robert Antelme ou la vérité de la littérature”, in *L.G. Une aventure des années soixante*, La Librairie du XXI siècle, Paris, Seuil, 1992, pp. 88-89.

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This extract, derived from Perec's article *Robert Antelme ou la vérité de la littérature*⁶³¹, sheds light on the author's conception of literature, which sees it as inextricably linked to experience.

A final point worth addressing when analysing the theme of silence in *W* is that of Perec's attitude towards Holocaust literature, provided by the aforementioned article. This essay was written by Perec at the age of 26, in 1963, and marks the transition from his youthful writings to his more mature style. This is done by discreetly acknowledging that the concentration camps had completely eradicated all forms of expression and changed their nature. Dan Stone, in this regard, writes:

But Perec's reading of Antelme did not just lead him imaginatively to find a way of structuring his work around a lack or loss; it also allowed him to confront his loss whilst also avoiding it.⁶³²

The camps then become the structure of his work, even though they are obliquely so, and the commentary on Antelme's book is a way of confronting his loss while avoiding talking about it explicitly. In short, this essay represents his first explicit attempt to relate to his legacy as an orphan. In the article, Perec deals in particular with Robert Antelme's *L'Espèce Humaine* and the relationship between testimony and silence, between writing and the unspeakable:

Quand il revint, Robert Antelme entreprit d'écrire : pour que son retour ait un sens, pour que sa survie devienne victoire, il fallait alors que de cette masse confuse et indifférenciée, inabordable, tour à tour machinerie énorme ou quotidien lamentable, émerge une cohérence, qui unisse et hiérarchise les souvenirs, et donne à l'expérience sa nécessité.

Cette transformation d'une expérience en langage, cette relation possible entre notre sensibilité et un univers qui l'annihile, apparaissent aujourd'hui comme l'exemple le plus parfait, dans la production française contemporaine, de ce que peut être la littérature.

L'écriture, aujourd'hui, semble croire, de plus en plus, que sa fin véritable est de masquer, non de dévoiler. On nous invite, partout et toujours, à ressentir le mystère, l'inexplicable. L'inexprimable est une valeur. L'indicible est un dogme. Les gestes quotidiens, à peine sont-ils décrits, qu'ils deviennent des mensonges. Les mots sont des traîtres. On nous invite à lire entre les lignes cette inaccessible fin vers laquelle tout écrivain authentique se doit tendre : le silence.⁶³³

It seems that the literary world contemporary to Perec was hostile to a certain kind of representation, but Perec is a firm believer in the power of language and sees in *L'Espèce humaine* a testimony to both the sayable and the unsayable:

⁶³¹ Cf. Georges Perec, "Robert Antelme ou la vérité de la littérature", cit.

⁶³² Dan Stone, "Perec's Antelme", in *French Cultural Studies* 1999, 10; 161.

⁶³³ Georges Perec, "Robert Antelme ou la vérité de la littérature", cit., pp. 111-112.

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Nous nous trompons. Nous pouvons dominer le monde. Robert Antelme nous en fournit l'irréfutable exemple. Cet homme qui raconte et qui interroge, qui combat avec les moyens qu'on lui laisse, qui extirpe aux événements leurs secrets, qui refuse leur silence, qui définit et oppose, qui restitue et qui compense, redonne à la littérature un sens qu'elle avait perdu. Au centre de *L'Espèce humaine*, la volonté de parler et d'être entendu, la volonté d'explorer et de connaître, débouche sur cette confiance illimitée dans le langage et dans l'écriture qui fonde toute littérature, même si, de par son projet même, et à cause du sort réservé, par notre culture, à ce que l'on appelle les « témoignages », *L'Espèce humaine* ne parvient à s'y rattacher complètement. Car cette expression de l'inexprimable qui en est le dépassement même, c'est le langage qui, jetant un pont entre le monde et nous, instaure cette relation fondamentale entre l'individu et l'Histoire, d'où naît notre liberté.

A ce niveau, langage et signes redeviennent déchiffrables. Le monde n'est plus ce chaos que des mots vides de sens désespèrent de décrire. Il est une réalité vivante et difficile que le pouvoir des mots, peu à peu, conquiert. La littérature commence ainsi, lorsque commence, par le langage, dans le langage, cette transformation, pas du tout évidente et pas du tout immédiate, qui permet à un individu de prendre conscience, en exprimant le monde, en s'adressant aux autres. Par son mouvement, par sa méthode, par son contenu enfin, *L'Espèce humaine* définit la vérité de la littérature et la vérité du monde.⁶³⁴

It thus emerges that while many contemporaries thought it necessary to separate the testimony of the concentration camps from proper literature⁶³⁵, Perec challenges this position by stating that literature is, as mentioned earlier, linked to life. The difficulty in this particular case, if anything, is the gulf that exists between the camp experience and the ability of language to bear witness to it. Nevertheless, for former deportees speaking is a visceral need:

Parler, écrire, est, pour le déporté qui revient, un besoin aussi immédiat et aussi fort que son besoin de calcium, de sucre, de soleil, de viande, de sommeil, de silence. Il n'est pas vrai qu'il peut se taire et oublier.⁶³⁶

The issue, according to Stone, is therefore not *whether* to write, but *how*. Perec's article dwells at length on this aspect: one should not get caught up in anger, but neither should one arouse the reader's compassion or manipulate him. This seems to be the point: "Il s'agissait de faire comprendre ce que l'on ne pouvait pas comprendre; il s'agissait d'exprimer ce qui était inexprimable"⁶³⁷. Going further than Antelme's considerations, Perec argues that those who have not experienced it can understand nothing of what it was: "Nous restions étrangers à ce monde"⁶³⁸. Yet, what Perec appreciates about Antelme is the fact that he "choisit de refuser tout appel au spectaculaire,

⁶³⁴ Ivi, pp. 113-114.

⁶³⁵ Cf.: "A la limite, l'on dirait qu'il est indécent de mettre en rapport l'univers des camps et ce que l'on appelle, avec, au besoin, une légère pointe de mépris, la 'littérature'". Ivi, p. 87.

⁶³⁶ Ivi, p. 89.

⁶³⁷ Ivi, p. 91.

⁶³⁸ Ivi, p. 93.

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d'empêcher toute émotion immédiate, à laquelle il serait trop simple, pour le lecteur, de s'arrêter"⁶³⁹. That is, Antelme is appreciated for his simple style, for his *écriture maigre*. This style, Perec writes, "va jusqu'à trahir la 'réalité' afin de l'exprimer d'une manière plus efficace"⁶⁴⁰. In fact, Perec states: "dans *L'Espèce humaine*, le camp n'est jamais donné. Il s'impose, il émerge lentement"⁶⁴¹. This way of writing, i.e. never making violence explicit but somehow sneaking it out, is quite similar to the procedures used by Perec in *W ou le souvenir d'enfance*. As Stone points out,

It is Antelme's transformation of this experience - simultaneously of the terror of the camp and the knowledge of humanity's triumph - into language that makes *L'Espèce humaine*, according to Perec, 'l'exemple le plus parfait, dans la production française contemporaine, de ce que peut être la littérature'.⁶⁴²

What does this mean for Perec? Essentially, Perec talks about the death camps through Antelme's work, i.e. in 1963 he discovers that not talking about the camps can be a very powerful way of talking about them. In fact, Antelme does not talk about the murder of the Jews, just as Perec consequently does not talk about it. In France in 1947, the year *L'Espèce humaine* was published, the genocide of the Jews was still relatively unknown, or at least not yet widely discussed. This silence, according to Stone, was due to a social desire for a return to the normalcy so longed for during the harsh war years. When Antelme's book was brought back into vogue in 1957, the literary landscape was changing considerably: one only has to think of Wiesel's texts. Despite this, Perec chose to focus on a book, *L'Espèce humaine*, which did not deal with the elimination of the Jews. This silence, considering its origin, is significant and proves once again Perec's reticence in dealing with themes that are fundamental to him: instead of the explicit, he prefers the implicit; reality is revealed, but through games of fiction, *contraintes* and omissions. In this regard, Davide Bellos writes:

Antelme's book did not speak to Perec about what had happened to his mother, nor did it address what the orphans of the shoah still had to cope with, but it was nonetheless about the camps. *L'Espèce humaine* thus offered Perec a sideways approach to his own pain, even as it comforted him by restating his conviction that writing was an appropriate, ethical response. Antelme's book was, so to speak, in the emotional and intellectual middle distance for Perec.⁶⁴³

In short, it is a matter of speaking while avoiding focus, of finding the right distance to approach an emptiness. Perec praises Antelme for expressing the inexpressible, but he himself, in

⁶³⁹ Ivi, p. 94.

⁶⁴⁰ Ibidem.

⁶⁴¹ Ivi, p. 96.

⁶⁴² Dan Stone, "Perec's Antelme", cit., p. 166.

⁶⁴³ David Bellos, *Georges Perec: A Life in Words*, London, The Harvill Press, 1995, p. 279.

commenting on a book depicting the Holocaust without making explicit the elimination of the Jews, quietly but eloquently testifies to how this affected him.

Summarising what we have discovered so far, we can therefore, as with Duras, simplify through a list the long series of levels of silence that Perec uses in his work.

A first level of silence is undoubtedly the graphic one: under the letters W and E, Perec hides hidden meanings that are fundamental to decrypting the meaning of the novel.

A second level of silence is that obviously linked to the novel's central ellipsis: the three suspension points in brackets. Many words have already been spent on this. Suffice it to mention here that behind this typographical ellipsis lies the whole of Perec's inner world and in particular the death of his mother: a ubiquitous element in *W*, yet never mentioned.

A third element of silence is the final ellipsis of the novel, namely the truncated quotation from *L'Univers Concentrationnaire*, of which Perec only quotes the part that does not make explicit the genocide of Jews and Poles, thus avoiding the reference to the mother who died in the gas chamber.

The fourth level of silence is linked to the structure of *W* itself: born as a novel published as a *feuilleton*, each chapter presents an interruption and creates suspension. The end result is a book whose main feature, from a structural point of view, is undoubtedly its fragmentary nature.

The fifth level of silence concerns the mysterious choice of the characters' names and their quests: Gaspard Winckler's search for his namesake harks back to Perec's search for his own origins, and Cyrla is closely reminiscent of Caecilia, although the mispronounced names somehow conceal the autobiographical truth. Names, throughout Perec's work, conceal things or are veiled references for deeper meanings. A sub-level to this is also the disappearance, in the diegetic world and plot, of Gaspard Winckler in the second part of the novel.

The sixth level of silence, reminiscent of the fifth, is the use of the fictional to mask the autobiographical reality that one dares not say explicitly: Perec resorts to *fictio* and, with immense imaginative power, tells his story through a parallel world.

The seventh level of silence is the extensive use of intertextuality, which creates a dense network of correspondences that silently wait to be discovered to reveal a unity that is greater than the sum of its parts. The use of intertextuality even comes to Perec's aid in talking about the two parental figures, transfigured into fictional characters.

The eighth level of silence is the reticence with which Perec lets his emotions shine through: we are faced with an *écriture maigre*, or an *écriture blanche*, which does not seek the reader's

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emotional resonances but, with a neutral, flat, almost documentary style, tells of his parents' absence and the tragedy of being an orphan and a Jew, without roots. In each case, all emotion is muted.

The ninth level of silence relates to modesty and the unspoken, especially in relation to female relationships in which the writer did not feel capable and of which he felt a profound lack that even led him to attempt suicide. This theme, so important to Perec, never emerges in the text.

To conclude this chapter on Perec, it seems fitting to use his own words, which describe his writing and the silence that inhabits it:

L'écriture dit qu'elle est là, et rien d'autre, et nous revoilà dans ce palais de glaces où les mots se renvoient les uns les autres, se répercutent à l'infini sans jamais rencontrer autre chose que leur ombre. [...]

L'écriture me protège. J'avance sous le rempart de mes mots, de mes phrases, de mes paragraphes habilement enchaînés, de mes chapitres astucieusement programmés. Je ne manque pas d'ingéniosité.⁶⁴⁴

⁶⁴⁴ Georges Perec, "Les gnocchis de l'automne ou Réponse à quelques questions me concernant", cit., p. 73.

IV. *Verso la foce*: “Chiama le cose perché restino con te fino all’ultimo”

Gianni Celati published *Verso la foce* in 1989. It is a collection of four “racconti di osservazione”⁶⁴⁵ written while the author wandered along the bank of the river Po until he reached its mouth.

The book takes the form of a travelogue in which Celati's observations along the way are recorded. The birth of *Verso la foce* owes much to the on-site explorations he made with Luigi Ghirri and other photographers, from which the photographic nature of the book's gaze also stems.

The four stories within the collection are: *Un paesaggio con centrale nucleare*, *Esplorazione sugli argini*, *Tre giorni nelle zone della grande bonifica* and *Verso la foce*, hence the eponymous collection.

They are preceded by *Notizia*, an introduction in which Celati briefly explains the content of each story and recounts the reasons for writing and the discoveries, especially interior ones, made through writing. Right from the start, we perceive the thematic nuclei around which all the diaristic writing of *Verso la foce* will revolve: the sense of strangeness in the plain, wandering, observation, solitude.

The title, *Verso la foce*, refers to the direction taken by Celati on his journey: starting from the countryside of the Po valley, he will travel kilometres of plain that will lead him to the mouth of the Po. However, the mouth also takes on a metaphorical meaning, which Celati himself takes up in *Notizia*:

Ogni osservazione ha bisogno di liberarsi dai codici familiari che porta con sé, ha bisogno di andare alla deriva in mezzo a tutto ciò che non capisce, per poter arrivare ad una foce, dove dovrà sentirsi smarrita. Come una tendenza naturale che ci assorbe, ogni osservazione intensa del mondo esterno forse ci porta più vicino alla nostra morte; ci porta ad essere meno separati da noi stessi.⁶⁴⁶

Celati's basic idea and the common thread running through these tales then seems to be the desire to lose oneself in order to then rediscover, with a fresh look, even the most familiar places. The arrival at the mouth is seen as the attainment of a new way of seeing things, after a journey that has changed us. Moreover, the outer landscape can resonate with our inner landscape and provide us with another way of getting in touch with ourselves. This poetics is reminiscent of T. S. Eliott when, in 1942, he wrote in *Little Gidding*:

⁶⁴⁵ Gianni Celati, *Verso la foce*, Milano, Feltrinelli, 2020, p. 9.

⁶⁴⁶ Ivi, p. 10.

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We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.⁶⁴⁷

For Celati, as for Eliot, the exploration of space corresponds to the exploration of inner landscapes that may not be new, but need to be revisited in order for old truths to resurface. The dichotomies new-ancient and interior-exterior underlie these two quotations and seem to be the cornerstone of the reflections that guide Celati throughout the diary.

Turning now to the four short stories in the collection, the writer presents them as follows:

Il primo parla d'una camminata attraverso le campagne cremonesi, nei giorni immediatamente successivi allo scoppio nucleare di Cernobyl. Il secondo è una esplorazione laboriosa degli argini del Po, con incontri che possono sembrare inverosimili. Il terzo è una visitazione delle zone della grande bonifica ferrarese, che va a finire abbastanza bene, mi sembra. Il quarto è un viaggio pieno di incertezze alle foci del Po, in cerca del limite delle terre e d'un gruppo di etologi tedeschi e forse d'altre cose (al momento del viaggio non chiare).⁶⁴⁸

In an extremely simple and brief style, Celati presents his four short stories. The common denominator among them is that the observations are all made while walking and that the writing is diaristic. We must therefore imagine Gianni Celati walking along the countryside with a diary in his hand while transcribing his travel impressions. Another common feature is the uncertainty that permeates these pages from the outset; notice locutions such as: “mi sembra”, “forse”, “non chiare”. The third element common to the four stories is undoubtedly related to the way of experiencing the journey and the company that revolved around Celati:

Questi quattro diari di viaggio son nati mettendomi a lavorare con un gruppo di fotografi, che si dedicavano ad una descrizione del nuovo paesaggio italiano, tra cui il mio amico Luigi Ghirri. Per come sono adesso, dopo essere stati riscritti e resi leggibili, li chiamerei racconti d'osservazione.⁶⁴⁹

Interestingly, Celati himself gives a characterisation to the textual material that follows: they are 'travel diaries'. At the same time, however, as is his custom, he forges a new model and a new name to describe his texts, which he calls 'observation narratives'. If we combine the two terms, we seem to be dealing with diaristic writing that stems from direct observation of the surrounding landscape with a photographic eye. Celati was in fact accompanied by a group of photographers, with

⁶⁴⁷ T. S. Eliot, “Little Gidding”, in *Four Quartets*, Faber&Faber, 2001.

⁶⁴⁸ Gianni Celati, *Verso la foce*, cit., p. 10.

⁶⁴⁹ Ivi, p. 9.

whom he shared this project of writing and image. The material can therefore be said to be relatively autobiographical: it is a kind of *Zibaldone* of thoughts recorded and transcribed during a particular journey: the narrator speaks in the first person and recounts his reflections and observations. This is intimate writing, which opens up the writer's inner world to the reader in the form of thoughts and notes. The first reflections are already present in *Notizia*:

Viaggiando nelle campagne della valle padana è difficile non sentirsi stranieri. Più dell'inquinamento del Po, degli alberi malati, delle puzze industriali, dello stato d'abbandono in cui volge tutto quanto non ha a che fare con il profitto, e infine d'una edilizia fatta per domiciliati intercambiabili, senza patria né destinazione - più di tutto questo, ciò che sorprende è questo nuovo genere di campagne dove si respira un'aria di solitudine urbana. I quattro viaggi qui presentati narrano dunque l'attraversamento d'una specie di deserto di solitudine, che però è anche la vita normale di tutti i giorni. Se hanno qualche rilevanza, almeno per chi li ha scritti, questa dipende dal fatto che un'intensa osservazione del mondo esterno ci rende meno apatici (più pazzi o più savi, più allegri o più disperati).⁶⁵⁰

The motif of the Stranger returns, as in Jabès. The landscape that Celati traverses is a polluted, diseased, industrial space: the sense of abandonment is pervasive and omnipresent. The feeling that the writer experiences and records is that of loneliness, intrinsically linked to silence. It is no coincidence that the image of the desert, already present in Jabès and emblematic of silence, returns. However, Celati's parallelism brings us back to the present: the desert of abandoned places is the same desert we experience every day in our ordinary lives. The importance of writing - which Celati sees as therapy - is linked to the concept of empathy: observing the world makes us less apathetic, that is, it makes us more capable of feeling.

On the subject of the desert, Celati writes a short essay, following a quotation from Max Frisch, which is worth quoting in part:

c'è un filo di pensiero che, se sviluppato, porta a vedere il deserto sulla soglia di ogni luogo abitato, e ci porta anche a vedere il carattere illusorio d'ogni addomesticamento del pianeta.

Questo filo di pensiero ci dice anche che noi non siamo i padroni del pianeta [...], e ci dice che la nostra dimora è comunque sempre precaria [...], e ci dice infine che, in questa tarda fine d'epoca, non c'è nessun lavoro di ricerca con qualche autenticità, senza riferimenti all'emblema del deserto. Perché è il deserto che alla fine poeti e fotografi, narratori e filosofi, hanno sempre di fronte, quando mandano richiami verso il mondo.⁶⁵¹

⁶⁵⁰ Ibidem.

⁶⁵¹ Gianni Celati, "Traversate nel deserto", in Riga 40, *Gianni Celati*, a cura di Marco Belpoliti, Marco Sironi e Anna Stefi, Macerata, Quodlibet, 2019, p. 194.

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The desert is, in short, the emblem of the contemporary landscape, exterior and interior: man no longer seems to perceive his own precariousness on the planet and feels himself to be its master, but this thinking is erroneous and Celati sees a return to a more elementary way of perceiving the world as necessary, of which the desert is the emblem.

È questo un emblema non solo della nostra miseria epocale, ma anche, insieme, dell'enorme sforzo immaginativo che è richiesto a ogni attraversamento dello spazio, del vuoto, del deserto. Perché nel vuoto miseria e immaginazione si riconoscono e si danno la mano, non si negano a vicenda; ed avremo allora deserti che sono immagini di pienezza – la grazia della piccola oasi sullo sfondo di sabbia fino all'orizzonte, la parola ritrovata per mezzo del silenzio [...].⁶⁵²

Celati speaks of an imaginative effort every time one crosses space and a desert: we can deduce that this effort also inhabited the pages of *Verso la foce*, which is full of desert, emptiness and solitude. The writer also recognises an integrity of emptiness where the desert can become an image of fullness: this only happens on condition that there is no mutual exclusion of misery (i.e. the reality of our age) and imagination, but rather a reconciliation between the two, which occurs, not by chance, through the rediscovery of the word through silence. But what does this mean?

Celati argues that misery and imagination, desert and fullness, words and silence (“miseria e immaginazione, deserto e pienezza, parole e silenzio”⁶⁵³) must not be forcibly separated, on pain of the devastation of imagination and the reign of misery. The risk is that of replacing imagination with representative surrogates, where desert and emptiness are denied (“sostituire l’immaginazione con surrogati rappresentativi, dove il deserto e il vuoto sono negati man mano che cresce la desertificazione del mondo, e cresce l’esposizione ad una grande precarietà”⁶⁵⁴).

Sono questi i segni di un’epoca in cui il deserto diventa sempre più il cammino da riprendere, la via da ritrovare, il silenzio da attraversare per poter ancora parlare con gli altri.⁶⁵⁵

In brief, Celati makes a hymn to the desert understood as a void to be inhabited in order to cross the silence that leads to the authentic word, that full word that allows us to be in relationship with others. Silence is thus to be sought and travelled, just like the spaces along which the writer walks in *Verso la foce*.

⁶⁵² Ivi, pp. 194-195.

⁶⁵³ Ivi, p. 195.

⁶⁵⁴ Ibidem.

⁶⁵⁵ Ibidem.

In the present work, we chose to analyse this text because Celati's diaristic and somewhat autobiographical writing is intertwined with the theme of silence and the desert. *Verso la foce* is a collection of suspended texts, where memory and the present mingle to give voice to reflections on memories, contemporaneity, words and silence. The sense of suspension that pervades these texts acts as a background to the recording of sensations and thoughts that revolve around the concepts of emptiness and non-sense of the modern era, in which we can venture the hypothesis that the trauma of the present is the sense of emptiness and melancholy that afflicts us all, in an exterior and interior landscape increasingly inhabited by silence.

It is no coincidence that in Marco Belpoliti's interview with Jean Talon Sampieri, Celati's depressive trait emerges, which his friend calls "umor nero"⁶⁵⁶. In addition to this, Jean Talon Sampieri confirms that Celati's fundamental combination was walking-telling, the two favourite activities of the writer, who liked to go outdoors. As a writer, in fact, he did not always like to stay in enclosed spaces: he wanted to go outside. He sought the outdoors for hospitality to inhabit the world. This is also evident from the precision of his descriptions, which resemble those of the landscape painters: the difference lies in the fact that Celati did not use a paintbrush, but had a boundless faith in words. In *Verso la foce*, Celati visits and describes places that no one really saw, because they are depopulated places, inhabited by the idea of 'uprooting'. Jean Talon calls Celati a 'philosopher poet': there is something both poetic and reflective in his texts. The vision he offers us is never panoramic, or a vision that wants to dominate things, but rather a vision that is attentive to what nobody pays attention to. For Celati, the mouth of the river represents the *finis terrae*: the evanescence of reality, the condition of the uprooted, the loss of a place, being strangers everywhere without a place of belonging. Hence his need to describe places that were the places of his origins, which have now become urban peripheries marked by desolation and melancholy. Celati is in fact known by the epithet of "cantore della pianura padana", but he is at the same time an uprooted person. Jean Talon, in the above-mentioned interview, also points out that a key word for getting to know Celati is *désaffecté*: there is a kind of disaffection in his poetics. This means that an object comes out of the web of common use and therefore out of the care of things. For Celati, however, observing and describing an object becomes a way to rediscover an affective relationship with things, to rediscover an affectivity in a world that has completely lost it in the name of production. In this we certainly also find a critique of modernity. What is relevant, however, for the purposes of this study is that his texts are pervaded by a kind of depression and melancholy, a sense of constant desolation, except for the brief encounters that always open up to something unexpected: "Lo spirito dei luoghi prende vita solo

⁶⁵⁶ Gianni Celati, *camminare e raccontare*, con Jean Talon Sampieri, <https://open.spotify.com/episode/2stPPCbTTTK7WSq4PFHwfh?si=c851f58975d34ed8->

se il viaggio diventa un'occasione d'incontro, nell'ovvietà delle abitudini che presiedono ai rapporti con gli altri"⁶⁵⁷.

In Celati, the operation carried out is therefore that of observing and naming things, since this has a therapeutic value: everything is seen without hierarchies, and it is the whatever, the infra-ordinary, reminiscent of Perec's *L'homme qui dort*, which not by chance, like the conclusion of *Verso la foce*, sees the use of the second person singular.

Returning now to the analysis of the text, the first of the four stories, *Un paesaggio con centrale nucleare*, is dated 9-17 May 1986. The story begins with the description of a foggy atmosphere in an almost unknown and insignificant place. What must be emphasised from the outset is the presence of numerous nominal, short and concise sentences, reduced to the bare minimum even from a syntactic point of view. Moreover, the text is littered with numerous metanarrative cues in which Celati notes his own thoughts.

Pensieri di oggi, su cui voglio scrivere: notizie sullo scoppio di Cernobyl, arrivo della nube atomica, e altri rimuginamenti. In aprile è morto Franco Occhetto e l'hanno sepolto in un cimitero inverosimile, a Lambrate, con una scavatrice e un'altra macchina semovente che svolgevano la cerimonia funebre; adesso è là, in quel cimitero che sembra una fiera campionaria.⁶⁵⁸

Right from the start, we find ourselves immersed in a rather desolate world, with everyday objects but lacking the usual context of reference. The news the writer writes about, moreover, has death as its thematic core: from the Chernobyl massacre to the death of Occhetto. Similarly, shortly afterwards we read:

Mangiato nel ristorante da basso, appunti su questo periodo che voglio raccontare.

In aprile mi inizio all'arte della sceneggiatura, perché io e Sironi dobbiamo scrivere il film sulla vita di Fausto Coppi. A Roma andiamo a parlare con Tonino Guerra, lui che ha scritto gloriosi film con Antonioni e Fellini, mi sentivo molto onorato. Seduto nella poltrona, Tonino Guerra per tutto un pomeriggio ci ha raccontato storie, apre la bocca solo per evocare immagini. [...]

Nei negozietti di Capalbio Scalo c'è un'atmosfera che ricorda il tempo di guerra; si parla delle misure di sicurezza, i clienti restano lì dubbiosi a ripetere le frasi dei giornali, e intanto i prezzi delle verdure in scatola, latte condensato, cibi surgelati, patate e verdure non in foglia, persino il prezzo dell'acqua minerale, ondeggiavano secondo le notizie diffuse.⁶⁵⁹

⁶⁵⁷ Nunzia Palmieri, "Navigare nella prosa del mondo", in Riga 40, *Gianni Celati*, cit., p. 102.

⁶⁵⁸ Gianni Celati, *Verso la foce*, cit., pp. 13-14.

⁶⁵⁹ Ivi, p. 15.

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We note that the text is full of colloquialisms and scenes of everyday life. Verb tenses change within the same sentence for no apparent reason. The figure of Tonino Guerra stands out as a precious encounter that makes the atmosphere slightly happier. Shortly after, however, the gloomy and melancholic descriptions of common characters saying common phrases return. The world seems to be reduced to a village. In the background of these images, the atomic mushroom of Chernobyl always remains:

Siccome il vento ha portato da terre lontane un pericolo che nessuno può constatare, e si può solo leggerlo sul giornale, ognuno colma il mutismo delle informazioni con le fantasie che gli vengono in mente.⁶⁶⁰

The first element of silence mentioned in the text is that of the 'muteness of information', signifying its absence. As was also the case in Duras's *La douleur*, the absence of information produces fantasies, which fill the void and appease the *horror vacui* that signals bad feelings.

Another significant element is the catchphrases ("commenti di frasi fatte"⁶⁶¹): people speak from hearsay, from phrases read in newspapers or from sayings. We find several examples of this:

Quel sapore d'incertezza che resta in bocca, dipende dall'effetto inconsulto che produce il terribile quando viene calato nel frigido frasario delle notizie giornalistiche.⁶⁶²

Parole ritrovate sotto gli strati di frasi fatte del parlare adulto, qui ogni frase vibra lievemente portando un'immagine.⁶⁶³

Dallo sguardo, dall'atteggiamento, veniva fuori un'idea del mondo come evidenza senza misteri, frigida informazione sui fatti del giorno e basta. Così in armonia con il cosiddetto "mondo reale", quella copertina incitava ad accettare e gradire un cumulo di frasi fatte, come farebbe un santino in un'altra superstizione.⁶⁶⁴

These words, Celati seems to argue, are empty words, devoid of authentic content, and somehow it is a *bavardage* that opposes, by contrast, the silence and dumbness of information. Hence the melancholic state of the writer, who immediately adds:

Dunque venuto il malumore. Ma è inutile, caro mio, prendersela con le superstizioni. Tu non sei mica il padrone d'una "più giusta" visione del mondo, non sei padrone di niente, e non sei l'inespugnabile fortezza su cui gli

⁶⁶⁰ Ivi, p. 16.

⁶⁶¹ Ibidem.

⁶⁶² Ibidem.

⁶⁶³ Ivi, p. 17.

⁶⁶⁴ Ibidem.

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eventi non hanno presa. Sei esposto all'aria come le altre bestie, e le tue parole sono quelle degli altri, emissioni di fiato.

Piuttosto, ascoltare bene gli altri: il suono delle voci che vengono all'orecchio, tutte queste emissioni di fiato che salgono verso il cielo.⁶⁶⁵

The first remark concerns Celati's 'black humour', as he looks around and sees a reality he does not like and which, in his own way, he criticises. The second underlining is the use of the second person singular: he dialogues with himself by referring to a 'you', which makes the reader feel involved. Finally, the content concerns being a man among other men, not an intellectual or a poet, but a beast among other beasts, and therefore exposed to the same risks and mediocrity. Celati's gaze is always humble. Finally, a sound element: the voices of others.

The second entry in the diary, dated 10 May 1986, begins with an encounter:

Incontrato uno che mi spiegava. [...]

Dopo non aveva più niente da dirmi, già recitato il suo rosario di propaganda [...]. Era tutto così falso che evitavo di guardarmi in faccia, forse stanco anche lui di dover fingere tanta serietà per un avvenimento che non diceva nulla alla sua immaginazione.⁶⁶⁶

The meeting revolves around the topic of the nuclear power plant, but it too is characterised by empty words: the speaker speaks, but it is a *bavardage* that ends in nothing. Words are used to give breath to the mouth, they are 'breath emissions' that, according to Celati, we could be spared. It seems that Celati is a cantor of silence, as well as of the plains, and that useless words give him depression. Indeed, shortly afterwards, when a young lady gives him a bundle of papers full of information, he writes:

Appena fuori mi è passata la voglia di capire come funziona quella centrale nucleare, che tra l'altro non ho neanche capito dove fosse. [...] C'erano altri visitatori, ma mi sembravano delusi come me, perché il mutismo dell'oggettività ti fa sentire troppo separato dalle cose del mondo.⁶⁶⁷

Once again, the theme of the muteness of information returns, that is, that objectivity that leaves no room for imagination and is therefore just a heap of empty words. This constant saturation of words seems to nip in the bud any imagination, any useful use of words. *Bavardage* prevents the silence that is space for creativity. This is reminiscent of the text by Louis-René Des Forêts, *Le*

⁶⁶⁵ Ivi, p. 18.

⁶⁶⁶ Ibidem.

⁶⁶⁷ Ivi, p. 19.

*Bavard*⁶⁶⁸, where the ranting almost generates a malaise and the extreme and constant use of the word becomes a destructive power.

Celati's text continues with the author's recording of images that pass before his eyes. They are anonymous images, very reminiscent of Perec's *Tentative d'épuisement d'un lieu parisien*, where it is the *infra-ordinaire* that is the protagonist. In his description of the people, Celati makes rather general observations that reveal a criticism of the attitude of modern life:

Quasi tutti passando guardano nei riflessi d'una vetrina in cerca della propria immagine, quasi tutti vestiti con abiti moderni come quelli esposti nelle vetrine, con etichette vistose e nomi e scritte in inglese da portarsi a spasso.

Quasi tutti mostrano di muoversi a proprio agio in questa strada piena d'insegne e luci, passeggiano a coppie o gruppi sparsi, con molti saluti e scambi di battute spiritose negli incontri. Non mi è sembrato di vedere nessuno un po' a disagio, nessuno che si sentisse poco guardabile, brutto o disfatto o obeso, nel passeggio serale.⁶⁶⁹

Celati, a careful observer, looks at people and notices behaviour common to all, typical of living in a society that requires conformity and a flatness of style: people are all dressed alike and exchange empty pleasantries. Everyone seems to be at ease and no one feels strange or is inhabited by melancholic feelings, like the writer who, estranged from this context, seems to feel alone and different. Different, in fact, are also some of the boys, whom Celati describes thus:

Stanno lì a fumare intruppatisi, con pose più spaesate che ostili. Comunque loro non partecipano all'assegnazione serale di identità, nello scambio di sguardi e saluti sul corso.⁶⁷⁰

The 'evening assignment of identity' reveals Celati's critique: people seem to walk around just to be seen and to be in the right place, to pander to the social expectations of others. The boys, on the other hand, who are still alienated from this mechanism, stand on the sidelines like a group of stray wolves.

Celati continues to record what he sees with his pen, and recounts the background against which these characters move, made up of: "grandi magazzini", "galleria quadrata e cementesca", "luce cinerea dei neon"⁶⁷¹. The urban landscape is depersonalising and people move along this background that absorbs them and deprives them of identity and imagination, making everything homologated.

⁶⁶⁸ Louis-René Des Forêts, *Le Bavard*, Paris, Gallimard, 1973.

⁶⁶⁹ Gianni Celati, *Verso la foce*, cit., p. 21.

⁶⁷⁰ Ibidem.

⁶⁷¹ Ibidem.

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On 11 May 1986, a new page of the diary opens with news of the contamination following the explosion at the Chernobyl power station. The surrounding landscape is characterised by flatness, just like its inhabitants:

In treno verso Cremona: molte industrie e campagne piattissime, qui, mentre il treno passa gli alberi e i pali della luce sorprendono con la loro verticalità, saltando fuori all'improvviso da tutta questa piatezza.⁶⁷²

The elements of modernity 'surprise' the eye because they are aliens in the middle of the countryside, where they have nothing to do. Afterwards, encounters return to litter the narrative:

Pensando all'insegnante di matematica. Ci sono molti come lui che sembrano rimasti fermi ad un'annata speciale della loro vita, al '56, al '68, o all'anno di sommosse 1977 [...]. Ma altri strati si sono sovrapposti a nascondere ciò che in loro è "rimasto indietro"; e il nascondimento definitivo è fatto con le frasi fatte dell'attualità più recente, di cui ci si serve per presentarsi agli altri con immediatezza.⁶⁷³

Identity stratification is a process whereby we hide our past in underlying layers and clothe ourselves with a present that serves to tell others about ourselves. The most recent layer is that of the catchphrases of the present, which seems to be the only thread that keeps us connected to other contemporaries. Celati reveals this mechanism and seems to want to encourage the professor to go back:

Il nascondimento dell'insegnante di matematica (peraltro gentile e simpatico, buono) mi sembra questa sua passione sfrenata per i "nuovi scrittori italiani". [...] Quando gli consiglio di leggere Ariosto rimane perplesso, come se Ariosto non s'intonasse al vestito che porta; il suo nascondimento va in crisi, rispuntano i timori d'essere "rimasto indietro", una svista che l'intelligenza non può più permettersi, a quanto pare.⁶⁷⁴

This concealment is created with speech: silence about the previous and older layers of one's identity makes man feel comfortable in modernity. The present is only liveable if one hides, i.e. keeps silent, the past. This silence in speech and this unspoken communication risks imprisoning the ego, which at all times must pay attention and remain vigilant so that it is always up-to-date.

Another encounter is with "l'esperto"⁶⁷⁵, of which Celati records this:

⁶⁷² Ivi, p. 22.

⁶⁷³ Ivi, p. 23.

⁶⁷⁴ Ibidem.

⁶⁷⁵ Ibidem.

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Andando in giro da solo, lui se reso conto che non c'è niente da vedere e un posto vale l'altro. Mi ha spiegato: “Andando a visitare poniamo chiese antiche o mura antiche, che sono indubbiamente opere d'arte, se uno è da solo si accorge che queste cose non dicono niente a nessuno. Si vanno a vedere con la moglie e i figli, sì, tanto per mostrare che ci si interessa a qualcosa, e allora bisogna sempre fotografare e dire che è interessante. Anche i paesi e le città sono ormai cose noiose che non dicono niente a nessuno. Ma pochi hanno il coraggio di confessarlo!”

Non gli dispiaceva che prendessi appunti. Quando ha saputo che voglio attraversare le campagne cremonesi per osservare quelle villette geometrili che a me sembrano misteriose, ha fatto una faccia molto disgustata. Mi ha dato questo consiglio: “È inutile fare viaggi per vedere dei posti che ormai sono uguali dappertutto. Se proprio deve scrivere, citi qualche libro o statistica, e vedrà che va sempre bene, glielo dico io.”⁶⁷⁶

The expert seems, in the first instance, to unveil the attitude of modern man: visiting boring places, taking pictures to show that you went somewhere and telling others that you did something interesting. Yet, the expert finds all this boring and claims that no one has the courage to expose this widespread attitude. However, as soon as Celati confesses his intention to do something different, i.e. visit anonymous and uninteresting places, he is looked upon with disappointment and disgust, because his trip is deemed pointless and anonymous. What is banal and commonplace is, in short, not taken into consideration: it is always necessary to amaze; the everyday is not in fashion.

What the expert does, in fact, is to explain. However, Celati states: “Le spiegazioni, a differenza delle narrazioni, sono cose che ci mettono sempre in una condizione di sudditanza – in quanto si suppone che non dipendano da una facoltà che tutti hanno, cioè l’immaginazione e il fiuto del senso comune, ma piuttosto da un sapere di cui solo lo spiegatore detiene la chiave”⁶⁷⁷. On the contrary, he argues: “Ciò che viene sollecitato con l’arte del narratore è proprio la nostra connivenza immaginativa, la nostra comprensione che gli altri sono esseri imperscrutabili – da cui nasce il piacere di narrare e di leggere”⁶⁷⁸. The expert is thus the opposite of the storyteller, but Celati is the latter whom he seeks out in his encounters. The mathematics teacher has the same attitude as the expert and when faced with a recreational club for the elderly (“circolo ricreativo per anziani sulla riva del Po”⁶⁷⁹) he feels uncomfortable when the writer talks to them:

Anche qui l’insegnante a disagio, non riusciva ad ascoltare quei vecchietti ed è andato a fare un giro per conto suo; a lui piacerebbe parlare con me solo di letteratura, cioè dei “nuovi scrittori italiani”, e la banalità ordinaria non riesce a digerirla.⁶⁸⁰

⁶⁷⁶ Ivi, p. 24.

⁶⁷⁷ Gianni Celati, “Le posizioni narrative rispetto all’altro”, in Riga 40, *Gianni Celati*, cit., p. 211.

⁶⁷⁸ Ivi, p. 210.

⁶⁷⁹ Gianni Celati, *Verso la foce*, cit., p. 25.

⁶⁸⁰ Ibidem.

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The teacher, now only comfortable in his most recent layers, cannot tolerate anything that sends him back to the past, such as a group of elderly people or a conversation about literature that does not concern new trends. Instead, Celati is interested in going back in time, in investigating places by talking to people who do not gag, but who use the word in a personal and original way, like the elders of the circle. Everyday life, in its flat reality, is what Celati holds dear.

On 12 May, a new diary page opens with a description of some trucks, signs and shops. The urban landscape is alienating, and Celati records this naturally through a series of elements: “cartelloni pubblicitari”, “lampade industriali”, “piazze industriali”, “nebulose dei gas di scarico”, “stazioni di servizio con pensiline di plastica a colori vivaci”⁶⁸¹. The entire urban landscape is saturated with plastic, cellophane and air pollution by radioactive substances (“sostanze radioattive”⁶⁸²). It seems to be in a dystopian landscape, instead it is just the banal Po Valley. The only personal element Celati inserts in these descriptive paragraphs is the following: “Non vengo qui da cinque anni e tutto mi sembra diverso”⁶⁸³. With extreme simplicity, the writer states his astonishment at the changes in the places of his origins and we begin to perceive that sense of uprooting that Jean Talon spoke of. The recording of what happens in the grocery store is also alienating, thanks to the voice of a speaker: everything seems artificial. The only element that brings Celati back to a vague sense of well-being is the following:

C'erano tre commesse in grembiule verde che attraversavano il piazzale tra le macchine ridendo allegre, e allora ho cominciato a sentirmi meglio. Le campagne sono là, per me sconosciute come tutto il resto; comincia la mia marcia sullo stradone.⁶⁸⁴

The cheerfulness of others becomes almost contagious for the writer, who feels uprooted from the childhood places he knew and no longer recognises: the countryside becomes as unfamiliar as everything else. There is no longer any belonging, no foothold: the condition of the foreigner in Jabès returns forcefully and reminds us that in modernity, roots do not exist.

Campanili lontani di quel tipo che chiamerei gotico-lombardo, ma così lontani che fanno asse con me per un bel pezzo mentre cammino, nello spazio immobile di quelle piatte campagne. Come se avanzassi di pochi centimetri all'ora, formichina senz'ombra.⁶⁸⁵

⁶⁸¹ Ivi, p. 26.

⁶⁸² Ibidem.

⁶⁸³ Ibidem.

⁶⁸⁴ Ivi, p. 27.

⁶⁸⁵ Ibidem.

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Celati becomes tiny compared to the landscape he travels through, so small that he no longer even possesses his own shadow. The motif of the shadow, Jung's archetype, returns again, reminding us precisely that the shadow serves to confer depth, whereas in Celati's landscape descriptions everything is pervaded by an infinite flatness: “Tutt’intorno piatto”⁶⁸⁶.

An interesting episode is that of Celati's escaped arrest:

Sorpreso a scrivere e quasi arrestato da due carabinieri. [...]

Dovevano avere il sospetto fossi un insegnante andato fuori di testa; ma quando mi hanno chiesto se scrivo per un giornale e ho detto subito di sì, mentendo moltissimo, sono ridiventato normale ai loro occhi. In quanto giornalista, mi hanno offerto un passaggio sulla loro camionetta.⁶⁸⁷

The act of writing for himself immediately arouses suspicion: the policemen, faced with an unusual gesture, are bewildered and have doubts about Celati's identity and good intentions. Faced with the standardisation of people's gestures, clothes and words, Celati, as an uprooted person, appears different: this diversity is badly tolerated. In order to appear normal again, Celati is forced to use a lie: the job of a journalist is immediately accepted as pertinent, and the risk of arrest is even turned into a favour granted. Journalism once again becomes the emblem of empty but reassuring words, which saturate silence and hearten people. This also emerges in an essay by Celati, in which the writer argues: “È poi una retorica di tipo giornalistico, dove il linguaggio è diventato sordo perché serve soltanto ad informarci su ‘fatti e nient’altro che fatti”⁶⁸⁸. So, what does it mean that language goes *deaf*? It means that it is an anaesthetised and emotionless language (“una lingua anestetizzata e senza sentimento [...] perché non evoca nessuna voce umana”⁶⁸⁹).

Celati's walking tour continues amidst the smells of burnt meat, industrial warehouses and geometrically designed houses. Stopping at cafés, the writer records colloquialisms and jokes in dialect, often relating to the nuclear disaster. Then, all of a sudden, the landscape and atmosphere change:

Diversa questa parte del paese, completamente silenziosa.⁶⁹⁰

Da queste parti l'altra volta m'era venuta l'idea d'un silenzio residenziale, un silenzio tutto diverso da quello degli spazi aperti. E anche le case non sembrano case, piuttosto dimostrazioni di un'idea di casa, da opporre

⁶⁸⁶ Ivi, p. 28.

⁶⁸⁷ Ibidem.

⁶⁸⁸ Gianni Celati, “Le posizioni narrative rispetto all’altro”, in Riga 40, *Gianni Celati*, cit., p. 211.

⁶⁸⁹ Ivi, p. 212.

⁶⁹⁰ Gianni Celati, *Verso la foce*, cit., p. 28.

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all'orizzonte pesantissimo pieno di camion e maiali. Sono attratto da queste cassette incantate per qualcosa che non so spiegare, una sospensione, un dismemorarsi di tutto che mi viene in gola.⁶⁹¹

Silence now becomes the emblem of the urban landscape. It is not the typical silence of open spaces, Celati warns us, but rather the silence that is the counterpart to the *bavardage*: reality is but an appearance of things. Everything is saturated by insignificant presences, which fill physical space and mouths, but leave a profound sense of emptiness. Celati himself speaks of a 'suspension', a feeling of 'dismemorisation', and cannot find the words to explain what he feels. Silence now also inhabits his text, which acts as a reflection of the external landscape. This, in turn, is inhabited by a great sleep that envelops neighbourhoods (“un grande sonno che avvolge quartieri”⁶⁹²):

C'è sonno nelle rogge e sulle sponde invase dalle ortiche, negli alberi avvolti dal rampicante convolvolo, in un cimitero di morti dimenticati che ho visto passando, e anche nelle decalcomanie attaccate ai vetri di questo bar, con le facce di Marilyn Monroe, Jim Morris, David Bowie.⁶⁹³

The place described seems abandoned, immersed in a sleepy atmosphere, like a kind of still life. Even the local newspaper is 'abandoned' on the table and reports no news (“non riporta nessuna notizia”⁶⁹⁴). The people who live there are described by Celati as follows: “Gente che sta quieta in un bar di campagna aspettando che passi il tempo”⁶⁹⁵.

The next day, dated 13 May, he immediately returns to the question of appearances:

Partenza all'alba. Le apparenze là fuori ancora nella mezza luce, e il piccolo discorso su come trovare il mondo.⁶⁹⁶

What is outside is therefore not the world, but a reflection of it: appearances dominate reality and hide what is authentic under multiple layers, just like people's clothes and useless words in newspapers. In this urban landscape, even the animals are sad:

Un uomo accanto al recinto mi ha detto che la tristezza di quelle vacche è contagiosa, lui certe sere torna a casa depresso senza sapere perché.⁶⁹⁷

⁶⁹¹ Ivi, p. 30.

⁶⁹² Ivi, p. 31.

⁶⁹³ Ibidem.

⁶⁹⁴ Ibidem.

⁶⁹⁵ Ibidem.

⁶⁹⁶ Ibidem.

⁶⁹⁷ Ivi, p. 32.

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A blanket of sadness pervades the environment, as if it were mist, and lets the 'black humour' of these places shine through.

Stamattina un velo nel cielo, altostrati un po' bluastri che ora si diradano. E ancora corti abbandonate, un cimitero di corti deserte. C'è quel vento che a tratti scuote gli arbusti sul ciglio della strada, arriva lì e disperde dei lucherini che volano via. Come la dimenticanza quando arriva con la sua onda, spazza la pianura in ogni angolo, e ti lascia lì dismemorato e intontito per le troppe cose che passano via.⁶⁹⁸

The bluish sky echoes the colour typically associated with melancholy and depression – as for Woolf -, the cemetery once again brings out the theme of death and 'too many things passing away', forgetfulness seems to be the quintessence of this anonymous and forgetful place, where the sense of uprooting is total. It is no coincidence that this place is pervaded by silence: “Nessuno nei paraggi, silenzio completo”⁶⁹⁹. Again, shortly afterwards: “Silenzio perplesso delle donne che si guardavano in faccia l'un l'altra”⁷⁰⁰.

This is followed by some thoughts on writing. A girl asks him if he is a writer and he replies: “Sono uno che scrive”⁷⁰¹. Celati's humility and his desire not to be framed in a role return. Asked by the girl about the material he is writing at the time, Celati says: “Ho risposto che mi piacerebbe fare un libro di viaggi sul Po, ma non so ancora come: se ci riesco, probabilmente utilizzerò questi appunti”⁷⁰². Celati, the poet-philosopher, rejects labels and social roles, and his book to come, like him, is still formless and devoid of connotations.

The landscape continues to be described with a veil of melancholy that increasingly pervades the settings:

Ai lati della porta nanetti in gesso come quelli d'un fil di Walt Disney: si sforzano anche loro di sospendere ogni ricordo della “vita piena di pena”, perché questo è lo scopo unico e finale delle cassette incantate, se ben capisco.⁷⁰³

The critique of modernity returns, made through the anonymous, all-same little houses: these cottages, emblems of the appearances of modernity, seem to suggest a well-being that nevertheless conceals the depression and sadness of contemporaneity. Continuing to walk, Celati is invaded by a cloud of pollen:

⁶⁹⁸ Ivi, p. 33.

⁶⁹⁹ Ibidem.

⁷⁰⁰ Ivi, p. 34.

⁷⁰¹ Ibidem.

⁷⁰² Ivi, p. 35.

⁷⁰³ Ivi, p. 36.

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Dieci secondi di masse opache, dove tutto passava via già da adesso, sparita anche quest'immagine del mondo che ci portiamo negli occhi. [...] L'effetto di black-out delle immagini pubblicitarie faceva piacere.

Altre sfilze di villette [...].

Sforzo fisico per proseguire, ogni momento in avanti è spazio vuoto, tempo vuoto da colmare. Almeno non ci fossero tutti quei cartelli pubblicitari, un numero sconfinato di parole che mi dà la depressione.⁷⁰⁴

The saturation of advertisements and words is emblematic of modernity, which fills the silence with its feigned fullness but does not actually fill the interiority: we are pervaded by malaise and depression. Celati is saturated by the boundless number of words he finds in the world and is invaded by the typical black humour. In fact, shortly afterwards, the writer speaks explicitly of depression: “Depressione con stanchezza di pensare”⁷⁰⁵. The need, unspoken, is that of silence, of the absence of words.

On 14 May, a diary page particularly marked by typographical whites, Celati returns to the themes of “dimenticanza”⁷⁰⁶ and “spazio d'affezione”⁷⁰⁷. The latter is the only way to keep the anonymous places described so far in mind: through imagination. The writer will in fact say: “Cercavo d'immaginare come sarà questo palazzo”⁷⁰⁸. Imagination is perceived as the human faculty that wrenches objects from their anonymity and restores them to an affection. Giuliana Bruno calls the attachment to place *topophilia*, i.e. an actual loving discourse addressed to a place⁷⁰⁹.

In addition to images, with which the text is saturated, Celati also makes use of the sense of hearing and records an Arabic music (“una musica araba, autentico maluf a nenia infinita”⁷¹⁰) which is a counterpoint to silence (“un grande silenzio dalle case”⁷¹¹). Music acts as a filler, like words, and saturates the interpersonal silence. When the music is turned off (“la musica viene spenta”⁷¹²), indeed, a conversation takes place, but Celati will say: “Ho ascoltato senza capire niente fin quando ha concluso”⁷¹³, to emphasise that the empty words of the human language of modernity are emissions of breath, and that no one truly understands the language of the other.

Next we read one of the most significant passages of the text:

⁷⁰⁴ Ivi, p. 37.

⁷⁰⁵ Ivi, p. 38.

⁷⁰⁶ Ivi, p. 39.

⁷⁰⁷ Ibidem.

⁷⁰⁸ Ivi, p. 40.

⁷⁰⁹ Giuliana Bruno, *Atlante delle emozioni*, a cura di Maria Nadotti, Milano, Bruno Mondadori, 2006, p. 317. Cf. Yi-Fu Tuan, *Topophilia. A Study on Environmental Perception. Attitudes, and Values*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1990.

⁷¹⁰ Gianni Celati, *Verso la foce*, cit., p. 41.

⁷¹¹ Ibidem.

⁷¹² Ivi, p. 42.

⁷¹³ Ibidem.

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C'è stata una battaglia tra le nuvole, poi un movimento d'aria le ha tutte sparpagliate, e brandelli di cirri navigano ora sopra le cime dei pioppi di là dal fiume. Quand'ero giovane leggevo sempre, avevo paura di perdermi qualcosa, e adesso ho l'idea che il perso e il trovato vadano nello stesso alveo.

Forse l'unica cosa da capire è quanto siamo estranei e inadatti alla "vita piena di pena", l'unica che c'è (calamità, dolore, morte). E come tutto lavori a dismemorarci, ci aiuti a mettere degli argini, per poter dire che "ha i suoi lati buoni", per mettere i nanetti di Walt Disney davanti alla porta; insomma per dire e mostrare sempre e dovunque che è una cosa tutta diversa da quello che è.⁷¹⁴

This reflection goes in several directions. The first relates to words: if at one time Celati read out of fear of missing something, today he believes that what is lost has the same value as what is found, as if to indicate that the saturation he sought was not as fundamental as he believed in order to be able to read reality. The second relates to life: the theme of pain, death, and sorrow return as elements that are part of existence and that we try to sweeten by putting up curbs and telling ourselves that there are positive aspects. Walt Disney's dwarves are a metaphor for this deception that we show others and ourselves in order to continue living, hiding something that we do not have the courage to say.

On 16 May, we find another important consideration, which follows the sentence: “Viene l’idea d’essere in un lontano stanziamento di frontiera”⁷¹⁵. This takes up the motif of uprooting and foreignness.

Là in fondo l’aperto si presenta dietro un orizzonte, facendo sentire l’indistinta lontananza che dà un senso alla nostra collocazione spaziale. Piazza quasi sempre vuota, dove il vuoto si riconosce come l’accogliente, e noi accolti potevamo accorgerci degli altri accolti di passaggio, senza la solita sensazione di fastidio.⁷¹⁶

The remoteness, the horizon, the emptiness become welcoming elements, contrary to our expectations. Celati loves being outdoors and loves the emptiness that he recognises as welcoming, proving that the saturation of images and words gives a sense of fullness that is only apparent, but leaves the souls empty and alone.

17 May concludes this first diary of observations, which Celati describes in making them:

Sono venuto sull’argine per scrivere una conclusione a questo diario, prima di partire, ma non l’ho ancora trovata.⁷¹⁷

⁷¹⁴ Ivi, p. 44.

⁷¹⁵ Ivi, p. 46.

⁷¹⁶ Ibidem.

⁷¹⁷ Ivi, p. 47.

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The writer's notes record not only the exterior landscape, but also the interior landscape, often inhabited by doubt, uncertainty and sadness. Celati returns to the initial theme of the diary, which he takes up again at the end, closing a circle. Regarding Chernobyl and the inhabitants who spoke about it, whom he describes as 'experts', he writes: "Nessuno può dire che"⁷¹⁸, which becomes an anaphora since it is repeated twice, and "Nessuno può davvero pensare che"⁷¹⁹, to emphasise that experts are in fact not.

Eppure ognuno di quegli esperti non smetteva mai di mostrare una sicurissima comprensione di quanto è successo e succederà.⁷²⁰

Words are then used as a tool to feel safe in a world that is constantly changing, with no points of reference, its landscape and intelligibility changing. The word, used here as an empty *bavardage*, fills the silence of doubt and saturates it with nonsense and hearsay. Celati, estranged and uprooted, concludes with this reflection:

Ho camminato tre giorni per osservare qualcosa, ma già confuso quello che ho osservato, incerto quello che pensavo, solo incertezza per quello che verrà. Credo che tra pochissimo quasi tutti avremo dimenticato le notizie che solo qualche giorno fa sembravano così impressionanti; saranno roba sfiorita e un po' arcana, con l'effetto che mi facevano le persiane polverose d'una villa abbandonata di Orbetello.

Deperibilità svelta del cosiddetto "mondo reale", non si distingue bene da un miraggio. Per forza l'intelligenza arriva sempre in ritardo: non lo capisce proprio tutto questo passare e perdersi nell'incerto, la dimenticanza che dovunque ci avvolge e ci porta.⁷²¹

The main sensations at the end of the journey are therefore radical insecurity with respect to the past, present and future, forgetfulness with respect to the novelty that will soon become past news, and the perishability of reality, which seems like a mirage. In this confusion that pervades the modern world, human intelligence is perpetually lagging behind, because it does not arrive in time to conceive of the rapid and constant changes that invade the world, which has now become a merry-go-round of binomials between old and new, empty and full, word and silence.

⁷¹⁸ Ivi, p. 48.

⁷¹⁹ Ibidem.

⁷²⁰ Ibidem.

⁷²¹ Ivi, p. 49.

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The second story in the collection is entitled *Esplorazione sugli argini* and picks up the physical place - the embankment - where the first one ended. It is first dated 20 May 1983 and contains some reflections on space, in a manner similar to Perec's *Espèce d'espace*.

Noi non sappiamo più dove finiscono le città [...]; dove finisce una città non è più un limite territoriale, ma un cambiamento nei movimenti di guida, in attesa d'essere consegnati alle nostre destinazioni.⁷²²

The places Celati talks about are anonymous, expressionless places. One no longer understands the boundaries of cities and places, everything blurs into urban elements.

Contro il cielo su un argine papaveri mossi dal vento, e un cielo così cupo, così pesante. Campagne vuote. Tutto questo mi dà voglia di scrivere, come se le parole seguissero qualcosa che è fuori di me. Se guardo in distanza, prima di tutto c'è una grande apertura nello spazio là fuori, il vuoto che accoglie tutte le cose: solo in un secondo tempo l'apertura si restringe per fissarmi su qualcosa che manda un richiamo [...]. Noi siamo guidati da ciò che ci chiama e capiamo solo quello; lo spazio che accoglie le cose non possiamo capirlo se non confusamente.⁷²³

Celati's words spring from the emptiness of the surrounding landscape: it is a constant pursuit of the gaze that wants to be translated into words. The words are reminders, as will also emerge in the book's conclusion.

Shortly afterwards, we learn that Celati is accompanied by photographer Luciano Capelli on this journey through lands marked by abandonment and neglect.

In questi viali d'ingresso secondario ai paesi viene l'impressione di poter percepire, grazie al silenzio diffuso, una simultaneità di gesti abituali ripetuti dagli abitanti d'un luogo; come entrare in casa d'altri e sentire un andamento benefico delle abitudini.⁷²⁴

The villages are surrounded by a 'diffuse silence': a blanket of silence renders the idea of stillness, reinforced by habitual gestures that give serenity to the onlooker. A little later, in a bar, the encounters return, punctuating the silent narrative with their voices:

Ascoltare una voce che racconta fa bene, ti toglie dall'astrattezza di quando stai in casa credendo di aver capito qualcosa "in generale". Si segue una voce, ed è come seguire gli argini d'un fiume dove scorre qualcosa che non può essere capito astrattamente.⁷²⁵

⁷²² Ivi, p. 53.

⁷²³ Ivi, pp. 54-55.

⁷²⁴ Ivi, p. 56.

⁷²⁵ Ivi, p. 57.

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The encounters are therefore closely linked to the stories, which tear us away from abstractness and bring us back to the concrete. Following a voice, like travelling along a river, helps us to understand and make order in the chaos of the ever-changing world. It is no coincidence that Celati would write shortly afterwards: “Incontrare quel parlatore ci ha fatto passare la voglia di ripartire in fretta”⁷²⁶. Words, when authentic, hold us and allow us to become attached.

As we continue to travel through these landscapes, the descriptions become increasingly gloomy: “campagne vuote, molte case diroccate”, “un cielo plumbeo”, “tromba d’aria”, “un cane che abbaia”, “segnali stradali mezzi sommersi”, “buio quasi come di notte”⁷²⁷. These landscape descriptions are interspersed with the writer's reflections:

Le idee che ho portato in viaggio, non sono capace di servirmene. Troppo diversi i pensieri che vengono muovendosi da quelli che si accumulano a casa propria, sono due cose che non stanno assieme. Vorrebbe dire che noi non siamo padroni dei nostri pensieri, semmai sono loro che accampano dei diritti su di noi secondo le situazioni in cui sorgono; e poi diventano anche presuntuosi. Bisogna portarli a spasso questi presuntuosi, che prendano aria.⁷²⁸

The pair of walking and writing mentioned by Jean Talon returns, as does the diversity of thoughts born 'static', at home, compared to those born 'dynamic', outdoors. Personifying thoughts and making them take on the traits of human personality, Celati calls them presumptuous. What is important, however, is that we are not masters of our thoughts, according to the writer. The same idea is expressed, in the field of photography, by his friend Luciano who says:

“In certi momenti ho voglia di fotografare tutto, tutto quello che vedo mi sembra interessante. Poi però guardo nell’obbiettivo, e tutto mi sembra ovvio. Ma mi sembra ovvio per gli stessi motivi per cui prima volevo fotografarlo. Se mi distraigo dall’idea di dover fotografare, invece, a momenti succede il contrario: una cosa mi colpisce isolatamente, senza pensarci troppo la inquadrare e vedo che riesco a farla giocare bene nell’inquadratura. È soprattutto un problema di inquadratura. È anche una questione di stati d’animo.”⁷²⁹

The same mechanism of photography is the one Celati uses with writing: words serve to recall things, to name them and to fix them, as if to capture and freeze forever a moment before the world changes. At the same time, the object one wishes to capture varies according to one's moods, or thoughts.

⁷²⁶ Ivi, p. 59.

⁷²⁷ Ivi, p. 60.

⁷²⁸ Ivi, p. 61.

⁷²⁹ Ivi, p. 63.

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The theme of uprooting also returns as a recurring one, in a confrontation with the local villagers:

Non sembrano sentire questa necessità che abbiamo noi di spostarci sempre nel grande spazio, tentando così (invano) di risolvere la nostra inadeguatezza alla vita. Questi abitano il luogo, il piccolo spazio, e non sono dei domiciliati che potrebbero essere dovunque, come noi che non abbiamo un luogo d'appartenenza: si vede da come si muovono per strada.⁷³⁰

The fundamental trait Celati identifies with is nomadism, contrasted here with belonging to a place and staying there: on the contrary, the writer has no place of belonging, is a stranger everywhere and wanders the plains trying to resolve the inadequacy he feels. The text is pervaded by the usual black humour, which returns shortly afterwards with a very melancholic reflection:

Sospiriamo per tutte le famiglie e unioni andate a male, per tutte le case e persone che abbiamo dovuto abbandonare, e poi perché siamo ancora lontanissimi dalle foci del fiume.⁷³¹

These sad sighs accompany the geographical route actually travelled by the couple: the distance from the mouths is perhaps synonymous with an inner distance from what the journey will bring to Celati. Again, the surrounding landscape is pervaded by sadness and abandonment: “luoghi disabitati”, “paesini [...] di cui nessuno ha sentito parlare”, “nessuno per le strade”, “un vecchio cimitero”, “il suono lontano d’una televisione”⁷³². All around suggests loneliness and melancholy, since it is: “luoghi dove nessuno vuole abitare perché ‘non succede niente’”⁷³³.

The encounters also make Celati feel his own difference through contrast: “Le cose di cui parlano mi fanno sentire un estraneo, un turista”⁷³⁴; “Non avrai più luogo d’appartenenza”⁷³⁵. The alienation felt is the same as that of a foreigner who finds himself in a place he does not know, unable to find familiar points of reference.

Le apparenze là fuori vengono avanti sempre diverse e formano i momenti, e i momenti sono ciò in cui gli esseri si raccolgono [...]. Invece il viavai domenicale di macchine e motorini verso il ponte è una cosa tanto apatica da farti dimenticare i momenti, andazzo meccanico di dispersi che cercano di salvarsi uscendo con la macchina dall’asfalto sulla costa erbosa. [...]

⁷³⁰ Ivi, p. 64.

⁷³¹ Ivi, p. 66.

⁷³² Ibidem.

⁷³³ Ivi, p. 67.

⁷³⁴ Ivi, p. 71.

⁷³⁵ Ivi, p. 77.

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Crolla l'idea di poter guardare e ascoltare tutto: c'è un potenziale depressivo là fuori, che se ti investe passa subito la voglia di farsi delle idee da distaccati osservatori.⁷³⁶

Celati's moments are distantly reminiscent of Woolf's *moments of being*, in which the subject gathers and has a small epiphany. Likewise, Celati contrasts them with the Sunday hustle and bustle, made up of mechanical and apathetic gestures, devoid of genuine emotional resonance. In this context, for Celati the idea of being able to watch and listen to everything collapses: it is not possible to record everything. The *infra-ordinaire* is potentially destructive, as it leaves a halo of depression on the observer, as Perec's *homme qui dort* also experiences.

In fondo là fuori non c'è niente di speciale da vedere o registrare, c'è solo tempo che passa. Lo spazio è una specie di grande galera dove si sta ad aspettare qualcosa: nessuno sa cosa, ci si fa delle idee, e c'è solo tempo che passa. Sto scrivendo in una nebulosa di gas depressivo.⁷³⁷

It is clear that such a melancholic and forlorn outer landscape has a reflection on Celati's inner landscape, which indulges in depressive reflections that seem to suggest the idea of the futility of everything: everything is resolved in passing time; we wait for something, but we do not know what. The world seems like a big container of useless things: “Si capisce solo che le cose sono là, disperse nello spazio”⁷³⁸; “Dove c'è il traffico le ombre hanno sempre l'aria di aspetti inutili, troppo immobili per questo mondo”⁷³⁹. Jung's shadow motif returns again, as does Jabès' theme of the stranger. Then the melancholy of alienation and flatness slowly turns to nostalgia, and we read:

Avevo nostalgia di questo modo di trattare la lontananza, di guardare lo spazio che si spalanca sul fondo dove tutto svanisce: non sguardo all'infinito, ma sguardo su ciò che svanisce.⁷⁴⁰

The word once again becomes the means of saving what fades away, but not only that:

Scrivendo mentre Luciano guida, riesco a tenere a bada un panico che a tratti è con me.⁷⁴¹

C'è il panico che viene quando ci si sente inadeguati, con la testa piena di opinioni che non servono a niente.⁷⁴²

⁷³⁶ Ivi, pp. 74-75.

⁷³⁷ Ivi, p. 77.

⁷³⁸ Ivi, p. 78.

⁷³⁹ Ibidem.

⁷⁴⁰ Ibidem.

⁷⁴¹ Ibidem.

⁷⁴² Ivi, p. 79.

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The word, writing, serves as therapy with respect to the bewilderment of the outside world. Writing helps to bring clarity amidst the confusion of the landscape and useless opinions, and soothes the panic of inadequacy.

The writer's diary ends on a depressive note, almost as if the external landscape had infected the photographer, who no longer feels like photographing these places (“non se la sente più di fotografare questi posti”⁷⁴³), and the writer, who is panicked. Both are tired and shabby (“stanchi e malmessi”⁷⁴⁴).

In questo viaggio per le campagne abbiamo visto un abbandono generale del mondo esterno [...]. Il vuoto è riempito da nomi di località inesistenti, non luoghi ma solo nomi messi sui cartelli stradali da qualche amministrazione dello spazio esterno.

Da un'ora percorriamo l'argine del Po senza aprire bocca [...].⁷⁴⁵

The state of abandonment in which the countryside finds itself relates to the state of mind of the travelling couple, who are inhabited by such an existential emptiness that they resolve themselves into silence: they no longer even speak to each other. These silent places of modernity, then, are either filled with a meaningless hubbub that makes one nauseous, or they remain empty and anonymous without reference points, (“nello spazio sempre più spalancato della pianura senza punti di riferimento”⁷⁴⁶).

Gli unici paesaggi a cui si va incontro sono andamenti di abitudini, circostanze secondo le ore, luci e colori e rumori che cambiano. Tutto questo svanire da cui nascono i racconti, la nostra piccolezza dispersa vicino a un fiume.⁷⁴⁷

The word once again becomes recognised as a salvific means that, through stories, prevents everything from fading away. The things named remain and are snatched from the silence of anonymity.

The last lines of the diary contain, significantly, a quotation from the photographer and travelling companion Luciano, who clearly expresses his unease that has grown during the journey to the abandoned places. He says:

⁷⁴³ Ivi, p. 80.

⁷⁴⁴ Ivi, p. 83.

⁷⁴⁵ Ivi, p. 81.

⁷⁴⁶ Ivi, p. 82.

⁷⁴⁷ Ibidem.

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“Non so più dove ho messo le chiavi della macchina. Non capisco niente di quello che faccio, di cosa fotografo. Poi non sto bene e ho voglia di vedere mia figlia, io torno a casa.”⁷⁴⁸

The photographer's depressive state and black humour are emblematic of the confusion that reigns supreme in the spirits of the two travellers. Each sentence is punctuated by a 'non', a negative element. Luciano knows nothing, understands nothing and is not well. He too, like the surrounding landscape, has lost all points of reference, and it is from this that the desire to return home arises, spontaneously, to put an end to that condition of uprooting that triggered the journey and to find the authentic words of their loved ones, to put an end to the anonymous silence that pervades the plains.

The third story in the collection is *Tre giorni nelle zone della grande bonifica* and was written in May 1984. Set in the Ferrara countryside, thus in his mother's home areas, it immediately begins with melancholic atmospheres:

Avevo l'idea che una macchina con altoparlante girasse per le vie deserte.

La padrona del bar-alloggio mi ha chiesto se ho dormito bene, con un sorriso che ho interpretato come una smorfia di solitudine.⁷⁴⁹

Two macro-themes appear immediately: desert and solitude, both closely linked to silence. Brief encounters continue to punctuate the story, but the landscape seems to engulf everyone with its atmosphere of sadness. In fact, shortly afterwards, we find a sentence as if pinned down, without even the main verb:

Sensazione d'essere tra popolazioni che vivono nelle riserve d'un continente, in una qualche provincia esterna, dove tutto arriva un po' attutito.⁷⁵⁰

The slow gestures of the people - “da vita in vacanza”⁷⁵¹ - create a tranquil atmosphere like that of people living at the ends of the earth, characterised by calm and not by the rush punctuated by schedules and commitments. The adjective Celati uses, 'muffled', refers to the field of sound: he seems to be in a bubble, where his own are attenuated and mitigated, almost lowered. To underline this feeling of marginality and muffling, Celati writes: “È un po' come essere sotto il livello standard del progetto finanziario di vita universale”⁷⁵². Time seems suspended, so much so that the women who

⁷⁴⁸ Ivi, p. 83.

⁷⁴⁹ Ivi, p. 87.

⁷⁵⁰ Ivi, p. 88.

⁷⁵¹ Ibidem.

⁷⁵² Ivi, p. 89.

go shopping cycle as if time had no weight for them (“donne che vanno a far la spesa pedalano come se il tempo per loro non avesse peso”⁷⁵³).

Continuing along the itinerary, we find for the first time an explicit reference to the writer's mother and thus to his origins. Celati tells of a recent agricultural settlement and his point of reference is precisely his mother: “Quando mia madre era bambina non esisteva ancora e qui c’erano le paludi”⁷⁵⁴.

Observing the landscape of the countryside and the houses, Celati registers this impression:

Dalla corriera apparivano là in attesa, come tutto il resto. Dappertutto quest’aria di attesa che il tempo scorra e passi il giorno, venga un’altra stagione, che non si sente in città.⁷⁵⁵

Waiting, suspension, stillness return once again: all these themes are linked to silence, which remains as an implicit background in the narrative. Emptiness and the lack of references also return to punctuate the narrative:

Davanti a me campagne vuote con molto cielo sopra [...].

Non passa mai nessuno, non so di preciso dove sto andando, con la bussola mi oriento all’incirca verso est.

C’è una specie di felicità là fuori, in quelle linee di terra che vanno dovunque senza ondulazioni.⁷⁵⁶

The loneliness of Celati walking alone through immense open spaces with immense skies above his head, somewhat bewildered and confused, recalls that of Perec's *homme qui dort*, who wanders the immense Parisian streets without a destination. Happiness exists, but it is 'out there', it does not belong to the wandering, uprooted, foreign subject, who nevertheless is fascinated: “Molto attratto, contento d’essere qui”⁷⁵⁷. The attraction stems from a kind of curiosity about what is around, like an ethnologist in search of special observations and information.

Camminando la linea d’orizzonte ti dice sempre che tu sei disperso in un punto qualsiasi sulla linea della terra, come le cose che si vedono in distanza. Bisogna cercare un altro punto con cui fare asse, e immaginare che ci si arriverà una volta o l’altra. Bisogna sempre riuscire a immaginare quello che c’è là fuori, altrimenti non si potrebbe fare un solo passo.⁷⁵⁸

⁷⁵³ Ibidem.

⁷⁵⁴ Ibidem.

⁷⁵⁵ Ivi, p. 90.

⁷⁵⁶ Ibidem.

⁷⁵⁷ Ivi, p. 91.

⁷⁵⁸ Ivi, pp. 91-92.

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The faculty of imagination returns as salvation from the confusion and loss of reference points in these infinite spaces where we find ourselves lost and foreign. Imagination allows us to move and not remain still and static: it is the motor of nomadism and uprooting that Celati inhabits. At the same time, it is the human faculty that allows us to become attached to and feel emotional resonances with our surroundings, as we note in the passage below:

Adesso col cappuccio rialzato sotto la pioggia mi sembra che là fuori, in ciò che si svolge, ci sia come il miraggio d'una presenza commovente. Richiamo dello spazio aperto, viene da tutto ciò che appare, cresce o spunta là fuori.⁷⁵⁹

Imagination makes us extremely receptive, and what was previously *infra-ordinary* opens up to moving meanings and resonances, which put us in deep contact with the world to the point of being moved by what we see. The semantic area of the desert does not disappear, however, this time instead of the desert we have a 'mirage', that is, a vision, an epiphany that makes us glimpse something precious in the midst of the banality of the everyday. An emotional opening returns shortly afterwards:

Ore 21. Telefonato a G. senza trovarla, avevo voglia di parlare. Anche l'intimità che portiamo con noi fa parte del paesaggio, il suo tono è dato dallo spazio che si apre là fuori ad ogni occhiata; ed anche i pensieri sono fenomeni esterni in cui ci si imbatte, come un taglio di luce su un muro, o l'ombra delle nuvole.

Per scrivere devo sempre calmarmi, sedermi o appoggiarmi da qualche parte, e non fare resistenza al tempo che passa. Posso anche scrivere camminando, ma dopo ritrovo nel quaderno solo liste di cose che ho visto, senza l'apertura dello spazio in cui le ho viste.⁷⁶⁰

Firstly, we notice a kind of nostalgia that makes the writer long for a loved one, whose name is symbolically truncated, indicating that intimacy is also secrecy, silence and privacy. The landscape is enriched with two elements: intimacy and thoughts. If the former is something that is part of the observing subject, the latter are external phenomena we come across, which have the power to change our mood.

Secondly, we find a reflection on writing: Celati notes a difference between writing while standing still and writing while walking. If the latter type of writing is characterised by quick jottings without that 'openness' that the writer seeks, that which he writes while standing still and calm is completely different, because he does not resist and allows himself to be traversed by the passing of

⁷⁵⁹ Ivi, p. 92.

⁷⁶⁰ Ivi, p. 93.

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time. To write in an 'open' manner with respect to the resonances of the landscape one must, in short, pause, stop, concentrate silently on the page.

In the following pages we find a harsh critique of modern society expressed through confrontation:

Un tempo qui le paludi invadevano tutto. [...] Adesso qui sorgono case moderne, squadrate e senza volto. Quelle case non hanno volto, hanno solo aperture di sicurezza e superfici protettive dietro cui ci si va a nascondere. Si esce a vedere se in giro è tutto normale, poi si torna a nascondersi nelle tane. [...] È domenica, per le strade vedo solo ragazze che vanno a spasso con i loro segreti.⁷⁶¹

The contrast between the former swampland and the homologated, modern houses that now dot the countryside is enormous: modernity is anonymous, requires mass homologation and separates us from one another. Celati sees modern living as protecting oneself inside one's own burrows with one's own secrets, one's own silences, which become like a caesura between the outside world and the inside world.

A tratti le mosse degli altri sembrano pose per tenere in piedi una rappresentazione senza senso. Impresione d'un ordine vuoto che si ripete dovunque e per nessun motivo. Nelle metropoli tutti si aggrappano gli uni agli altri in amori soffocanti, per non sentirsi persi in quell'ordine vuoto che si ripete senza motivo. Qui c'è piuttosto il senso che le cose stiano così e basta, e non ci sia poi una gran differenza tra quella ripetizione perpetua e lo spuntar di arbusti a caso lungo una strada.⁷⁶²

These reflections with their depressive and sombre tone have a fundamental point, which is a typical Celati trait: the apparent non-sense of all things. The world as representation, that is, as a stage, has no meaning and is always the same. What changes is only the attitude of the people, who in the big cities toil in search of suffocating relationships, while in the countryside they indulge in determinism.

Sulla piazza centrale di Codigoro, in un bar, ora del pranzo. A momenti la voglia di scrivere mi passa, ho l'impressione che sia inutile annotare ciò che vedo, perché questa è una finzione come le altre. Ma poi mi vengono in mente quelli che sistemano tutto con la loro saputezza, credono solo a ciò che hanno letto nei loro libri e giornali, e trattano tutto questo mondo con sufficienza perché odiano sentirsi smarriti, esposti alla casualità delle apparenze. Se hai la sensazione di capire tutto, passa la voglia di osservare.⁷⁶³

⁷⁶¹ Ivi, p. 94.

⁷⁶² Ivi, p. 95.

⁷⁶³ Ibidem.

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Non-sense also invades the writer to the point of questioning what he is doing on the road: writing. If the world is representation, his notes would be nothing more than fiction. Yet, thinking of the empty words in the newspapers, Celati decides to write almost by contrast, to give value to that lost feeling that accompanies him and makes him so melancholic. The desert that inhabits us seems to give rise to authentic writing that springs from silence, contrary to the 'breathlessness' and gibberish of newspapers and 'experts'. The observations continue:

Sono venuto da queste parti per vedere le zone della grande bonifica, il terreno uniformato e resto tutto produttivo, e cosa ne resta delle campagne. Tutta la vita e tutta la terra ormai consegnate a un progetto. Ma devo smetterla con le diffidenze, osservare ciò che si ripete giorno dopo giorno senza motivo, il più inappariscente degli spettacoli.⁷⁶⁴

Celati's goal is to observe those places that everyone has before their eyes but no one sees, to restore value to what has become anonymous. Writing saves things in naming them, and does so through the eye and description of an unprejudiced observer. The sense of foreignness and uprootedness continues to animate the writing:

Nel ristorante, a cena, tutte le occhiate mi dicono che sono un'unità incompleta. È sempre come se la gente sola portasse con sé strani enigmi. [...]

Non si è mai estranei a niente di ciò che accade intorno, e quando si è soli ancora meno. Il corpo è un organo per affondare nell'esterno, come pietra, lichene, foglia.⁷⁶⁵

The contrast between loneliness and belonging is evident here, but Celati, contrary to the glances of ordinary people, affirms his participation with everything around him. Solitude, according to the writer, makes us more porous to what happens around us, and our body becomes a receptor of the external environment, to the point that everything, even a sunset, moves us:

Un bagliore rosso al tramonto, e subito la sensazione d'un rimorso per qualcosa che non ho fatto o non sto facendo, insieme al pensiero di persone da cui sono separato, con la certezza che continueremo a perderci.⁷⁶⁶

Thoughts, external elements of the landscape, seem to be animated beings that come towards us just like people and put us in touch with seemingly misplaced sensations. And yet, this is precisely the openness the writer is talking about: being porous to the environment and being able to mirror the

⁷⁶⁴ Ivi, p. 96.

⁷⁶⁵ Ivi, p. 97.

⁷⁶⁶ Ivi, pp. 97-98.

landscape, which is characterised by: “un rallentamento dei ritmi”, “ombra indistinta”⁷⁶⁷, “la tinta del deserto che hanno le ocre da queste parti”⁷⁶⁸. Slowness, shadows, and the desert return to cadence the narrative of the journey, where our traveller is almost always silent and expresses himself only through his writing, which gives voice to the silent thoughts that inhabit his mind. To confirm this, we read:

Nel bar e nel barista ritrovo qualcosa di spento, che conosco bene dai tempi della famiglia. Un modo proprio di esprimersi della penuria, come prudenza estrema, smorzamento di tinte, condizione senza vanità. Una specie di galateo ufficiale della penuria; viene da epoche in cui la vita non era progetto, ma sussistenza e basta.⁷⁶⁹

What is dull, muted, poor is the way the characters who inhabit these deserted places express themselves: there is an extreme humility that resolves itself in silence, in the slowness of gestures, in the dulling of colours. Life has other rhythms in these places, completely different from those who live by projects as in fast-paced metropolises. Approaching the end of his journey, Celati says he is travelling along a fairly deserted road (“strada abbastanza deserta”) and sees the shadow of the mountains (“l’ombra delle montagne”⁷⁷⁰). However, when a little later he can no longer make out the line of the Alps, he writes:

ma non vedevo niente, e m’è venuto il dubbio d’essermi immaginato tutto. Poi c’erano nubi bianche che coprivano l’orizzonte; probabilmente di qui nessuno ha mai visto le Alpi, ma moltissimi devono averle immaginate come me.

Anche l’immaginazione fa parte del paesaggio: lei ci mette in stato d’amore per qualcosa là fuori, ma più spesso è lei che ci mette in difesa con troppe paure; senza di lei non potremmo fare un solo passo, ma lei poi porta sempre non si sa dove. Ineliminabile dea che guida ogni sguardo, figura d’orizzonte, così sia.⁷⁷¹

In these few lines we read a hymn to the imagination, which is what allows us to see things with other eyes and puts us in contact with what is outside of us. Imagination, for Celati, is the source of love: it is what allows us to move from the word *désaffecté* to an affection for things. The imaginative gaze is the loving gaze: Celati makes things and landscapes his own because he looks at them imaginatively, letting himself be carried, literally, along the paths of imagination.

This diary finally concludes with a dialogue with himself in the second person singular, which also seems to be an appeal to the reader:

⁷⁶⁷ Ivi, p. 97.

⁷⁶⁸ Ivi, p. 100.

⁷⁶⁹ Ivi, p. 101.

⁷⁷⁰ Ibidem.

⁷⁷¹ Ivi, pp. 102-103.

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Ogni volta è una sorpresa, scopri di non sapere niente di preciso sul mondo esterno. Allora viene anche la voglia di scusarsi con tutti: scusate la nostra presunzione, scusate i nostri discorsi, scusateci di aver creduto che voi siate un pugno di mosche su cui sputare le nostre sentenze.

Scusate, scusate, noi siamo inetti e smemorati, e neanche tanto furbi da restare a casa, tacere e non muoverci, fare come gli alberi.⁷⁷²

Celati's humility is now made explicit and declares an impossibility of knowledge of the world, so the first thought is to apologise for the presumption of having left home and having tried to say something about the landscape and reality. In what does this attitude of humility resolve itself? In 'keeping quiet and not moving': in stasis and silence.

The last tale that closes the collection is *Verso la foce*, dated May and June 1983.

The diary opens on a funeral scene: a cemetery and a visit to a friend's grave. Right from the start, several human presences are encounters that reconnect Celati with his origins: "Certi sguardi che restano gli stessi dall'infanzia, marchi di famiglia fino alla morte"⁷⁷³. The childhood-death binomial therefore imposes itself forcefully from the very first pages, following the thematic thread of suspended time of the previous stories. Continuing to roam the countryside, Celati observes the behaviour of the villagers and writes:

Apatia di tutto il funzionamento esterno. Ci sono gli orari, le corriere e i treni che partono, i traffici commerciali e le ragioni amministrative, l'astratto gioco del mondo da mandare avanti, e per il resto: canzone senza sentimento.⁷⁷⁴

The modern world is a meaningless wandering, dictated only by market reasons that lead everyone in the direction of progress. However, this 'going forward' is actually a song without feeling: a proceeding along predefined paths, but without feeling anything. The world has become apathetic, the opposite of empathetic: nobody feels anything any more. In this context, Celati quotes the words of old Constantine, now dead, who said that now everyone wants to buy names ("diceva che adesso tutti voglio comperarsi dei nomi"⁷⁷⁵): empty names, of cars, clothes, food. Words have lost substance and depth, they have flattened out like the countryside.

On this journey we again see Celati accompanied, but this time by Reinhard:

⁷⁷² Ivi, p. 104.

⁷⁷³ Ivi, p. 108.

⁷⁷⁴ Ivi, p. 109.

⁷⁷⁵ Ibidem.

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Con qualcuno accanto riesco meglio a far fronte alle immagini che vengono avanti là fuori, come un'oscura domanda che bisogna sempre tenere in sospeso.⁷⁷⁶

External images seem almost threatening, because they hold the power to influence our inner landscape, and in the face of this challenge it is better to be accompanied. The 'dark question' to which Celati refers is that of the meaning of things, and it is necessarily an open question, for if we assume the attitude of humility mentioned above, it is clear that we do not know how to answer it. In fact, just like the shadows, the impressions of confusion and the image of the desert also return: “Questa strada non porta da nessuna parte. Indietro per un'altra strada deserta”⁷⁷⁷. Forced to enter the town of Comacchio due to a technical requirement, the area is packed and busy:

Come se nessuno potesse mai smettere di cercare qualcosa che è altrove, e sgasasse per essere sempre pronto a correre verso una scoperta formidabile degli occhi, in balia dell'aria che tira.⁷⁷⁸

The constant movement of people is indicative of a restlessness that has to do with the non-acceptance of meaninglessness, with the constant search for something to do in order not to feel existential angst. The comings and goings of young people on mopeds is contrasted with the stasis of elderly people at bar tables: “Quando qualcuno si guarda attorno lo fa per distrarsi un po', non per cercare qualcosa verso cui correre”⁷⁷⁹. Movement and stasis, noise and silence, are the two counterpoints that echo in these small villages.

Pensieri venuti. Si è disposti all'osservazione quando si ha voglia di mostrare ad altri quello che si vede. È il legame con gli altri che dà colori alle cose, le quali altrimenti appaiono smorte. C'è sempre il vuoto centrale dell'anima da arginare, per quello si seguono immagini viste o sognate, per raccontarle ad altri e respirare un po' meglio.⁷⁸⁰

The basic idea is that we are all inhabited by 'a hole', and not by a solid rock (“salda roccia”⁷⁸¹). The emptiness that we have at the centre of our soul is a constant reminder that it needs to be filled, and this filling can only be done through connection with other people: telling one's stories, or imaginations, or experiences to others allows us to 'breathe a little easier', that is, to feel less

⁷⁷⁶ Ivi, p. 110.

⁷⁷⁷ Ivi, p. 112.

⁷⁷⁸ Ivi, p. 114.

⁷⁷⁹ Ivi, p. 115.

⁷⁸⁰ Ibidem.

⁷⁸¹ Ibidem.

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asphyxiated by the emptiness. It is this kind of word, originating from an emptiness, hence from an inner silence, which, just like Rovatti's silence-soaked words, can be salvific. In contrast to the full, or imaginative, or silence-born word, we find the words of experts, newspapers and catchphrases, which are hypocritical.

The subsequent reflections that punctuate the story are always on the subject of bonds between human beings:

Ascolto, e ogni frase ha una modulazione di canto, ogni parola è un richiamo. La gente si chiama come fanno gli uccelli, canta o racconta e non fa altro, questa è la vita d'ogni giorno. Forse ciò che diciamo ha pochissima importanza, tutto è già da sempre espresso dall'ordine che ci guida.⁷⁸²

Words are associated with music, or rather singing. Every word is a call, and human language is likened to that of animals, so much so that the important thing, for Celati, is not so much the content of what we say to each other, but in the tonality, in the sound of the voice, in the modulation with which we call out to each other. This modulation has an affective tone and our telling becomes singing, which is our daily activity. Singing is born out of silence, that is, out of the emptiness of the soul that was mentioned earlier. Otherwise, it is just insignificant 'breath emissions'. In an interview, Celati said: “Le parole son sempre parlate, son sempre musica”⁷⁸³.

We find some important thoughts on the musicality of words in the essay *Le posizioni narrative rispetto all'altro*, where we can read that if the language of newspapers is deaf and *paralytic of the imagination* (“paralitico dell'immaginazione”⁷⁸⁴), on the contrary there is a musical language which is that used by the narrator. Reflections on the nature of language proceed:

Alla prima occhiata capisco cosa avviene là fuori, e la stagione e l'ora del giorno, questa trama di cose ovvie che so riconoscere e nominare. Se tutto questo fosse un funzionamento scontato, mi basterebbe tirar fuori una di quelle grosse parole (sociologiche o altre), che spiegano con una definizione “le ragioni” del mondo com'è. Ma allora quello che avviene sarebbe già scontato e spiegato ancora prima di avvenire!

Ecco. Parlando in quella lingua di grosse parole che spiegano tutto, diventa difficile accorgersi ogni tanto d'esser qui.⁷⁸⁵

The 'big words' of sociology are opposed to the 'singing modulation' of storytelling: the former try to explain the world, to apply labels and concepts; the latter create bonds between people. If we

⁷⁸² Ivi, p. 116.

⁷⁸³ Gianni Celati, “Lector in fabula. Conversazione alla Radio Svizzera”, in Riga 40, *Gianni Celati*, cit., p. 25.

⁷⁸⁴ Gianni Celati, “Le posizioni narrative rispetto all'altro”, in Riga 40, *Gianni Celati*, cit., p. 212.

⁷⁸⁵ Gianni Celati, *Verso la foce*, cit., p. 117.

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use the former, we end up not even noticing our being in the world, because we reduce everything to the realm of reason, and we no longer feel the emotional resonances.

The meeting with Masotti, who starts talking without taking a breath (“si mette subito a parlararmi delle sue ricerche senza neanche tirare il fiato”⁷⁸⁶) is an example of *bavardage* that in fact leaves Celati “stralunato”⁷⁸⁷ and with no desire for further encounters.

Shortly afterwards, we read a remark inserted in brackets:

(nell’abbandono, è il vuoto centrale dell’anima che ci accoglie nel suo grembo, come una poltrona da cui non si ha voglia di alzarsi).⁷⁸⁸

Observing a model sitting momentarily alone in reflection, the writer emotionally connects with her and tries to go beyond appearances, beneath the surface, until he grasps what inhabits her: it is a moment when the hole we all have inside is speaking in her, who is not by chance in a meditative silence. Opposed to this silence are the men locked in front of a TV set because they cannot bear to look other men in the face (“uomini chiusi in casa davanti a un televisore perché non sopportano di guardare in faccia altri uomini”⁷⁸⁹). The television set, like the newspaper, emits sounds of empty words and catchphrases, information about the world that does not arise from the silence of the soul. Instead, when Celati is with his German friend Reinhard, who is in love, he attempts a communication in English, which is made complex by the foreign language, and writes:

Questa mancanza di comunicazione più che altro mi dà sollievo: mi fa sentire solidarietà con questo amico trovato per strada, e con le cose attorno che osserviamo assieme in silenzio.⁷⁹⁰

The absent word brings relief because the writer longs for silence, that is, the desert from which the words of writing can flow. Observing in silence is seen as a gesture of solidarity and friendship: a quiet walking along the streets. Silence is thus the background on which Celati's writing and reflections rest. Indeed, how can one observe in depth if not in silence?

Le cose sono là che navigano nella luce, escono dal vuoto per aver luogo ai nostri occhi. Noi siamo implicati nel loro apparire e scomparire, quasi che fossimo qui proprio per questo. Il mondo esterno ha bisogno che lo

⁷⁸⁶ Ivi, p. 119.

⁷⁸⁷ Ivi, p. 120.

⁷⁸⁸ Ivi, p. 121.

⁷⁸⁹ Ivi, p. 124.

⁷⁹⁰ Ivi, p. 125.

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osserviamo e raccontiamo, per avere esistenza. E quando un uomo muore porta con sé le apparizioni venute a lui fin dall'infanzia, lasciando gli altri a fiutare il buco dove ogni cosa scompare.⁷⁹¹

Celati achieves a kind of communion with all things, an indistinct participation with the rest of the world, where he does not belong to any place, but participates in all places. This involvement with the world gives him existence through words, which serve to name things and make them remain. In this poetics, one's own personal experience plays a fundamental role: the apparitions, or epiphanies, that each of us experiences from childhood are our particular way of observing - and therefore of narrating - the world and remain with us until the mystery of death, where everything falls silent again.

Poco fa, mentre giocavo a flipper, c'è stato un momento di silenzio assoluto in queste campagne. [...] Tutto appariva finalmente compatto, come al riparo dalla solitudine e dall'isolamento, sullo sfondo di questa lunga strada attraversata da un bancone di linoleum verde. E una foto di calciatori alla parete, la macchina per macinare il caffè, una scatola di plastica piena di palline di chewing gum, orari delle corriere vicino alla porta, tutte queste cose sembravano in salvo dentro un ordine leggero e possibile.⁷⁹²

Absolute silence is juxtaposed with shelter, salvation, order. There is a need for silence in a world that is saturated with meaningless, empty words and images. Speaking of silences, we learn from Celati that there is a gap in the story: "Ho perso il piccolo taccuino che m'ero portato dietro per l'occasione, così persi gli appunti del pomeriggio"⁷⁹³.

In the urban and increasingly industrialised landscape of the countryside, a new expression is making its way - that of non-place: "Tutti i luoghi faranno la stessa fine, diventeranno solo astrazioni segnaletiche o progetti tecnici di esperti"⁷⁹⁴. Places become anonymous and abstract, devoid of emotional resonance and without a proper name that speaks of their uniqueness: "relitti di vecchie tristezze", "luoghi che non sono più luoghi"⁷⁹⁵. The apathy and loneliness are not only of the people and inhabitants, but also of the physical places where they are located.

When the two travellers finally approach the mouth of the river, however, their feelings change:

⁷⁹¹ Ivi, p. 126.

⁷⁹² Ivi, p. 128.

⁷⁹³ Ivi, p. 130.

⁷⁹⁴ Ivi, p. 132.

⁷⁹⁵ Ibidem.

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L'immobilità dell'acqua e il silenzio completo danno immaginare un'infinità di movimenti invisibili che si ripetono senza sosta, sotto le alghe, dentro i cespugli, sotto i sassi, e anche sottoterra.⁷⁹⁶

Absolute silence leads to imaginative processes, which are those that enable us to approach things in authentic words.

Pretese delle parole; pretendono di regolare i conti con quello che succede là fuori, di descriverlo e definirlo. Ma là fuori tutto si svolge non in questo o in quel modo, c'entra poco con ciò che dicono le parole. Il fiume qui sfocia in una distesa senza limiti, i colori si mescolano da tutte le parti: come descrivere?

Come quando vai a cercare un amico e lui non c'è, senti la vanità della visita. Ti accorgi d'esser lì, vorresti gettare dei ponti con le parole, ma impossibile. Smettiamola: il buco dove tutto scompare è qui dove sono, ingorgato dal sentimento di tutti quelli che se ne sono andati prima di me. Sono qui alle foci del Po e penso a loro.

D'un tratto risuonano richiami di gabbiani, uno chiama e altri rispondono. Anche le parole sono richiami, non definiscono niente, chiamano qualcosa perché resti con noi. E quello che possiamo fare è chiamare le cose, invocarle perché vengano a noi con i loro racconti: chiamarle perché non diventino tanto estranee da partire ognuna per conto suo in una diversa direzione del cosmo, lasciandoci qui incapaci di riconoscere una traccia per orientarci.⁷⁹⁷

In this beautiful passage, Celati speaks open-heartedly about the relationship between words and things. Words attempt to define things, but fail: language has insurmountable limits. Words cannot describe everything: how then to describe? The answer seems to be in silence and to be resolved in the unspeakable, which in this case is not the traumatic experience, but the traumatising horror of realising that words are bridges, that they do not always connect with reality. Words are reminders, as we said earlier, that build links between people, but each of us says words that others do not mean in the same way, while silence is the same for everyone, since everyone fills it in his or her own way but no one can misinterpret it. The mouth of the Po becomes a 'hole where everything disappears' and where every word becomes silence and all meaning is annihilated. Words serve to make things and people remain: one describes so that something foreign becomes familiar; one speaks to build a bridge of friendship towards the other. The stranger is such until the word makes him local. The word is a trace to orient oneself in the desert. In this desert-river in which everything flows, the pen cannot run and describe everything before it is gone: "Non trovo la penna per scrivere, perduta anche la penna mentre tutto scorreva così in fretta"⁷⁹⁸.

⁷⁹⁶ Ivi, p. 133.

⁷⁹⁷ Ivi, p. 134.

⁷⁹⁸ Ivi, p. 135.

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The conclusion of the diary takes place after sunset, in the evening, when the landscape is inhabited by a great silence (“un grande silenzio”⁷⁹⁹):

Ci hanno mescolato le anime e ormai abbiamo tutti gli stessi pensieri. Noi aspettiamo ma niente ci aspetta, né un’astronave né un destino.

Se adesso cominciasse a piovere ti bagneresti, se questa notte farà freddo la tua gola ne soffrirà, se torni indietro a piedi nel buio dovrai farti coraggio, se continui a vagare sarai sempre più sfatto. Ogni fenomeno è in sé sereno. Chiama le cose perché restino con te fino all’ultimo.⁸⁰⁰

In this poetic conclusion - as Jean Talon would say - we read a final reflection on words: Celati manifests his faith in words. The paragraph, written in the second person, calls to the reader just as words call to things. In this great silence that inhabits us, in this great hole that we all have inside our souls, in this melancholy that pervades the urban landscape, the only source of salvation are words. Not the empty words, however - those of newspapers or experts - but the words that name things: those that describe to give a name, to baptise, to find an identity, to not feel like a stranger, to make the stranger a familiar, the desert a mirage, silence a welcoming space.

In *Verso la foce*, too, we find multiple levels of silence.

Firstly, the silence of places: Celati seeks out unknown and insignificant places, endless openings where urban noise is lost and a great silence remains as a background to every observation.

Secondly, the silence of words in newspapers, which say nothing, as opposed to the silence of words drowned in silence, which are full words that can relate us to others.

As a third level, we find a particular silence that is that of intimacy, of discretion, of the family sphere: not by chance, the name of Celati's wife, Gillian, is truncated in G.

Fourth, silence linked to the walking-writing binomial, which means walking while observing: writing, like photography, makes use of the gaze, which silently seeks material to say.

Fifth, silence understood as a lack of dialogue, as the absence of physical speech: writing is a silent activity, which requires solitude. We noticed how Celati needed silence even when accompanied by Reinhard, because his words arise from silence.

Sixth, silence linked to the psychological state of depression or, as Jean Talon puts it, black humour.

Seventh, the silence linked to Jabès' condition of the stranger in the desert. Celati himself writes: “I luoghi sono quasi sempre deserti, come se l’umanità fosse andata via. Infatti per lo più

⁷⁹⁹ Ivi, p. 139.

⁸⁰⁰ Ivi, p. 140.

mancano le presenze umane [...] ed è come se le cose apparissero finalmente avvolte nel loro naturale silenzio”⁸⁰¹.

On the aspect of discretion, it is worth dwelling on and considering the studies of Pia Schwarz Lausten, who in an article uses the term “poetica del pudore”⁸⁰² to refer to Celati's de-subjectivised writing in *Verso la foce*. The idea of the subject expressed here would be that of a subject who is no longer master of things and language, but is like a place (“un soggetto che non è più padrone delle cose e della lingua, ma che è come un luogo”⁸⁰³):

In *Verso la foce*, l'uso di un io narrante autobiografico abolisce la distinzione soprannominata tra autore e narratore, ma non per rilevare un io autobiografico tradizionale e forte [...], ma per rilevare un io-medium o ‘io-luogo’, attraverso cui passano delle percezioni del mondo esteriore. C'è un soggetto, ma è dilatato e svuotato dei suoi connotati classici, è un soggetto che trascrive un'esperienza fatta più coi sensi e le emozioni che con l'intelletto analitico; un'esperienza di rapporto affettivo col mondo.⁸⁰⁴

The body, in this context of autobiographical humility, becomes a place of the senses and of narrating: “un soggetto-corpo che si lascia riempire dalle voci dell'altro [con] una voce narrante esigua e pudica nei confronti della realtà”⁸⁰⁵. According to Pia Schwarz Lausten, in short, Celati's observation stories are inhabited by listening, modesty, *pietas* and abandonment (“l'ascolto, il pudore, la ‘pietas’ e l'abbandono”⁸⁰⁶).

When we ask what links *Verso la voce* has with notions of trauma and trauma studies, we find an answer in an interview in which Celati talks about this volume and explains:

Avevo viaggiato molto prima di scriverlo, e il libro doveva essere una sorta di diario di viaggio. In realtà per me scrivere il resoconto di quel percorso lungo il Po è equivalso, in un certo senso, ad entrare in psicanalisi. Perché i sogni e le visioni alla fine hanno avuto la meglio. Volevo scrivere qualcosa di “reale”, invece non ho mai scritto nulla di più visionario. Questo perché per lo scrittore la realtà non esiste. Lo scrittore realizza continue proiezioni. [...] Credo che offrire dei punti di fuga dalla realtà generi un'attivazione del pensiero, nuovi modi di vedere le cose.⁸⁰⁷

This poetics is reminiscent of Calvino's *Multiplicity*, which he theorised in *Lezioni americane*. The semantic field used by Celati refers to that of psychoanalysis: he speaks of visions, projections

⁸⁰¹ Gianni Celati, “Viaggio in Italia con 20 fotografi, 20 anni dopo”, in Riga 40, *Gianni Celati*, cit., p. 263.

⁸⁰² Pia Schwarz Lausten, “L'abbandono del soggetto. Un'analisi del soggetto narrato e quello narrante nell'opera di Gianni Celati”, in *Revue Romane* 37 – 1 – 2002, p. 128.

⁸⁰³ *Ibidem*.

⁸⁰⁴ *Ivi*, p. 129.

⁸⁰⁵ *Ibidem*.

⁸⁰⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁸⁰⁷ Roberto Carnero, “Celati, ovvero la scrittura come visione”, in Riga 40, *Gianni Celati*, cit., p. 46.

and dreams. Indeed, the environment described is oneiric, suspended in a sometimes paralysing fog, and we are constantly immersed in Celati's flow of thoughts. Walking and writing, for the writer, are therapeutic activities in a certain sense.

In relation to the activity of writing, in *Le posizioni narrative rispetto all'altro* Celati argues: “Nella vita non facciamo altro che raccontarci storie, darci degli esempi, riferire sui nostri stati d'animo, narrare le nostre avventure di viaggio”⁸⁰⁸. Narrating is therefore a purely human faculty, which we all exercise:

la capacità narrativa non appartiene in partenza a una categoria specializzata [...]. Fa parte della predisposizione umana in generale, ed è un apprendimento comune e quotidiano, perché le risorse della lingua le apprendiamo soprattutto ascoltando le voci degli altri nella vita quotidiana – mentre i libri sono semmai come partiture musicali che conservano la memoria di voci, di intonazioni, di modi d'intendersi a orecchio tra chi narra e chi ascolta.⁸⁰⁹

Narrating therefore has to do with music, the ear and sound. Books, which are silent musical scores, preserve within themselves the sound of the narrator's voice, and if we stretch our ear, that of the imagination, we can still hear it. It is the same operation that Barenboim spoke of: we need an interpreter who brings the musical notes alive, indeed we need sensitive and imaginative readers (“lettori sensibili e immaginativi [...] capaci di immaginare il valore delle voci evocate”⁸¹⁰). Celati continues: “I vecchi narratori sottolineavano continuamente questa posizione di connivenza fantastica, di simpatia immaginativa con l'ascoltatore: sottolineavano continuamente un piano di familiarità e di intesa tra chi narra e chi ascolta, rivolgendosi direttamente all'ascoltatore effettivo”⁸¹¹. This sense of familiarity and a 'you' to address is also an operation carried out by Celati in *Verso la foce*, which concludes with an appeal to the reader and which constantly seeks a humble tone, in order to approach the other.

With respect to Celati's prose, Elisabetta Menetti writes in fact:

La sua prosa sembra, infatti, una musica composta con le parole al posto delle note, dove il “narratore-musicista” abbandona ogni volontà di onniscienza e ogni pretesa di superiorità per apparire al suo lettore-ascoltatore come un interprete, a volte giocoso a volte malinconico, di uno spartito musicale comune.⁸¹²

⁸⁰⁸ Gianni Celati, “Le posizioni narrative rispetto all'altro”, in Riga 40, *Gianni Celati*, cit., p. 213.

⁸⁰⁹ Ibidem.

⁸¹⁰ Ibidem.

⁸¹¹ Ibidem.

⁸¹² Elisabetta Menetti, “Gianni Celati”, in *Il romanzo in Italia, IV il secondo Novecento*, a cura di Giancarlo Alfano e Francesco de Cristofaro, Roma, Carocci editore, 2018, p. 392.

Chapter 1

In contrast to the old storytellers, today a 'standard language' is spoken and the other to be addressed is not a specific individual, but only a mass unit: “unità di massa: l’altro è soltanto una cosa anonima su cui bisogna imporsi”⁸¹³. Not only the world, but also the activity of writing is in the grip of an unprecedented individualism: “Non si riesce neanche più a immaginare che l’altro a cui parlo è precisamente la sorgente del mio parlare, e che nessun solipsismo è possibile nelle forme comunicative”⁸¹⁴. Celati once again criticises modernity and advocates those small encounters that not only mark time in his travelogue, but also enrich it and allow him to be a storyteller. Like him, the old storytellers had a different attitude:

loro sottolineavano continuamente che ogni racconto nasce da una stretta collaborazione tra chi narra e chi ascolta, nasce proprio dal fatto che io narro per qualcuno, e colui per cui narro mi aiuta a trovare il tono giusto della mia narrazione. I vecchi narratori sottolineavano una posizione dell’ascoltatore a lato del narratore, così come si trova naturalmente: [...] un modo immaginativo di parlarsi in circolo e in amicizia.⁸¹⁵

We notice more and more how writing, narrative, are interpersonal phenomena, always requiring a you to address, just like the end of *Verso la foce*. One always writes for someone, who not only listens, but also helps to find the right tone, the right musicality of the narration. In short, it is a shared activity. Today, however, Celati speaks of a situation of *diffuse achromatism*: “acromatismo diffuso, cioè una situazione in cui nessuno riconosce più i colori”⁸¹⁶. In other words, we have become colour-blind, i.e. insensitive to variations in tone and musicality of narration. One of the most important reflections on the musicality of language follows:

Ora questa situazione di acromatismo diffuso è simile alla nostra situazione d'epoca, dove l'informazione di massa diffonde una diffidenza ufficiale verso il linguaggio e dunque una dilagante sordità alla sottigliezza delle parole. Come abbiamo visto si può pensare a una soluzione, ma la prima cosa da fare è accorgersi che siamo dei daltonici o degli stonati [...].⁸¹⁷

We have become *tone-deaf*, i.e. unable to recognise the tonality and musicality of words, which gradually become more subtle, i.e. emptier, as Lacan would say, i.e. unable to address a you. To solve this problem, Celati's proposed solution is to learn to read well:

⁸¹³ Gianni Celati, *Le posizioni narrative rispetto all’altro*, in Riga 40, *Gianni Celati*, cit., p. 214.

⁸¹⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁸¹⁵ *Ibidem*.

⁸¹⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁸¹⁷ *Ibidem*.

Chapter 1

Credo si possa dare un'idea del problema pensando alla lettura. Come si impara a leggere bene? I professori forniscono interpretazioni complessive, dove non entrano mai in causa le questioni più cruciali, come ad esempio: l'orecchio stonato del lettore, la sua sordità a certe voci, la cattiva percezione delle forme intonative e dunque il mancato riconoscimento dei toni delle parole, l'incapacità di dare un giusto valore alle pause o cesure e quindi il mancato riconoscimento degli andamenti ritmici, etc.

Poniamo che ci si metta di buzzo buono per imparare a leggere ad alta voce una narrazione, così che ciò che ho nell'orecchio risuoni nella mia voce (lo stesso problema c'è in musica, tra la capacità di percepire gli intervalli e la capacità di riprodurli con la voce o con uno strumento). Ogni narrazione parla di personaggi, e ogni volta che tratta d'un diverso personaggio le frasi entrano nel regime di intonazione suggerito da quel personaggio, o dal modo in cui il narratore immagina il personaggio. [...]

Questo è un riflesso naturale del parlare, e anche là dove ci sono modi cerimoniali uniformati, come nei vecchi poemi epici, ogni personaggio è sentito e immaginato come una unità sensibile, di gesti, di voce, di atteggiamento. Il che produce in ogni narrazione continue variazioni intonative, variazioni atmosferiche, variazioni affettive – nonché la meraviglia di immaginare e gustare questi perpetui cambiamenti, associati alla vicenda degli altri-da-noi.⁸¹⁸

Today we are no longer *able* to listen to a text: we no longer know how to recognise the different intonational forms and do not know how to give the right value to pauses, or caesuras. This results in a lack of perception of the rhythm of the narrative. As is evident, the parallelism with music permeates this reflection. Writing is like a score that the reader must learn to listen to. Today we are all deaf: we are no longer able to read while respecting the pauses, or rather the silences, of the text. The words of *Verso la foce*, however, are immersed in a silent atmosphere and spring from silence. That is why we get a sense of the slow pace of his wandering and the voices of the little characters he meets. Each character, in fact, has its own voice and is a sensitive unit. Learning to read means in fact also learning empathy, that is, putting oneself in the shoes of the other-than-us, that is, taking on the other within oneself. What, then, is good reading?

Si capisce allora che una buona lettura sarebbe quella in cui qualcuno riesce a farmi sentire le variazioni di tono, di ritmo, di timbro, frase per frase, così che ogni parola della narrazione abbia un senso specifico e mutevole – anche le virgole, anche le pause diverse suggerite dalla punteggiatura convenzionale, o le pause implicite che la punteggiatura convenzionale non riesce a indicare.⁸¹⁹

In short, it is necessary to *reopen the ear* (“riaprire l'orecchio”⁸²⁰) and go back to perceiving not only the variations in tone, but also and above all the pauses, i.e. the silences, that lie not only in conventional punctuation, but also in the implicit. What are the advantages of such good reading?

⁸¹⁸ Ivi, pp. 214-215.

⁸¹⁹ Ivi, p. 215.

⁸²⁰ Ibidem.

The fact that one can follow the other's changing expressions: “si segue immaginativamente il variare delle espressioni dell'altro”⁸²¹:

Cioè è come se seguissimo il variare delle espressioni sul volto di un altro, e i suoi cambiamenti di postura, i cambiamenti intonativi, i cambiamenti nel modo di articolare le parole – che sono più o meno articolate in base alle cesure, alle pause, e dunque ai ritmi mutevoli con cui ciascuno di noi si esprime.⁸²²

Particularly important are the pauses, and thus the silences, that punctuate the narratives and allow us to detect the mutations of the other. Celati writes that, for this to happen, we must find a *tuned ear* (“un orecchio intonato”⁸²³):

Ascoltare il variare delle voci d'una lingua, come un'acqua che scorre senza nessun momento di fissità, a me sembra il punto d'avvio d'un apprendimento narrativo. Quando io racconto le vicende di un personaggio, la mia narrazione è precisamente un apprendimento a seguire la mobilità infinita dell'altro, non solo per me che racconto ma anche per chi mi ascolta. E la mia intesa con chi mi ascolta si fonda su questa capacità di percepire una mobilità infinita negli altri: si fonda sulla nostra comune capacità di aderire immaginativamente a quella mobilità infinita, senza bisogno di definizioni, spiegazioni, o altre ostentazioni di competenza.⁸²⁴

Listening to what varies, as in a flow of water, is the operation carried out by Celati in listening to the various small narrators he encountered as he travelled along the river. This flowing, reminiscent of the flows of *The Waves*, forces us to follow “the infinite mobility of the other” and requires us to renounce fixed definitions or the definitive word: there is a reliance on the contingency (“contingenza del momento che passa”⁸²⁵).

Solo nello scorrere del tempo io capisco che il mio rapporto con l'altro non può essere una relazione fissa, non può essere determinato da regole forti e definitive, ma è qualcosa come una variazione affettiva inarrestabile. Ma a questo punto è la percezione del linguaggio che cambia completamente, e il linguaggio torna a essere composto soltanto di voci mutevoli [...].⁸²⁶

Storytelling is linked to being with others; knowing how to read is linked to knowing how to listen; words are linked to silences. One cannot disregard the other, because language is always dialogue, constantly evolving and changing: “La cosa più elementare è che una narrazione scorre nel

⁸²¹ Ibidem.

⁸²² Ibidem.

⁸²³ Ibidem.

⁸²⁴ Ibidem.

⁸²⁵ Ivi, p. 218.

⁸²⁶ Ibidem.

tempo”⁸²⁷, or is iridescent. At the same time, narratives are like music (“le narrazioni sono come le musiche”⁸²⁸), because they pass on the edge of temporality. The same attitude as Celati is shared by Woolf, who in *The Waves* takes up this flow both metaphorically and rhythmically: everything is momentary, changing before our eyes. The world is iridescent as are the words, images and sounds, so much so that reading aloud is essential: “Studiare una narrazione per me vuol dire leggerla ad alta voce, e leggerla molte volte”⁸²⁹. In fact, there is nothing rational or scientific about this for Celati:

il fatto narrativo in sé non è spiegabile e non è insegnabile. È qualcosa che si prende su, come si prende un mestiere, o una lingua; e ha a che fare con l’orecchio, col senso della misura, con la capacità figurale, ma certamente non con le spiegazioni universitarie [...].⁸³⁰

Narratives therefore have to do with the ear, which must be trained to listen to the mutations of voices, timbres and pauses and suspensions in the text. The narrator is likened to a diviner because he follows these vibrations of the text and every moment reorients himself in search of the right musicality, in a silent surrounding landscape.

Massimo Schilirò, in *Tornare alla casa della madre*, formulates the hypothesis that *Verso la foce* is a return towards the mother's horizon, albeit desacralised, unsentimental, and even impossible because the journey is a drift towards places that have disappeared or radically changed. However, if in Celati's journey we perceive a constant uprooting, bewilderment and a perennial lack of meaning, we recognise that the mother is the one who gives meaning, so the separation from the original-maternal place brings about a loss of meaning that one wants to attempt to fill.

Celati's path seems to be that of a *flâneur* and not that of someone walking towards a destination. Indeed, there is no starting point: the diary of observation begins *in medias res*. Walking marks the rhythms and times of the writing, as in a musical score cadenced by steps. However, this walking is devoid of *telos*, of desire, and this leads to an extreme availability with respect to the free perception of the surrounding landscape. Anthony Giddens considers the *flâneur* to be a symbol of contemporary society⁸³¹, since he is a wandering figure who expresses both bewilderment and the desire to belong to places and to be interested in relationships. The contemporary metropolis, emblem of the liquid society Zygmunt Bauman⁸³² talks about, can only be read and interpreted by a wandering subject like the *flâneur*, in the manner of Gianni Celati. In the same way, Lévi-Strauss believes that

⁸²⁷ Gianni Celati, “Il narrare come attività pratica”, in Riga 40, *Gianni Celati*, cit., p. 223.

⁸²⁸ Ibidem.

⁸²⁹ Ivi, p. 224.

⁸³⁰ Ivi, p. 225.

⁸³¹ Cf. Anthony Giddens, *Le conseguenze della modernità*, Bologna, il Mulino, 1994.

⁸³² Cf. Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernità liquida*, Laterza & Figli S.P.A., 2011.

the modern traveller who sets out in search of his own identity should not immerse himself in forests full of trials and obstacles, as in antiquity, but in the modern, desacralised world, where even Celati's characters and he himself seek to self-determine. Michael Jakob calls this urban *flânerie* a “new territorial or psychogeographical prose”⁸³³, where the urban sphere appears as an immense ruin⁸³⁴. In this context deprived of landmarks, Schilirò writes, a new idea of space is established that has the features of the *labyrinth*, and not of the house: “Si afferma una nuova idea di spazio che abbiamo meno della *casa*, sostituto del corpo materno, e più del *labirinto*”⁸³⁵. In this labyrinth, the *flâneur* is alone: only in solitude, in fact, is it possible to let oneself be pervaded by listening to the things around. Indeed, Marc Augé wrote that the ethnology of non-places is an ethnology of solitude, since the non-place is a place where one can feel fully *chez soi*⁸³⁶. This listening is made possible because, as Lino Gabellone points out, 'the one who walks' is actually the one who listens: “Quelle parole, che non camminavano, erano in attesa dell'orecchio attento, del ritmo della vita, segnato dal passo e dal respiro”⁸³⁷. Schilirò argues that the disposition to listen originates from a crisis of the word, that is, from a loss of linguistic capacity: if literature is based on the idea of resistance to time, things pass in the flow of time and escape this crystallisation. In this labyrinthine urban periphery where the subject gets lost, the opening towards the other and towards the fluidity of time of which Celati writes takes place. In a certain sense, the uprooted, the stranger - as in Jabès - is more willing to welcome the otherness that comes from this constant suspension. As Simone Weil wrote, the outcome is that of inhabiting transit, or rather being rooted in the absence of place⁸³⁸. In Bauman's liquidity of modernity, we experience a deafness of words, whereby we can no longer understand each other and every character is deaf or out of tune. It is no coincidence that in Celati the sense that predominates is hearing: just think of *Narratori delle Pianure*. Sight is in fact always obscured by river mist and the narrative is based on listening to the sounds and voices of those encountered. In this fragmentariness, only the affective relationship with places can restore a continuity, and this is rendered through writing, which is an exercise in observation and recording that finally translates into listening and naming. Words are not used to explain the world, but to name what exists. The intelligibility of the contemporary world is called into question, its logic escapes us: “L'infinito divagare ci dice che nulla sta assieme veramente, al di fuori dei racconti che facciamo per mettere avanti a noi delle parole, una direzione, un progetto, una finzione”⁸³⁹. That is why, if we do not find

⁸³³ Michael Jakob, *Il paesaggio*, Bologna, il Mulino, 2009, p. 130.

⁸³⁴ Cf. Ivi, p. 131.

⁸³⁵ Massimo Schilirò, *Tornare alla casa della madre. Vittorini Morante Celati*, Pisa, Edizioni ETS, 2019, p. 125.

⁸³⁶ Cf. Marc Augé, *Nonluoghi*, Milano, Elèuthera, 1993, p. 110.

⁸³⁷ Lino Gabellone, “Quello che sta fermo, quello che cammina”, in AAVV, *Scritture contemporanee, Gianni Celati*, “Nuova corrente”, 97, 1986, p. 30.

⁸³⁸ Cf. Simone Weil, *La prima radice*, Milano, SE, 1990, p. 19.

⁸³⁹ Gianni Celati, *Preazione* a Flann J. O'Brien, *La miseria in bocca*, Milano, Feltrinelli, 2000, p. 31.

a coherence in the world, Celati chooses the metaphor of the river-narrative, i.e. following a voice like the banks of the river, the river as eternal flow and uprooting. In this context, the voice is the place⁸⁴⁰ and each character encountered is translated by his or her voice tones, as in *Narratori delle pianure*. Through voices and writing, Celati attempts to reorient himself and remap the space around him, repeating a primordial gesture: in this case, however, the map is the page⁸⁴¹ and the road is the place of chaos to be travelled slowly in order to appropriate information along the way. This path, however, is studded with rubbish, advertising signs, terraced houses and the dregs of modernity that seem to describe an entropic landscape characterised by the theme of ruin⁸⁴². This ruinous landscape is recorded by diaristic writing, which writes what is transitory, that is to say, it is writing of the flux of the present, of what the *flâneur* observes. The world is neither intelligible nor ordered and, as Calvino and Borges teach, is only explorable in its ever-changing and aimless multiplicity. In this exposure to the contingency of the world (“esposizione alla contingenza del mondo”⁸⁴³) we can find a poetics based on psychological decentralisation, projection outwards, desubjectivisation. Already in the 1975 *Bazar archeologico*, Celati had expressed his distrust of narration as a faithful concatenation of events: “I luoghi in cui identificarsi, in cui identificare il progetto dei propri percorsi, in cui cercare la propria identità storica, si sono frammentati, moltiplicati all’infinito nella spazializzazione della città moderna. Sicché tra il cittadino e lo straniero non c’è più differenza [...]”⁸⁴⁴. We no longer have origins, in short, and we walk like *flâneurs* in search of an impossible order. According to Schilirò, in fact:

il recupero di quest’ordine è “una illusione del risveglio”. Al fondo di ogni risveglio, come in un racconto della paura, c’è un silenzio, un indicibile, che resiste all’arroganza della scrittura. Il narratore cammina verso il risveglio (verso la foce) come verso questo silenzio. Questo silenzio che viene dalla perdita dell’“unità originaria d’un disegno” invade il presente come “una apocalisse sotterranea e invisibile appena passata, o ancora in atto”⁸⁴⁵, o futura. Vedremo infatti, al termine del suo viaggiare, il camminatore nelle pianure aspettare una fine del mondo.⁸⁴⁶

⁸⁴⁰ Cf. Massimo Schilirò, *Tornare alla casa della madre. Vittorini Morante Celati*, cit., p. 134 e cf. lettura di Gianni Celati di *At Swim-two-Birds* di Flann O’Brien (Prefazione, cit., p. 28).

⁸⁴¹ Ivi, p. 137.

⁸⁴² Cf. Monica Seger, “Observation and Acknowledge in Gianni Celati’s *Verso la foce*”, in *Landscapes in between. Environmental Change in Modern Italian Literature and Film*, Toronto Buffalo London, University of Toronto Press, 2015.

⁸⁴³ Massimo Schilirò, *Tornare alla casa della madre. Vittorini Morante Celati*, cit., p. 141.

⁸⁴⁴ Gianni Celati, “Il bazar archeologico”, in *Finzioni occidentali. Fabulazione, comicità e scrittura*, Torino, Einaudi, 2001, p. 223.

⁸⁴⁵ Ivi, pp. 210-211.

⁸⁴⁶ Massimo Schilirò, *Tornare alla casa della madre. Vittorini Morante Celati*, cit., p. 144.

Chapter 1

The direction taken by Celati, which is to follow the flow of the river, will thus lead him to a silence, that of the mouth, which is emblematic of the limit, of death, of *finis terrae*. Just as in the story *Scomparsa di un uomo lodevole*⁸⁴⁷, wandering becomes a metaphor for existence:

Ma chi può dirlo dove un uomo sta andando? Spesso si crede di saperlo, ma è un errore.

Tutto quello che si sa è che bisogna continuare, continuare, continuare come pellegrini nel mondo, fino al risveglio se il risveglio verrà.⁸⁴⁸

According to Schilirò's hypothesis, the place-boundary of the mouth corresponds to the maternal place, to which access is not permitted. If there is a destination, moreover, wandering becomes a pilgrimage and the last diary of observation in *Verso la foce*, of the same name, is a diary in search of other unclear things (“forse altre cose (al momento del viaggio non chiare)”⁸⁴⁹), which implies autobiography⁸⁵⁰. However, the idea behind this type of autobiography is not a reconstruction of the self, but rather an absorption: “Un tentativo di lasciarsi assorbire dai luoghi propri attraverso una osservazione/descrizione soprattutto aptica”⁸⁵¹. As in any autobiography, there are thus references to the father and mother, but they are made through places: the paternal country and the maternal country. The former seems to be quickly dismissed:

Abbiamo deciso di prendere la strada per Bondeno perché m'era venuto in mente di andare a cena nel paese dove è nato mio padre, ma arrivati a Bondeno ci siamo infilati nel primo ristorante che abbiamo trovato.⁸⁵²

The landscape is so distorted and disfigured that industry has completely destroyed any connection and any symbolic meaning attached to that potentially affectively connected place. Celati does not enter his father's village: he stays right outside, in a restaurant in the suburbs. In fact, Celati concludes by writing: “Più niente da salvare, famiglia nella tomba e amen. Non avrai più luogo d'appartenenza”⁸⁵³, and it seems an echo to Perec.

After this brief pause, Celati continues along the river, emblematic of the path towards the sea that determines the encounter with the origin, that is, the mother. The river, imagined by Schilirò as a metaphor for the umbilical cord⁸⁵⁴, narrates the attempted conjunction with the maternal home, with

⁸⁴⁷ Gianni Celati, “Scomparsa di un uomo lodevole”, in *Quattro novelle sulle apparenze*, Macerata, Quodlibet, 2016.

⁸⁴⁸ Ivi, p. 165.

⁸⁴⁹ Gianni Celati, *Verso la foce*, cit., p. 10.

⁸⁵⁰ Cf. Rebecca West, *Gianni Celati: The Craft of Storytelling*, Toronto Buffalo London, University of Toronto Press, 2000.

⁸⁵¹ Massimo Schilirò, *Tornare alla casa della madre. Vittorini Morante Celati*, cit., p. 154.

⁸⁵² Gianni Celati, *Verso la foce*, cit., p. 77.

⁸⁵³ Ibidem.

⁸⁵⁴ Massimo Schilirò, *Tornare alla casa della madre. Vittorini Morante Celati*, cit., p. 159.

the source that is feminine and maternal. The house, the emblem of protection, is symbolically linked to the figure of the mother and, in this case, is also linked to water, another archetype linked to motherhood:

La tensione tra la casa e il mondo è presente nel romanzo fin dai suoi inizi. L'acqua del fiume conferisce a questa tensione una forma elementare, perché la sua melma è fatta dalla terra "di casa" delle sponde, che si mescola con l'acqua che scorre verso il mare aperto. Il flusso del fiume unisce così la terra natale alle grandi distese d'acqua del vasto mondo: un collegamento evidente sia che il protagonista discenda il fiume per arrivare all'oceano [...], sia che egli risalga la corrente per fare ritorno alla propria casa, alle proprie origini e alla propria famiglia [...].⁸⁵⁵

That is why, following the flow of the river, we first reach the paternal country and then the maternal one. Indeed, it is structural to autobiography to search for the origin up to before birth, thus to the mother.

Stava arrivando la corriera e sono corso verso la fermata per farmi caricare. Jolanda di Savoia è questa stradona con due controviali, attorno a cui si vedono ammassi di cassette geometrili dovunque. Stanziamento agricolo cresciuto in epoca fascista sotto gli auspici di Italo Balbo, credo, quando mia madre era bambina non esisteva ancora e qui c'erano le paludi.⁸⁵⁶

Schilirò argues that there are multiple signs of this connection to the maternal in the text, traced in the dialectal accents of the mother's Ferrarese family, in thriftiness as the norm of life in the mother's family, and finally in the summer landscape as a season typically associated with childhood. That is why he concludes, that the journey to the mouth of the river is a journey to the mother: "Ci pare si possa dire che il viaggio verso la foce sia un lento avanzamento sulla terra materna"⁸⁵⁷. The mother would be the gravitational centre around which not only the journey but also the story revolves – like for Woolf -, although this is not explicitly stated: there is a sacred silence around the mother figure. Yet, despite being concealed, the mother is the orbital centre⁸⁵⁸. If in other tales the mother appears as a character⁸⁵⁹, in *Verso la foce* she remains silent. The only mention that is made of the mother figure is the one above, yet she is the great absentee around whom Celati's entire wanderings revolve.

⁸⁵⁵ Margaret Cohen, "Il mare", in *Il romanzo, IV. Temi, luoghi, eroi*, a cura di Franco Moretti, Torino, Einaudi, 2003, p. 437.

⁸⁵⁶ Gianni Celati, *Verso la foce*, cit., p. 89.

⁸⁵⁷ Cf. Massimo Schilirò, *Tornare alla casa della madre. Vittorini Morante Celati*, cit., p. 160.

⁸⁵⁸ "Quando vedeva sua madre d lontano attraverso una finestra gli veniva l'idea che tutto il resto delle cose girasse intorno a lei, in orbita come i pianeti". Gianni Celati, "Cinema naturale", in *Romanzi, cronache e racconti*, Mondadori, 2016, p. 1331.

⁸⁵⁹ Cf. Gianni Celati, *Narratori delle pianure*, Milano, Feltrinelli, 2018.

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Just as the mother figure remains silenced and concealed in the text, the place of origin is also not actually visited: “La ricerca di Celati non accederà a un luogo antropologico, della continuità esperienziale-affettiva, cui l’alienazione definitiva è sancita dall’insistenza dell’autore, in tutti i profili biografici, sulla nascita a Sondrio”⁸⁶⁰. As for Perec, also in Celati there is no re-appropriation of family memory: “Manca l’appropriazione della memoria familiare, il riconoscimento di un’origine garantita da una memoria condivisa”⁸⁶¹. The place of birth, in short, is no longer affectively connoted: it is now a distant apparition that can only be given meaning through an interpretative narrative. The return to the maternal place is prevented because the modern landscape is defaced and compromised and cannot be recognised. Not only Sondrio, but also Sandolo, the village where Celati's mother was born, will not be crossed. Schilirò speaks of the theme of the untraceable and writes: “Al centro del viaggio verso la madre sta il vuoto della memoria della madre”⁸⁶². Celati's itinerary does not touch the paternal country, does not touch the country of his birth, and does not touch the maternal country: the archetype of home is unattainable, as there is nothing to return to. Why does Celati not enter these places? Schilirò's hypothesis is as follows: “Celati viaggiatore fino al paese della madre si ferma non perché il ritorno è insufficiente a ricreare il passato, non insomma perché la nostalgia è inutile a ricostruire il focolare, ma perché la nostalgia è un ostacolo alla percezione del presente”⁸⁶³. It follows that the traveller, at the end of the journey, remains a stranger:

Il viaggio verso la foce sfiora i luoghi del radicamento e dell’appartenenza ma non li raggiunge mai. Il viaggiatore non possiede nessun luogo, non c’è stanza che lo accolga. Egli si è quindi rivelato un esiliato, uno che ha tagliato le origini ed è destinato a proseguire il suo vagabondaggio. All’esilio Celati, come Dante, oppone la lingua. Ha scritto con esattezza Antonio Prete che “la lingua è il familiare nello straniero, il proprio nell’esperienza di espropriazione e di perdita”⁸⁶⁴. Ovvero: la memoria è una riserva di voci e di immagini che la lingua custodisce e riesprime. Vale per Celati, che abbiamo visto cercare nei luoghi, e anche ritrovare, le voci familiari.⁸⁶⁵

Not only does Celati remain an exile and a foreigner like Jabès, but this choice to stop at the threshold of his father's country and his mother's country is significant of the fact that any return to these places would demolish the inaudible music that his desire and imagination emanate. The music in this case is the maternal language, the call that those places emit and from which the *quête* springs. The silence linked to the mother is thus extremely eloquent and the return to the mouth, which is at sea, could be a symbolism of childbirth. It is also important to note that the four diaries are not

⁸⁶⁰ Massimo Schilirò, *Tornare alla casa della madre. Vittorini Morante Celati*, cit., p. 162.

⁸⁶¹ *Ibidem*.

⁸⁶² *Ivi*, p. 166.

⁸⁶³ *Ivi*, p. 167.

⁸⁶⁴ Antonio Prete, *Nostalgia. Storia di un sentimento*, nuova edizione ampliata, Milano, Raffaello Cortina, 2018, p. 18.

⁸⁶⁵ Massimo Schilirò, *Tornare alla casa della madre. Vittorini Morante Celati*, cit., p. 167.

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arranged in chronological order in the collection. In this way, the return to the mouth, which concludes the book, gives rise to a circularity where birth and death coincide. Where Celati symbolically rediscovers his birth, the writing, which ends, dies. The mouth of the river, understood as a cosmic place, is also the place where Celati thinks of the dead: “Tutti quelli che se ne sono andati prima di me”⁸⁶⁶. Everything dissolves in the mouth, in the sea, where not only life ends, but also speech, leaving space for silence. What we detect at the conclusion of this diary is a sense of suspension⁸⁶⁷, a free acceptance of the flow of thoughts⁸⁶⁸, a receptive listening that lets everything be as it is.

⁸⁶⁶ Gianni Celati, *Verso la foce*, cit., p. 134.

⁸⁶⁷ Cf. Andrea Tagliapietra, *Icone della fine*, Bologna, il Mulino, 2010, p. 8.

⁸⁶⁸ Cf. Vittorio Lingiardi, *Mindscapes*, Milano, Cortina, 2018, pp. 36-37.

Interlude 1. In Dialogue with Theory

We conclude our reflections on this chapter by explicitly emphasising the theoretical references that guided us in analysing the texts examined. If at the beginning of this chapter we in fact highlighted how trauma studies are of fundamental relevance in approaching the four autobiographical texts examined, it is equally important to underline the contribution of music-literary studies and those of the philosophy of language cited in the methodological framework.

Starting this time from music-literary studies, we highlight how the theme of death - actual or feared - is the first of the nuclei explored by our authors. Jankélévitch dealt with the theme of death in *La musique et l'ineffable* and affirmed that, in an originally silent time that is subsequently filled by the noise of world events, death has a very precise role, which presents a strong connection with silence: “La mort est le marasme qui, arrêtant le devenir et le mouvement, fait taire les événements bavards”⁸⁶⁹. Death thus manifests itself as a suspension of ordinary time, punctuated by the din of events, and becomes a pause of silence that silences everything, especially all that is *bavardage*. Such is, indeed, the experience presented by Woolf, when she recounts her experience with respect to the death of her mother and sister, by Duras when she suspects the death of her husband, by Perec around the never pronounced death of his mother, by Celati when he descends into the mists of the plains made ghostly by the nightmare of Chernobyl. These writers tell of death in silence, in hints, fragments, ellipses or typographical blanks. Sometimes, they even recount it by making silence explicit in the text by declaring that it is a time to *keep* silent.

With respect to the vast thematic core relating to the Holocaust, then, there are numerous theoretical observations that have guided us in our analysis of Duras' and Perec's texts. First of all, we should mention Jabès' fragments, which remind us how, with respect to an event such as the Shoah, the word is an instrument that wounds and consoles at the same time:

Le mal est dans le mot.

Mot qui fait mal et qui, étrangement, console.

Le mystère est dans son étrangeté.⁸⁷⁰

This double side of the coin inherent in the word is evident in a writer like Duras, who uses the word to delve into the depths of her soul, emerging from it more aware but also more wounded, as the writer herself relates in *Écrire*. Indeed, writing seems a necessity in order to understand the absurd reality that Duras is experiencing, but at the same time such clarity proves to be

⁸⁶⁹ Vladimir Jankélévitch, *La musique et l'ineffable*, cit., p. 146.

⁸⁷⁰ Edmond Jabès, *Un Étranger avec, sous le bras, un livre de petit format* cit., p. 43 [my emphasis].

psychologically unbearable, to the point of driving her mad with pain, between the hallucinations of the “fossé noir” and obsessive thoughts. Indeed, as Jabès argues, we tend to put into words what by its very nature would not be expressible:

L'insupportable, avons-nous tendance à l'effacer, avant même de le dire et puis en le disant ?

Cet effacement nous engageant, justement, à *mettre en mots ce qu'aucune phrase ne saurait, a priori, exprimer*.⁸⁷¹

Auschwitz, in this context, occupies a very special place according to Jabès:

C'est que l'on ne peut jamais dire que le commencement de l'intolérable, le commencement, Ô tonique ingénuité, d'une parole qui se refuse à elle-même ; qui se tait pour être captée tue.

« Auschwitz - avait-il noté - échappe à ce commencement, restera toujours antérieur à lui ; *blessure d'un indicible nom*, plutôt que nom d'une inguérissable blessure. »⁸⁷²

Indeed, we find this wound never healed in the writings of Perec, who is tormented by an unspeakable, a word that finds no expression, an event that will always precede his existence and his own writing, namely the death of his mother in the concentration camp. Writing, for Perec, constitutes precisely that “initiation of the intolerable” necessary to survive: this is the reason why the writer states that he hesitated for a long time before beginning the double journey of writing and Gaspard Winckler's voyage by sea.

Again with regard to the Holocaust, it is crucial to draw attention to Patterson's views, which are particularly useful in the analysis of *La douleur* and *W ou le souvenir d'enfance*. In fact, according to Patterson, “in the Holocaust novel silence is always a character”⁸⁷³. Not only, then, do we find silence as an expression of trauma or as a tension of speech at the limits of language, but also as a real character. This is certainly true if we think of the loneliness expressed by the two writers, who have repeatedly confronted the silence of others and their own inability to find adequate words, to the point of leaving blank typographic marks or eloquent ellipses in the middle of the page. This is as much the case for Antelme's return - preceded by a typographical blank that marks the break between the time of Antelme's wait and that of Robert L.'s return, which no longer bears a date - as it is for the death of Perec's mother - concealed and at the same time made explicit in the three suspension points enclosed in brackets. This is because, as Patterson suggests, “the novelist struggles to impart a voice

⁸⁷¹ Edmond Jabès, *Un Étranger avec, sous le bras, un livre de petit format* cit., p. 95 [my emphasis].

⁸⁷² Ibidem [my emphasis].

⁸⁷³ David Patterson, *The Shriek of Silence. A Phenomenology of the Holocaust Novel*, cit. p. 5.

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to silence”⁸⁷⁴. Hence the fundamental importance of spaces between words, between paragraphs, between pages even:

The Holocaust novel is not set in one period or another but *in the space between the voices* of encounter, in the dialogue between word and word, word and silence, silence and silence. The form of the novel is the form of *this between-space* as it takes shape in the dialogic relation that ties the author to character, to reader, and to his own soul.⁸⁷⁵

Indeed, according to Patterson, it is precisely in this *whiteness* that the silence of the Holocaust resides, which is nothing other than the silence of a lost meaning that must be regained:

The silence that shrieks in the Holocaust novel is not the silence of the inability to describe events that elude language; nor is it the silence of the gap between the familiar and the absolutely alien. Rather, *it is the silence of meaning lost and yet to be regained*, the silence of a soul lost and yet to be reborn in a future forever yet to be.⁸⁷⁶

It is with the aim of regaining an apparently lost meaning that the contribution of metaphors is crucial. Metaphors, as George Lakoff and Mark Johnson illustrated in *Metaphors We Live By*, are essential literary tools in order to achieve with words something that is cognitively and psychologically unattainable. Indeed, the texts examined are studded with metaphors that symbolically indicate what is not expressed and remains unspoken. Duras often resorts to the image of the flood when she tries to describe the moments of delirium she experienced while waiting for Antelme, or to that of the abscess to describe her now sick mind as obsessed, or to that of the vulture devouring carrion. Perec, at the same time, uses the island of W as a great metaphor for the concentration camps, which, however, remain silent and are never mentioned. Metaphors, of course, are not only used by Duras or Perec, but also for traumas that have nothing to do with the experience, direct or indirect, of the Holocaust. Suffice it to think, for Woolf, of the beautiful metaphor of the broken chrysalis, that of the cotton wool, that of the vessels, or the image of the fingers over the mouth to indicate the physical violence suffered, the ferocious beast to which the father is compared, or the recurring image of the river. Like Woolf, Celati also makes extensive use of metaphors, from the desert as an image of wholeness, to the recurring motif of the stranger, the uprooted, or the exiled to speak of one's alienation in the modern era, to the metaphor of the river mouth that is a return to the motherland. With respect to metaphors, Rovatti too, in his volume on silence, advocates a greater

⁸⁷⁴ Ibidem.

⁸⁷⁵ David Patterson, *The Shriek of Silence. A Phenomenology of the Holocaust Novel*, cit. p. 5 [my emphasis].

⁸⁷⁶ Ivi, p. 27 [my emphasis].

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openness in this sense: “Non una saturazione degli spazi [...], bensì un’apertura o una maggiore visualizzazione degli effetti metaforici”⁸⁷⁷.

A peculiar case, with respect to the use of metaphor, is that of Marguerite Duras, who deserves a discourse in her own right. Her silence can in fact be read, in the light of Jerzy Josinsky's studies, as a metaphor for alienation from the community with which she feels she no longer has anything in common:

Perhaps this *silence is also a metaphor for dissociation from the community* and from something greater. The feeling of *alienation* floats on the surface of the work and manifests the author’s awareness, perhaps unconscious, of his *break with the wholeness of the self*.⁸⁷⁸

The dissociation that Duras experiences is primarily with regard to herself, and this is made clear in the text through the confusing use of personal pronouns, which vary from the first to the third person singular when talking about herself. Precisely on the subject of alienation from oneself, the so-called “screen memory”⁸⁷⁹ theorised by Freud, which indicates the attitude of one who sees and hears and feels what is happening from a third person point of view, comes in handy. Secondly, Duras experiences an alienation from the city of Paris and her fellow citizens, from whom Duras physically hides and separates herself through the glass of the window - which circumscribes the private space of mourning - from which she observes the 'outside' - which constitutes the public space of the streets and supposed normality. A stark separation is also perceptible at the moment when Paris seems to return to a normal everyday life after Germany's surrender, but Antelme is slow to return and Duras is annoyed by the festive atmosphere that pervades the city, as for her it is still a suspended time of waiting, if not mourning.

Evidently, the need for metaphor, i.e. a symbolic register, is strongly connected to the nature of traumatic experience, which, as Yaelle Sibony-Malpertu argues, “questions the limits of language”⁸⁸⁰. Trauma, which is by essence the unrepresentable and the unspeakable, causes words to be disconnected and stands as an obstacle “preventing word and thing from being linked”⁸⁸¹. Since the link between the representable and the unrepresentable is missing, we are faced with a dilemma:

⁸⁷⁷ Pier Aldo Rovatti, *L’esercizio del silenzio*, cit., p. 130.

⁸⁷⁸ Jerzy Kosinski, *Notes of the Author on the Painted Bird*, cit., p. 17 [my emphasis].

⁸⁷⁹ Cf. Sigmund Freud, 1899 “Screen memories”, Vol. 3, *Standard Edition of Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, cit.

⁸⁸⁰ Yaelle Sibony-Malpertu, “A possible way to represent the unrepresentable”, cit., p. 40.

⁸⁸¹ *Ibidem*.

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Indeed, the problem would seem to be: *how to move from the traumatic real to a symbolic register?* Therefore, we can assert first that the unrepresentable is what can only be shown without being seen, what can be said without being clearly understood.⁸⁸²

The answer, for all those whom Arthur W. Frank would call “wounded storytellers”⁸⁸³, like our four writers, lies precisely in the ability to write by creating silence. For if, as James Berger argues, trauma is a discourse of the unrepresentable, i.e. “of the event that *destabilizes language* and demands a vocabulary and syntax in some sense incommensurable with what went before”⁸⁸⁴, it is evident how silence lies not only in the contents that writers attempt to communicate through rhetorical figures belonging to the register of the symbolic and not to that of the real - as Lacan claims - but also through *formal*, purely linguistic expedients. In this sense it will be useful to recall the observations of Herman, who maintains that the first accounts of the traumatic experience are usually “repetitious, stereotyped, and emotionless”⁸⁸⁵. This is certainly manifest in the two proposed texts by Duras and Perec: while the former is characterised by numerous repetitions, the latter makes extensive use of an almost journalistic, neutral register devoid of emotional connotations. Furthermore, Herman recalls how “trauma is experienced in a highly *fragmented* way, as a collection of sensations and images, which must be actively placed together to create a coherent narrative”⁸⁸⁶. The fragmentary nature of the narrative is evident in all four of the texts examined, from the fragments of memories proposed by Woolf amidst associations and juxtapositions, to the consequential reading constantly interrupted by Perec's fictional and autobiographical chapters, to Celati's reportage of fragments of notes. The discourse is thus inevitably disconnected and this is precisely the answer to the question in the previous paragraph: in order to move from the traumatic real to the symbolic register, there is a need for silence and, above all, omissions: “Sometimes the unspeakable *can* be put into words but often it may be communicated through silences and omissions”⁸⁸⁷. Sometimes, however, silences are forced: one need only think of the Victorian taboos that limited female speech and of Virginia Woolf. This is exactly what Foucault is referring to when he argues that within power relations, there are authorised discourses and others that are not, and necessarily remain in the shadows.

Still on the subject of silences and omissions, it is essential to say that these are precisely the founding elements of Shoah literature, which inhabits exactly the paradoxical posture of the word made explicit by Boué when she wrote that silence is what founds the literary word, and not its

⁸⁸² Ibidem [my emphasis].

⁸⁸³ Cf. Arthur W. Frank, *The Wounded Storyteller: Body, Illness, and Ethics*, cit.

⁸⁸⁴ James Berger, “Trauma and Literary Theory”, cit., p. 573 [my emphasis].

⁸⁸⁵ Judith Lewis Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, cit., p. 175.

⁸⁸⁶ Cf. Ibidem [my emphasis].

⁸⁸⁷ *The Unspeakable: Narratives of Trauma*, Magda Strojinska / Vikki Cecchetto / Kate Szymansky (eds.), cit., p. 18.

negation. This paradoxical posture is perfectly rendered by Etty Hillesum, already quoted in the introduction to this work and useful here to reiterate how silence in writing is a necessity of the word, especially after the crisis of language and representation linked to the genocides and wars of the last century. Hillesum, in fact, reminds us how writing actually needs few words and many silent spaces surrounding these rare gems:

That's how I want to write. *With that much space round a few words. They should simply emphasize the silence.* Just like that print with the sprig of blossom in the lower corner. A few delicate brush strokes - but with what attention to the smallest detail - and all around it space, not empty but inspired. The few great things that matter in life can be said in a few words. If I should ever write - but what? - *I would like to brush in a few words against a wordless background.* To describe the silence and the stillness and to inspire them. What matters is the right relationship between words and wordlessness, the wordlessness in which much more happens than in all the words one can string together. And the wordless background of each short story - or whatever it may be - must have a distinct hue and a discrete content, just like those Japanese prints. It is not some vague and incomprehensible silence, *for silence too must have contours and form. All that words should do is to lend the silence form and contours.* Each word is like a small milestone, a slight rise in the ground beside a flat, endless road across sweeping plains.⁸⁸⁸

This poetic quotation from Hillesum is reminiscent of the work of Woolf, Duras, Perec and Celati, who explicate the place of silence through multiple rhetorical and syntactical devices. Returning to Boué, in fact, it is useful to stress how the literature of the last century is animated by the desire to overcome that dilemma between saying and keeping silent and chooses silence as an exploration of the limits of the sayable:

De ce dilemme entre dire et taire, naît une littérature, non pas tant préoccupée d'elle-même et en proie au doute, mais plutôt *capable de dire ce qu'elle n'arrive pas à être.* Ce sont ces *postures paradoxales de la parole* que nous appelons *silence*. Le paradoxe tient à ce que l'exploration des limites du dicible ne conduit pas à l'extinction de l'écriture mais au contraire à sa confirmation littéraire. Le *silence*, c'est-à-dire ce que l'écriture ne peut pas être, est bien *ce qui fonde la parole littéraire*, animée d'un désir de surpassement.⁸⁸⁹

Following this *fil rouge*, what Wittgenstein expressed, namely that silence reveals itself precisely at the limits of language, comes in handy. We need only think of Woolf's *moments of being*, that is, of everything that apparently cannot be grasped with words, but which is rendered with sensations, images, sounds replicated on the page through metaphors, ellipses, blanks and white

⁸⁸⁸ Etty Hillesum, *An Interrupted Life: The Diaries, 1941-1943*, New York, Henry Holt and Company, 1996, p. 137 [my emphasis].

⁸⁸⁹ Rachel Boué, *L'éloquence du silence. Celan, Sarraute, Duras et Quignard*, cit., p. 10 [my emphasis].

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spaces. Calvino maintained that the word is the means to draw a connection with what is invisible, hidden, absent. Such seems to be the operation carried out by Perec, who builds a bridge to his deceased parents, by Duras, who writes to keep her deported husband alive, by Woolf, who searches for ancient sensations inside the chest of her memories, by Celati, who calls things so that they remain until the very end and who uses words as traces to orient himself in the desert. Indeed, Calvino writes:

*La parola collega la traccia visibile alla cosa invisibile, alla cosa assente, alla cosa desiderata o temuta, come un fragile ponte di fortuna gettato sul vuoto.*⁸⁹⁰

We can then conclude our reflections on this chapter by taking up Barthes' thought, who writes that the strength of literature is precisely that of representation. In fact, Barthes argues that literature insists on representing something, namely the real, and that it is precisely because humans insist on representing the real with words that there is a history of literature. Clearly, the real is not representable, yet it is precisely this impossibility, as Boué also wrote, that stimulates literary creation, which, according to Barthes, does not give up in the face of the impossible challenge:

*Or, c'est précisément cette impossibilité topologique à quoi la littérature ne veut pas, ne peut jamais se rendre. De ce qu'il n'y a point de parallélisme entre le réel et le langage, les hommes ne prennent pas leur parti et c'est ce refus, peut-être aussi vieux que le langage lui-même, qui produit, dans un affairément incessant, la littérature. On pourrait imaginer une histoire de la littérature, ou, pour mieux dire : des productions de langage, qui serait l'histoire des expédients verbaux, souvent très fous, dont les hommes ont usé pour réduire, apprivoiser, nier, ou au contraire assumer ce qui est toujours un délire, à savoir l'inadéquation fondamentale du langage et du réel. Je disais à l'instant, à propos du savoir, que la littérature est catégoriquement réaliste, en ce qu'elle n'a jamais que le réel pour objet de désir ; et je dirai maintenant, sans me contredire, parce que j'emploie le mot ici dans son acception familière, qu'elle est tout aussi obstinément : irréaliste ; elle croit sensé le désir de l'impossible.*⁸⁹¹

It is precisely the obstinacy in the face of the desire to say the impossible that our four writers demonstrate in their writings: going beyond the pain of remembrance, the anguish of shedding light through words, the struggle to find metaphors and images that speak of the omissions deliberately imprinted in the text, Woolf, Duras, Perec and Celati make silence speak and, as Éric Méchoulan would say: “désormais c'est à l'ombre du silence qu'on écrit”⁸⁹².

⁸⁹⁰ Italo Calvino, *Lezioni americane. Sei proposte per il prossimo millennio*, cit., p. 76 [my emphasis].

⁸⁹¹ Roland Barthes, *Leçon inaugurale – Sémiologie littéraire*, cit., pp. 21-22 [my emphasis].

⁸⁹² Éric Méchoulan, *Le Corps imprimé. Essai sur le silence en littérature*, Montréal, les Éditions Balzac, 1999, coll. « l'Univers des discours », p. 271.

Chapter 2.

Theme of Silence: Silent Characters in Fictional Writings

*Since I've learned to be silent,
everything has come so much closer to me.*

Rainer Maria Rilke

Is Silence a Theme?

This chapter is dedicated to silence as the thematic core of the texts examined. It should be made clear from the outset that the theme of silence emerges strongly throughout the 20th century and is not a specificity peculiar only to the four works chosen in this work, which are: Woolf's *The Waves*, Duras's *Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein*, Perec's *Un homme qui dort* and Celati's *Baratto*. However, these four texts, in a close relationship with the autobiographical works already analysed, present strong connections and provide us with an insight into the literature of the 20th century with regard to this theme.

Silence was treated as a central or marginal theme in the various texts and takes on different functions depending on the author's intentions. First of all, we must therefore ask ourselves: what does it mean to thematise silence? Can silence be a theme? With what expedients?

The answer, which we will see emerge in the course of our analysis of the texts, is that silence can be thematised and takes various forms. In some texts, silence is the effect of the death of dialogue between characters; in others, it is the perfect culmination of communicability between humans. In some works, silence is intimately linked to decency; in others, it is the emblem of mystery and secrecy. In some texts, there are silent characters who choose to speak no more: whether out of a renunciation linked to distrust in the capabilities of language, or out of a subversion that becomes a critique of the *status quo*. In other texts, silence becomes a pause, a suspension, an intermittence between dialogues in a word that allows self-suspension and leaves space for listening to the other, be it a you or the world around you. Finally, some texts present silence through the element of contrast: in the midst of music or deafening noise, certain moments of silence and stillness become particularly significant.

If in the previous chapter, therefore, silence was mainly linked to the notions of trauma and the unspeakable, and the speaking subject was prevented from saying something, in this chapter we will see cases in which the subject chooses, as a posture of self-determination, not to say. Silence,

from being a limit of language, becomes a springboard for other meanings: silence is no longer a boundary that marks an interior and an exterior of language to be overcome, but rather a space within language - one of its characteristics, in short - that becomes porous and contains, within itself, all possibilities. Silence becomes the occasion of a chosen condition.

But where does language cease, if the limits of language necessarily include silence? If language includes its own absence, this can only mean that literature too is synonymous with the presence *and* absence of words.¹

If Wittgenstein argued “whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent”, Blanchot's thought comes to our aid here because he argues for the necessity of speaking precisely in order to be silent². In short, a literal silence becomes possible and in Blanchot's thought silence and language are inextricable: silence is made manifest in language. For a more in-depth look at the theme of silence in literary language according to Blanchot, see the following: *From Dead to Language, Literature and the Right to Death, The Essential Solitude, Idle Speech, Where Now? Who Now?*. Suffice it to point out here that according to Blanchot, silence is inherent to language:

Le langage ne commence qu'avec le vide ; nulle plénitude, nulle certitude ne parle ; à qui s'exprime, quelque chose d'essentiel fait défaut. La négation est liée au langage. Au point de départ, je ne parle pas pour dire quelque chose, mais c'est un rien qui demande à parler, rien ne parle, rien trouve son être dans la parole et l'être de la parole n'est rien. Cette formule explique pourquoi l'idéal de la littérature a pu être celui-ci : ne rien dire, parler pour ne rien dire. [...] Si des choses on ne parle qu'en disant d'elles ce par quoi elles ne sont rien, eh bien ne rien dire, voilà le seul espoir d'en tout dire.³

L'absolu d'un sens [...] qui partout nous poursuit, nous précède, toujours là avant que nous soyons, toujours présent dans l'absence, toujours parlant dans le silence.⁴

Silence therefore continues to speak even when speech ceases and, to some extent, does not exist. The literature of the 20th century is characterised precisely by this transition: from verbal overflow to aphasia, from effusiveness to muteness.

Trying to define, by means of multiple examples, this attitude of literature to tend towards silence, it will finally be possible to discern a link between the fictional works dealt with here and the autobiographical ones analysed above: the former often provide a key to understanding the latter. What is kept silent in autobiography is often revealed, in a fictional manner, in *fictio*. The unspoken

¹ Leslie Hill, *Bataille, Klossowski, Blanchot: Writing at the Limit*, Oxford, Oxford UP, 2001, p. 217.

² See Maurice Blanchot, “Idle Speech”, in *Friendship*, trans. by Elizabeth Rottengberg, Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1997, pp. 117-128.

³ Maurice Blanchot, « La littérature et le droit à la mort », in *La part du feu*, Paris, Gallimard, 1949, p. 312

⁴ Maurice Blanchot, *Le livre à venir*, Paris, Gallimard, 1959, p. 118.

of one text is transfigured into another: it is up to the reader to unveil this concatenation of concealed meanings.

Attempting now to take a panoramic look at the novels of the four writers examined, we can recognise several thematic nuclei associated with silence in numerous works.

Woolf is the writer of interiority par excellence. In her novels, we read many reflections on silences related to intimacy. Silence also becomes the space of unknowability of the Other than oneself and the shadow zone, as Jung reminds us, of the subject itself. In Woolf, silence does not have a single meaning, but is the space for the ambiguities of language and life.

An example par excellence is *To the Lighthouse*, where marriage is experienced as a place of silence and incommunicability; where the female characters are silent, but only because of a convention imposed by Victorian society; where wordless communication sometimes takes place, made up of understandings and glances that do not require words; where the body speaks, with its eloquent and silent gestures. In this novel, we read three types of silence, as Patricia Ondek Laurence⁵ notes: the unsaid, the unspoken and the unsayable. In the marriage of Mr and Mrs Ramsay, many things remain unsaid: "That was typical of their relationship. Many things were left unsaid"⁶. The artist Lily Briscoe illustrates the second type of silence by saying: "For how could one express in words the emotions of the body? Express that emptiness there?"⁷. The third type of silence can be observed when Mrs Ramsay's daughters - Prue, Nancy and Rose - observe her during a dinner party:

She was now formidable to behold, and it was only in silence, looking up from their plates, after she had spoken so severely about Charles Tansley, that her daughters, Prue, Nancy, Rose-could sport with infidel ideas which they had brewed for themselves of a life different from hers; in Paris, perhaps; a wilder life; not always taking care of some man or other; for there was in all their minds a mute questioning of deference and chivalry, of the Bank of England and the Indian Empire, of ringed fingers and lace.⁸

The role of the mother is challenged, silently, by the daughters. The mother, in this case, is subjugated to patriarchy, empire and colonialism.

Mrs Dalloway, in addition to the aforementioned inspection of the main character's interiority, which is full of silences, presents an extremely significant moment of silence: the one that precedes the advent of the First World War.

⁵ Cf. Patricia Ondek Laurence, *The Reading of Silence. Virginia Woolf in the English Tradition*, Stanford, California, Stanford University Press, 1991, p. 1.

⁶ Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, New York, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1927, p. 263.

⁷ Ivi, p. 265.

⁸ Ivi, p. 14.

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All down the Mall people were standing and looking up into the sky. As they looked the whole world became perfectly silent, and a flight of gulls crossed the sky, first one gull leading, then another, and in this extraordinary silence and peace, in this pallor, in this purity, bells struck eleven times, the sound fading up there among the gulls.⁹

The very famous 11 o'clock silence is surely the fictional counterpart of the silence observed on Remembrance Day, even though it is hushed in the text.

The novel *The Voyage Out* explicitly announces Woolf's preoccupation with silence with the following sentence:

I want to write a novel about Silence, he said; the things people don't say. But the difficulty is immense.¹⁰

The Voyage Out is also characterised by its reinterpretation of hysteria as a form of silence and the expression of women's bodies, such as Rachel's. Moreover, in this novel the reader is catapulted into the mind of Rachel's character by the narrator. In contrast, in *Between the Acts* and *The Waves*, the reader is given access to the inner voices and thoughts of many of the characters, making the placement more complex. The silence in *The Voyage Out* indicates unexpressed feelings.

In *Between the Acts* Woolf attempts to represent thoughts without words: "Thoughts without words... can that be"¹¹. People hear even when no words are spoken. The silence of this text is thus related to the interstices that exist between the acts, personal and historical, of a conversation. To some extent, it is a silence of the meta-conversation that occurs between two characters who say nothing.

The Waves is Woolf's most musical novel, like an eternal stream of consciousness, yet it is the most interesting novel for us because the physical voice of the characters is completely silent. In their place, subjectivity speaks. Thought and speech are thus intermingled and completely interchangeable in this novel, where, although they are indeed silent, we hear the words of many characters. In this text, there is no shortage of reflections on language and silence, such as in Bernard's interior monologue where he wonders how to describe the world without a self and comes to the conclusion that there are no words. In *The Waves*, therefore, silence represents certain aspects of the mind, life and nature, which is ineffable, and that which is unconscious.

⁹ Virginia Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway*, London, Hogarth Press, 1960, pp. 23-24.

¹⁰ Virginia Woolf, *The Voyage Out*, New York, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1915, p. 216.

¹¹ Virginia Woolf, *Between the Acts*, New York, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1914 p. 68.

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Duras is another writer who proposes above all a psychic silence in her novels, especially embodied by enigmatic characters such as Anne Desbarèdes, Lol V. Stein, Anne-Marie Stretter and Emily L.. The interiority of these characters is unfathomable: they are as much strangers to others as to themselves¹², so that each is the bearer of an unknowable otherness, like that of Jabès's stranger:

L'intime, qu'une souffrance incommunicable condamne au silence, contamine l'extérieur et imprime au récit une esthétique du diffus qui rend la trame romanesque aléatoire.

Pourtant ce silence fournit l'alibi fictionnel des récits de M. Duras, d'un point de vue diégétique et stylistique. Le silence est, en effet, non seulement constitutif de l'étrangeté psychique des personnages mais en se posant comme énigme, il est aussi matière à intrigue.¹³

As Rovatti pointed out, silence is also enigma and mystery. In *Le Vice-consul*, Charles Rosett falls in love with the secret personality of Anne-Marie Stretter. In *Le Ravisement de Lol V Stein*, the narrator Jacques Hold poses as a narrative investigation his encounter with Lol, whose story he attempts to reinvent.

Sa seule vue m'effondre. Elle ne réclame aucune parole. Et elle pourrait supporter un silence infini. Je voudrais faire, dire, dire un long mugissement de tous mots fondus et revenus au même magma, intelligibles à Lol V. Stein. Je me tais.¹⁴

It is precisely the mystery and the aura of silence that revolves around this character that makes Duras's writing so enigmatic and porous, dense with hidden meanings.

L'insondable des êtres est donc la matrice romanesque des récits. Cette dernière s'appuie sur une rhétorique de la réticence. Dialogues qui taisent l'objet du discours, effets de parataxe qui empêchent la sédimentation du sens, et phrases nominales qui suspendent l'action produisent une rhétorique négative qui bloque le procès du sens entre deux mouvements contradictoires : appel au déchiffrement et dissolution des ses effets.¹⁵

Duras calls this type of writing “écriture courante”:

L'écriture courante c'est ça, celle qui ne montre pas, qui court sur la crête des mots, celle qui n'existe pas, qui a à peine le temps d'exister.¹⁶

¹²See Rachel Boué, *L'éloquence du silence. Celan, Sarraute, Duras et Quignard*, cit., p. 77.

¹³ Ivi, p. 78.

¹⁴ Marguerite Duras, *Le ravisement de Lol V. Stein*, Paris, Gallimard, 1964, p. 202.

¹⁵ Rachel Boué, *L'éloquence du silence. Celan, Sarraute, Duras et Quignard*, cit., p. 79.

¹⁶ Entretien de M. Duras avec Hervé Le Masson, in *Le Nouvel Observateur*, 28 sept-5 oct 1984, p. 93.

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As Boué argues, the characteristic of this type of writing is to indicate the silence that underlies it. Duras's characters are the word-bearers of silence. A striking example is surely that of the “mot-trou”, or missing word, of *Lol V. Stein*:

Faute de son [le mot] existence, elle [Lol] se tait. Ç'aurait été un mot absence, un mot-trou, creusé en son centre d'un trou, de ce trou où tous les autres auraient été enterrés. On n'aurait pas pu le dire mais on aura pu le faire résonner. Immense, sans fin, un gong vide (...) ce mot qui n'existe pas pourtant est là : il vous attend au tournant du langage, il vou défie, il n'a jamais servi, de le soulever, de le faire surgir hors de so royaume percé de toutes parts à travers lequel s'écoulent la mer, le sable l'éternité du bal dans le cinéma de *Lol V. Stein*.¹⁷

In this case, silence is thematised, it is made explicit, it is given a form. Writing becomes the substitute for what is missing, it gives form to absence. It is no coincidence that *Le Vice-consul* ends precisely with aphasia:

- Rien d'autre, vous n'avez rien d'autre à me dire, monsieur ?
- Rien, non, directeur¹⁸

The aphasia of Duras's characters recalls the negativity of the work Blanchot¹⁹ spoke of. Silence becomes an essential datum of the writing: it is both its source and its opening.

Hiroshima Mon Amour, like the other texts, despite being a play script, also presents numerous thematisations of silence. Firstly, the text is constantly fragmented into short episodes, which create continuous suspensions. Secondly, as in *L'Amant*, there is an explication of the silence between the two lovers: the possible misunderstanding between two lovers from such different countries and conditions is treated in the context of the incommunicability of the Hiroshima event. The punctuation also speaks of silence: there are many suspension points, interruptions in speech that is left hanging, pauses, sighs in conversations, omissions.

Furthermore, in *Moderato Cantabile* we witness the scene of a child who refuses to learn to play the piano. Here we wonder whether silence can be subversive and whether the figure of the child is one of protest who, through silence, claims his own freedom.

Le bruit de la mer s'éleva, sans bornes, dans le silence de l'enfant.²⁰

Le bruit de la mer dans le silence de son obstination se fit entendre de nouveau. [...]

¹⁷ Marguerite Duras, *Le ravisement de Lol V. Stein*, cit., pp. 48-49.

¹⁸ Marguerite Duras, *Le Vice-consul*, Paris, Gallimard, coll. L'imaginaire, 1966 p. 212.

¹⁹ Cf. Maurice Blanchot, “Comment la littérature est-elle possible?”, in *Faux pas*, Gallimard, nrf, 1971, pp. 92-101.

²⁰ Marguerite Duras, *Moderato Cantabile*, Paris, Les Editions de Minuit, 1958/1980, p. 12.

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- Je ne veux pas apprendre le piano, dit l'enfant.²¹

Also in the same text, one should note the ambiguous communication between the child's mother and the man she meets at the bar, which proceeds between said and unsaid and revolves around a gap that is not made explicit, but which concerns the desire for death.

Je ne sais rien. Peut-être par de longs silences qui s'installaient entre eux, la nuit, un peu n'importe quand ensuite, et qu'ils étaient de moins en moins capables de surmonter par rien, rien.²²

Le vin coule dans sa bouche pleine d'un nom qu'elle ne prononce pas. Cet événement silencieux lui brise les reins.²³

Dans l'éclatante lumière des lustres, Anne Desbardes se tait et sourit toujours.²⁴

Sa voix se fait mince, presque enfantine [...] Sa voix était posée, sans timbre, une voix de sourd.

- Ce n'est pas la peine d'essayer de comprendre. On ne peut pas comprendre à ce point.²⁵

The misunderstanding between the two characters and the limitations of language to render female emotions and interiority are two other key themes of the novel, which revolve around silence.

Lastly, *La maladie de la mort* is an enigmatic and mysterious text par excellence, where it is precisely absence - of love, of desire, of the possibility of an encounter - that is thematised and the female figure is on several occasions forced into silence by the male character:

Vous dites qu'elle devrait se taire comme les femmes de ses ancêtres, se plier complètement à vous, à votre vouloir [...].²⁶

Pendant deux nuits elle ne parle presque pas.²⁷

Vous mettez la main sur sa bouche pour qu'elle se taise, vous lui dites qu'on ne dit pas ces choses-là.²⁸

²¹ Ivi, pp. 13-14.

²² Ivi, p. 58.

²³ Ivi, p. 111.

²⁴ Ivi, p. 112.

²⁵ Ivi, p. 121.

²⁶ Marguerite Duras, *La maladie de la mort*, Paris, Les Editions de Minuit, 1982, p. 10.

²⁷ Ivi, p. 12.

²⁸ Ivi, p. 15.

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Not only is there a subjugation of the woman imposed through silence, but also an incommunicability between the two lovers that emerges more and more in the text, in the form of “la frontière infranchissable entre elle et vous”²⁹.

Une autre fois vous lui dites de prononcer un mot, un seul, celui qui dit votre nom, vous lui dites ce mot, ce nom. Elle ne répond pas, alors vous criez encore.³⁰

Quand vous avez pleuré, c'était sur vous seul et non sur l'admirable impossibilité de la rejoindre à travers la différence qui vous sépare.³¹

Duras's characters never seem to reach each other, in an incommunicability that always refers to silence, understood as the impossibility of understanding each other, of communicating a trauma, or of conscious unspokenness.

Finally, of all Duras's writings, *L'Amant* is the novel that most reflects the tendency of her writing towards silence: that's why, exceptionally, it is worth dwelling on it for a while before going on. Published in 1984 and winner of the Prix Goncourt, *L'Amant*, which has repeatedly been described by critics as an autobiographically inspired novel, tells a story set in Indochina between a young girl and her Chinese lover. However, if the love relationship remains the main theme of the novel, whose importance we understand from the title, another theme that emerges strongly is that of family ties and, in particular, the relationship with the mother and siblings. How far the work traces the personal experience actually lived by Duras is not of interest here. What is important for the purposes of our study is in fact the exodus of a writing that matured over thirty years and whose final outcome is the great theme of silence. This theme is declined in many aspects: childhood as a place of silence; the madness of the mother and the silence imposed on her children; the silence linked to poverty; the death of the brother and the silence that follows; illicit love and the silence imposed by this condition; the incommunicability of love between the two lovers; the silence linked to separation.

Some of the autobiographical themes present in this novel had already emerged in *Un barrage contre le Pacifique*, published in 1950, and would return a few years later in *L'Amant de la Chine du nord*, of 1991. Even from these data, we understand the importance of the writer's autobiographical experience, which is constantly transposed in her novels.

In *L'Amant*, the thematisation of silence takes all the forms Duras has written about in over thirty years of publications. In some ways, this novel represents a perfect synthesis of the

²⁹ Ivi, p. 25.

³⁰ Ivi, p. 26.

³¹ Ivi, p. 56.

configurations that silence can assume. Moreover, considering that it was published in 1984, we can note that Duras's writing, which has always tended towards silence, reaches its apex in this novel both from the point of view of its thematisation and from the stylistic point of view.

The novel eludes all characterisation and around it Marguerite Duras herself has said and written conflicting phrases. Indeed, just as it is true that in the interview within Bernard Pivot's *Apostrophes* she stated: “C’est la première fois que je n’écris pas une fiction. Tous mes autres livres sont des fictions”, it is equally true that Duras, in the first pages of *L’Amant*, writes: “L’histoire de ma vie n’existe pas”³². Furthermore, speaking of *Un barrage contre le Pacifique*, Duras states: “L’histoire d’une toute petite partie de ma jeunesse je l’ai plus o moins écrite déjà, enfin je veux dire, de quoi l’apercevoir, je parle de celle-ci justement, de celle de la traversée du fleuve. Ce que je fais ici est différent et pareil”³³. Duras's attempt seems to be completely new and different from any other text, and therefore resistant to any label. In Duras, in fact, living and writing are two activities so intertwined that an effective distinction between the two is impossible: the fictional material is constantly mixed up with the autobiographical. No text by Duras is exempt from some experience actually lived by the author. Writing sometimes even replaces life, as she herself says: “On a une vie très pauvre, les écrivains, je parle des gens qui écrivent vraiment [...] Je ne connais personne qui ait moins de vie personnelle que moi”³⁴. What’s more, Duras argues: “L’intensité, elle est dans mes livres, dans mes films. Je ne la vis pas”³⁵.

Finally, in 1991, on the release of *L’Amant de la Chine du Nord*, a text that again takes up the theme of the Chinese lover, Duras writes in the preamble to the work: “Je suis restée dans l’histoire avec ces gens et seulement avec eux. Je suis redevenue un écrivain de romans”³⁶. Yet, Duras also claims: “Dans *L’Amant de la Chine du Nord* c’est moins inventé que dans *L’Amant*”³⁷. Hence *L’Amant* is a text where invention plays an important and even greater role than in other autobiographical texts, with the result that “Marguerite Duras dit inventer dans l’autobiographie et rester au plus près de l’histoire dans le roman”³⁸.

The fictional transposition of autobiographical events is, in short, the best way for Duras to access a truth that is not fixed and untouchable, but changes with time, with self-awareness and with writing. The experience thus lived with the Chinese lover is recounted, romanticised, mythologised in various writings, from *Un Barrage contre le Pacifique* to *L’Amant* to *L’Amant de la Chine du Nord*.

³² Marguerite Duras, *L’Amant*, Paris, Les Editions de Minuit, 1984, p. 14.

³³ Ibidem.

³⁴ Marguerite Duras, *Le Camion*, Paris, Minuit, 1977, p. 125.

³⁵ Alternatives théâtrales, « Marguerite Duras », Bruxelles, *Maison du spectacle*, n°14, mars 1983, p. 13.

³⁶ Marguerite Duras, *L’Amant de la Chine du Nord*, Paris, Gallimard, 1991, p. 12.

³⁷ Laure Adler, *Marguerite Duras*, Paris, Gallimard, 1998, p. 567.

³⁸ Monique Pinthon, “Marguerite Duras et l’autobiographie: le pacte de vérité en question”, *Relief - Revue Électronique de Littérature Française*, 3(1), p. 30–42, p. 39.

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What is important to emphasise here is that however authentic or fictional this experience may be, it nevertheless becomes part of Duras's life and is amplified through the magic of writing:

Je pense souvent à cette image que je suis seul à voir encore et dont je n'ai jamais parlé. Elle est toujours là dans le même silence, émerveillant. C'est entre toutes celle qui me plaît de moi-même, celle où je me reconnais, où je m'enchanté.³⁹

From this quotation we can interrogate the silence with which this text is imbued. The sentence above in fact refers to an intimate image, anchored in silence, from which emerges the mythologisation of self that Duras operates in *L'Amant*. This sentence, found on the first page of the novel in question, immediately clarifies the status of silence in the work: the intimacy experienced with the Chinese lover remained an unspoken experience, which Duras did not talk about. For what reason? Because it is precisely through silence that Duras can preserve a memory, an image, truer and more authentic to her. Words, in short, would be a source of misunderstanding and language is insufficient to recount the enchantment derived from this event. Furthermore, it is worth mentioning what Duras writes with respect to the silence maintained on certain themes within *L'Amant*:

Ici je parle des périodes cachées de cette même jeunesse, de certains enfouissements que j'aurais opérés sur certains faits, sur certains sentiments, sur certains événements. J'ai commencé à écrire dans un milieu qui me portait très fort à la pudeur. Écrire pour eux était encore moral. Écrire, maintenant, il semblerait que ce ne soit plus rien bien souvent. [...] Mais le plus souvent je n'ai pas d'avis, je vois que tous les champs sont ouverts, qu'il n'y aurait plus de murs, que l'écrit ne saurait plus où se mettre pour se cacher, se faire, se lire, que son inconvenance fondamentale ne serait plus respectée, mais je n'y pense pas plus avant.⁴⁰

Duras speaks of hiding, of burying, of purposely maintained silences about certain events and feelings that, if at first they were opaqued by modesty, are exposed in the writing. Yet, just like the photograph never taken of the river crossing, something is constantly omitted and kept silent. Precisely that which is not exposed, however, takes on the power to become an absolute: "C'est à ce manque d'avoir été faite qu'elle doit sa vertu, celle de représenter un absolu, d'en être justement l'auteur"⁴¹.

The thematic nuclei associated with silence are numerous.

The first is linked to the family and childhood as places par excellence of silence, as much linked to the role of the narrator's family members, who suffer the imposition of silence on certain

³⁹ Marguerite Duras, *L'Amant*, cit., p. 9.

⁴⁰ *Ivi*, pp. 14-15.

⁴¹ *Ivi*, p. 17.

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issues, as to the mother's madness. The character in the novel who best embodies silence is the mother, who often does not answer or say anything, especially with respect to her daughter's wishes:

Tout est là et rien n'est encore joué, je le vois dans les yeux, tout est déjà dans les yeux. Je veux écrire. Déjà je l'ai dit à ma mère : ce que je veux c'est ça, écrire. Pas de réponse la première fois.⁴²

Je lui ai répondu que ce que je voulais avant toute autre chose c'était écrire, rien d'autre que ça, rien. Jalouse elle est. Pas de réponse, un regard bref aussitôt détourné le petit haussement d'épaules, inoubliable.⁴³

Le proviseur lui dit : votre fille, madame, est première en français. Ma mère ne dit rien, rien [...].⁴⁴

The mother's attitude, as we note in the quotations, is often one of absence: absence of answers, absence of consent, absence of words. The mother, in short, seems cold and detached, worn out by her personal anxieties and unable to speak loving words to her children. Around this fundamental character, revolves the silence that Duras maintained about her childhood, and which is recounted in this paragraph:

Dans les histoires de mes livres qui se rapportent à mon enfance, je ne sais plus tout à coup ce que j'ai évité de dire, ce que j'ai dit, je crois avoir dit l'amour que l'on portait à notre mère mais je ne sais pas si j'ai dit la haine qu'on lui portait aussi et l'amour qu'on se portait les uns aux autres, et la haine aussi, terrible, dans cette histoire commune de ruine et de mort qui était celle de cette famille dans tous les cas, dans celui de l'amour comme dans celui de la haine et qui échappe encore à tout mon entendement, qui m'est encore inaccessible, cachée au plus profond de ma chair, aveugle comme un nouveau-né du premier jour.⁴⁵

Duras, or the narrator, says she is confused with respect to remembering what she said and what she avoided saying with respect to her family-related feelings. Certainly, she writes that she did not say the hatred towards her mother as well as the ambivalence of feelings between her siblings. In this family, we see love and hate, dialogue and silence, life and death intertwined. What is emphasised, however, is that something still eludes the understanding of the narrating self, and thus also the possibility of being verbalised: this remains in silence, inaccessible, hidden. The text is, in short, full of faults, admittedly. Moreover, in the passage immediately following, this silence with which the novel is imbued is made explicit:

⁴² Ivi, p. 28.

⁴³ Ivi, p. 30.

⁴⁴ Ibidem.

⁴⁵ Ivi, p. 33.

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Elle est le lieu au seuil de quoi le silence commence. Ce qui s'y passe c'est justement le silence, ce lent travail pour toute ma vie. Je suis encore là, devant ces enfants possédés, à la même distance du mystère. Je n'ai jamais écrit, croyant le faire, je n'ai jamais aimé, croyant aimer, je n'ai jamais rien fait qu'attendre devant la porte fermée.⁴⁶

Silence is thus a slow *travail* throughout Duras's life. Something remains inaccessible and mysterious, constantly put at a distance. The family as a place of silence is taken up several times in the text, until it reaches the apex of aphasia:

Jamais bonjour, bonsoir, bonne année. Jamais merci. Jamais parler. Jamais besoin de parler. Tout reste, muet, loin. C'est une famille en pierre, pétrifiée dans une épaisseur sans accès aucun. Chaque jour nous essayons de nous tuer, de tuer. Non seulement on ne se parle pas mais on ne se regarde pas.⁴⁷

The family is therefore a crystallised, cold, still place, where love does not circulate but one is imprisoned in a void of looks and words. It seems almost a phantasmal element. Not only did the law of silence reign within the family, but even outside it: the children lived their economic misery with shame and imposed secrecy.

De tout cela nous ne disions rien à l'extérieur, nous avons d'abord appris à nous taire sur le principal de notre vie, la misère. Et puis sur tout le reste aussi.⁴⁸

The second thematic core is the death of her brother and the ensuing silence.

Le petit frère est mort en trois jours d'une broncho-pneumonie, le cœur n'a pas tenu. C'est à ce moment-là que j'ai quitté ma mère. C'était pendant l'occupation japonaise. Tout s'est terminé ce jour-là. Je ne lui ai plus jamais posé de questions sur notre enfance, sur elle. Elle est morte pour moi de la mort de mon petit frère. De même que mon frère aîné. Je n'ai pas surmonté l'horreur qu'ils m'ont inspirée tout à coup. Ils ne m'importent plus. Je ne sais plus rien d'eux après ce jour. [...] Et puis un jour il n'y en a plus. Ils sont morts maintenant, la mère et les deux frères. Pour les souvenirs aussi c'est trop tard. Maintenant je ne les aime plus. Je ne sais plus si je les ai aimés. Je les ai quittés. Je n'ai plus dans ma tête le parfum de sa peau ni dans mes yeux la couleur de ses yeux. Je ne me souviens plus de la voix, sauf parfois de celle de la douceur avec la fatigue du soir. Le rire, je ne l'entends plus, ni le rire, ni les cris. C'est fini, je ne me souviens plus. C'est pourquoi j'en écris si facile d'elle maintenant, si long, si étiré, elle est devenue écriture courante.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Ivi, p. 34.

⁴⁷ Ivi, pp. 66-67.

⁴⁸ Ivi, p. 73.

⁴⁹ Ivi, pp. 36-37.

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The death of her brother coincides with Duras's abandonment of her mother and a total disregard for her family of origin. As if the brother was the centre of it, Duras writes that everything ended on the day of his death. Silence also imposes itself as stunted indifference: Duras stops asking her mother questions about her childhood. After years, the relatives seem to have ended up in the oblivion of the narrator's voice, who says she has forgotten them and no longer loves them. The death of one drags everyone into the abyss of indifference and forgetfulness, which only writing brings back to the surface.

The third and final thematic core highlighted is, of course, that of illicit love and the silence imposed by this condition, as well as that of the incommunicability of love between the two lovers and, finally, the silence associated with the separation between the two. Sadec, the Chinese lover, is characterised by “son silence génial”⁵⁰: he is a taciturn, enigmatic man, already living in a quiet stillness even before Marguerite's arrival in his life. Conversations between the two lovers are marked by deep silences and pauses:

Lui, il tremble. Il la regarde tout d'abord comme s'il attendait qu'elle parle, mais elle ne parle pas. Alors il ne bouge pas non plus, il ne la déshabille pas, il dit qu'il l'aime comme un fou, il le dit tout bas. Puis il se tait. Elle ne lui répond pas. Elle pourrait répondre qu'elle ne l'aime pas. Elle ne dit rien. Tout à coup elle sait, là, à l'instant, elle sait qu'il ne la connaît pas, qu'il ne la connaîtra jamais, qu'il n'a pas les moyens de connaître tant de perversité. Et de faire tant et tant de détours pour l'attraper, lui il ne pourra jamais.⁵¹

Je n'entends plus ce qu'il dit, je n'écoute plus. Il le voit, il se tait.⁵²

Pendant tout le temps de notre histoire, pendant un an et demi nous parlerons de cette façon, nous ne parlerons jamais de nous. Dès les premiers jours, nous savons qu'un avenir commun n'est pas envisageable, alors nous ne parlerons jamais de l'avenir, nous tiendrons des propos comme jour-nalistiques, et a contrario, et d'égale teneur. Je lui dis que son séjour en France lui a été fatal.⁵³

C'est comme s'il n'avait pas parlé, comme si on n'avait pas entendu. Sa tentative sombre dans le silence.⁵⁴

Mes frères ne lui adresseront jamais la parole. C'est comme s'il n'était pas visible pour eux, comme s'il n'était pas assez dense pour être perçu, vu, entendu par eux. [...] Moi non plus, devant eux, je ne lui parle pas. En présence de ma famille, je dois ne jamais lui adresser la parole.⁵⁵

⁵⁰ Ivi, p. 43.

⁵¹ Ivi, p. 46.

⁵² Ivi, p. 60.

⁵³ Ibidem.

⁵⁴ Ivi, p. 62.

⁵⁵ Ivi, p. 63.

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Nous nous sommes embrassés, sans un mot, embrassés, là, nous avons oublié, devant le lycée, embrassés.⁵⁶

Il ne lui parle presque plus. Peut-être croit-il qu'elle ne comprendrait plus ce qu'il lui dirait d'elle, de cet amour qu'il ne connaissait pas encore et dont il ne sait rien dire. Peut-être découvre-t-il qu'ils ne se sont jamais encore parlé, sauf lorsqu'ils s'appellent dans les cris de la chambre le soir.⁵⁷

As can be deduced, the silence between the two lovers is the main thematic core. There seems to be a basic incommunicability between the two dictated not only by their different age, origin and socio-economic status, but by their very diversity which is the source of the unfathomable mystery of the Other: is it ever possible, after all, to know each other? Is it ever possible, after all, to communicate in words to tell each other something about oneself? Duras seems to argue no, and that the only way to really get close is to do so through silence.

Also in Perec, as we have seen extensively, silence is a central theme. One need only think of all the omissions in his texts, to be found in intertextual links. There are, however, some texts that thematise silence explicitly more than others.

A first example is undoubtedly *Un homme qui dort*, which we will analyse in depth later, where a completely silent character appears.

La Disparition, which stages an actual disappearance, is another emblematic text. The novel is in fact a lipogram. Not only does the mute letter of French, the E, disappear for a *contrainte* chosen by Perec, but also thematically the text tells of a disappearance.

Récits d'Ellis Island. Histoires d'errance et d'espoir is a text written with the collaboration of Robert Bober that investigates Perec's missing Jewish origins, both through writing and photography, and which contains numerous explicit reflections on the theme of silence, especially linked to origins and the sense of belonging to something that no longer exists, so that the text becomes a choral litany of absence. The silence, in this text, is that of the places of exile and diaspora.

Two other texts that thematise silence, but in a peculiar way, are *Je me souviens* and *La Boutique Obscure*. If in the former we find a collection of disconnected fragments of memories, in the latter we read a series of fragments of dreams, with voluntary and involuntary omissions. Silence appears here not only as an unspoken to be sought in the text and in Perec's psyche, but also as a word that is made explicit several times.

⁵⁶ Ivi, p. 98.

⁵⁷ Ivi, p. 116.

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Finally, in Celati, the thematisation of silence is present in some texts and is constantly linked to orality. Celati was in fact a lover of short forms, of the short story and of everything that originated from oral narration, such as that of the storytellers or the village elders. This is also evident in *Narratori delle pianure*, which are nothing more than short novellas in which each tale is a fragment of a collective narrative that wishes to tell the story of the places in the Po valley. In *Baratto* we read the story of an ordinary man, a rugby-loving teacher, who suddenly chooses not to speak any more. *Le avventure di Guizzardi* tells instead the adventures of a boy without a family and, not by chance, is inspired by the farces of silent films.

Yet, the four works we have chosen present particular traits, which is why we decided to investigate them in greater depth at the expense of the others.

I. *The Waves*: “How much better is silence”

The Waves is Woolf's most innovative novel. Published in 1931, it consists of nine sections that repeat a pattern. At the beginning of each section, we find a short interlude, written in italics, describing the path taken by the sun from sunrise to sunset in one day. Each interlude is followed by a series of soliloquies by the six characters: Susan, Jinny, Rhoda, Louis, Neville and Bernard. The interludes, which describe the landscape and solar phases, reflect the phases of the characters' lives, ranging from childhood to old age and sometimes death: “The subject matter of the two prose series is juxtaposed, so that the passage from dawn to dusk is paralleled by the passage from youth to age”⁵⁸. It is crucial to point out from the outset that the entire novel takes on the appearance of a stream of consciousness and that the characters do not actually speak: we access their thoughts through their inner monologue. The distinction between spoken word and processed thought is thus completely lost, as Patricia Oudek Laurence notes:

In her diary, Woolf notes that what is narrated can be thought or speech, yet she blurs the distinctions in her writing by using “said” and quotation marks, which conventionally indicate speech, and by using the present tense, which conventionally refers to thought. [...] “Speaks” and “thinks” are used interchangeably in this novel [...].

“Mind” in fiction is thus inevitably intertwined with language: indeed, mind is language and silence too.⁵⁹

It is equally important to emphasise that in addition to the six characters mentioned, there is actually a seventh character, Percival, whom we only get to know through the thoughts and words of the others. Percival, in fact, is the silent character in the text: his presence is made so by the other six, but the reader never accesses his inner monologue. We therefore get to know this character indirectly, through the looks, thoughts and emotions of the other six. Percival's silence is a fundamental element of our analysis, for although silent, he is the centre around which the entire novel revolves and the pivot on which the lives and words of the other characters hinge. Although Percival is silent and absent throughout the novel, he is repeatedly present in the monologues of the others. His character thus becomes enigmatic and mysterious: the reader always senses his presence, but never gains direct knowledge of him. His absence, in short, emphasises his presence. An essential question is therefore: why did Woolf create such a character? What significance does he assume in the novel? We will return to this question later.

⁵⁸ Avrom Fleishman, *Virginia Woolf: A Critical Reading*, Baltimore, The John Hopkins UP, 1975, print., p. 153.

⁵⁹ Patricia Oudek Laurence, *The Reading of Silence. Virginia Woolf in the English Tradition*, cit., pp. 21-22.

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It is important from the outset to trace the idea that generated *The Waves*, which we find as early as 1927 in her diary:

I want to embody all those innumerable little ideas and tiny stories which flash into my mind at all seasons. I think this will be great fun to write; and it will rest my head before starting the very serious, mystical poetical work I want to come next.⁶⁰

The play-poem idea; the idea of some continuous stream, not solely of human thought, but of the ship, the night, etch, all flowing together: intersected by the arrival of the bright moths.⁶¹

The Moths hovers somewhere at the back of my brain.⁶²

And when, I wonder, shall I begin *The Moths*? Not until I am pressed into it by those insects themselves. Nor have I any notion what it is to be like – a completely new attempt I think.⁶³

Yes, but *The Moths*? That was to be an abstract mystical eyeless book: a playpoem. [...]

Again, one reviewer says that I have come to a crisis in the matter of style: it is now so fluent and fluid that it runs through the mind like water.⁶⁴

The Moths still haunts me, coming, as they always do, unbidden, between tea and dinner, while L. plays the gramophone.⁶⁵

We note that the starting idea is that of a novel-poem, characterised by a musical style, like a constant flow of thought: a completely new, unprecedented attempt. Moreover, Woolf speaks of a saturation, i.e. an effort to achieve unity and leave no room for emptiness:

The idea has come to me that what I want now to do is to saturate every atom. I mean to eliminate all waste, deadness, superfluity: to give the moment whole; whatever it includes. Say that the moment is a combination of thought; sensation; the voice of the sea. [...] I want to put practically everything in: yet to saturate. That is what I want to do in *The Moths*. It must include nonsense, fact, sordidity: but made transparent.⁶⁶

⁶⁰ Virginia Woolf, *A Writer's Diary, Being Extracts from the Diary of Virginia Woolf*, edited by Leonard Woolf, New York, A Harvest Book, Harcourt, Inc., 2003, p. 104.

⁶¹ *Ivi*, p. 107.

⁶² *Ivi*, p. 128.

⁶³ *Ivi*, p. 131.

⁶⁴ *Ivi*, p. 134.

⁶⁵ *Ivi*, p. 136.

⁶⁶ *Ibidem*.

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In this flowing novel, even the voice of the sea must speak. Woolf seems to have in mind an all-encompassing combination of the elements of nature and human passions. The difficulty of such an undertaking appears immediately in her diary:

Now about this book, *The Moths*. How am I to begin it? And what is it to be? I feel no great impulse; no fever; only a great pressure of difficulty. Why write it then? [...] I am not trying to tell a story. Yet perhaps it might be done in that way. A mind thinking. They might be islands of light – islands in the stream that I am trying to convey; life itself going on. [...] But there must be more unity between each scene than I can find at present. Autobiography it might be called.⁶⁷

The book is therefore not a story, but rather a thinking mind, a continuous flow, which might resemble an autobiography. Why? Because it is a faithful recording of sudden states of mind. Moreover, from the outset Woolf conceives of the novel as a heterogeneous collection of sounds and voices:

I think it will begin like this: dawn; the shells on a beach; I don't know – voices of cock and nightingale; and then all the children at a long table – lessons. The beginning. Well, all sorts of characters are to be there. [...] Then another person or figure must be selected. The unreal world must be round all this – the phantom waves. [...]
Everything becomes green and vivified in me when I begin to think of *The Moths*. Also, I think, one is much better able to enter into others.⁶⁸

Thus I hope to have kept the sound of the sea and the birds, dawn and garden subconsciously present, doing their word underground.⁶⁹

Therefore, not only natural and different sounds, but also characters of all kinds who develop empathy for the author, who becomes able to inhabit them one by one, entering into their thoughts and showing them in her writing. Only one figure will be different: Percival's.

Returning to the specifics of this novel, it is well known that Woolf composed it in a musical style. Above all, then, it will be interesting to ask: what place does silence occupy in such an explicitly musical novel? Indeed, it is known that the writer conceived her books as music before writing them⁷⁰. Many critics have already spent words on the musical style of *The Waves*, but it is Woolf herself, in

⁶⁷ Ivi, pp. 139-140.

⁶⁸ Ivi, p. 141.

⁶⁹ Ivi, p. 165.

⁷⁰ Cf. Ivi, p. 159.

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her diary, who confirms this thesis when, on 22 December 1930, approaching the end of the novel, she wrote:

It occurred to me last night while listening to a Beethoven quartet that I would merge all the interjected passages into Bernard's final speech, & end with the words O solitude: thus making him absorb all those scenes, & having no further break. This is also to show that the theme effort, effort, dominates: not the waves: & personality: & defiance: but I am not sure of the effect artistically; because the proportions may need the intervention of the waves finally so as to make a conclusion.⁷¹

The musical structure relates not only to the overt influence of Beethoven, not incidentally mentioned in “A Sketch of the Past”, and J.W.N Sullivan, but also to the concerted emphasis on the sounds of nature. For instance, when we are informed of Percival's death in India due to a trivial and not at all heroic fall from a horse, the sounds of nature emerge as preponderant and narrate, in a way, his death:

His horse stumbled; he was thrown. The flashing trees and white rails went up in a shower. There was a surge; a drumming in his ears. Then the blow; the world crashed; he breathed heavily. He died where he fell.⁷²

Percival's death, which also represents the novel's centre from a structural point of view, since it is in the fifth section when the sun is at its Zenith, is told by a series of harsh sounds. Death, as in “A Sketch of the Past”, always represents the centre: in the autobiographical text it was that of the mother Julia, in this one it is that of Percival, who we discover is the alter-ego of Virginia Woolf's brother. However, as Gerald Levin points out, Woolf's comment on Beethoven in the diary suggests that she was thinking of a musical structure especially as a thematic device, and not so much as rendering a sensuous experience⁷³. There is one paragraph in particular that perfectly renders the idea of the musical structure of *The Waves*, edited by Bernard:

Whatever sentence I extract whole and entire from this cauldron is only a string of six little fish that let themselves be caught while a million others leap and sizzle, making the cauldron bubble like boiling silver, and slip through my fingers. Faces recur, faces and faces-they press their beauty to the walls of my bubble-Neville, Susan, Louis, Jinny, Rhoda and a thousand others. How impossible to order them rightly; to detach one separately, or to give the effect of the whole-again like music. What a symphony, with its concord and its discord and its tunes on top and its complicated bass beneath, then grew up!⁷⁴

⁷¹ Ibidem

⁷² Virginia Woolf, *The Waves*, cit., p. 107.

⁷³ Cf. Gerald Levin, “The Musical Style of *The Waves*”, *The Journal of Narrative Technique*, Fall, 1983, Vol. 13, No. 3 (Fall, 1983), pp. 164-171.

⁷⁴ Ivi, p. 184.

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In reference to the different lives of his friends, Bernard uses the metaphor of the symphony. In this meditation, where the characters' experiences are intertwined and become a symbolic unity through music, Bernard identifies with Beethoven:

Not that I love music, but because the whole of life, its masters, its adventurers then appeared in long ranks of magnificent human beings behind me; and I was the inheritor; I, the continuer; I, the person miraculously appointed to carry it on.⁷⁵

One of the difficulties Woolf faced in treating her novel as music is the fact that, unlike a symphony, in a novel the voices of the characters cannot be heard simultaneously, although images can be taken up and recur between monologues: "How to end, save by a tremendous discussion, in which every life shall its voice-a mosaic [...] I do not know"⁷⁶. The style of *The Waves* is also musical in the union of human and natural rhythm, and this is expressed by Bernard at the end:

When the storm crosses the marsh and sweeps over me where I lie the ditch unregarded I need no words. Nothing neat. Nothing that comes down with all its feet on the floor. None of those resonances and lovely echoes that break and chime from nerve to nerve in our breasts making wild music, false phrases. I have done with phrases.⁷⁷

Levin, in this regard, points out that "the musical experience is finally one of unresolved dissonances. We have connection without consonance or resolution"⁷⁸. Indeed, although there are multiple voices, points of view and personalities, there is no single echoing theme. This is why Levin asserts that the musical style of *The Waves* is pantonal, that is, one in which the tones, or characters, each become the thematic focus as they express themselves, but are more absorbed into a unity as the novel unfolds. In this way, each character has its own distinctive tonality that corresponds to its own personality. Percival's tone is that of silence, which stands for loss and death. Percival's death awakens in the characters as much a sense of emptiness and futility of living as it does a power of feeling never before experienced.

In the movement of these fragmented personalities toward everything different from themselves is to be discovered the "it" that Woolf refers to in her diary: the "astonishing sense of something there," the "sense of my own strangeness, walking on the earth"-indefinable yet discoverable in consciousness, in the process of living."

⁷⁵ Ivi, p. 182.

⁷⁶ *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, intro. by Quentin Bell and ed. by Anne Olivier Bell. 5 vols, London, Hogarth, 1977-84, Vol. 3, pp. 298-312.

⁷⁷ Virginia Woolf, *The Waves*, cit., p. 213.

⁷⁸ Gerald Levin, "The Musical Style of *The Waves*", cit., p. 167.

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The form of *The Waves* is the form of evolving consciousness out of silence, each character increasing in self-awareness of themselves and one another.⁷⁹

The characters' consciousnesses emerge from silence and become musical tones as awareness increases. The basic idea is musical: there is a propulsion towards a final unity, arising from and ending in silence. Bernard's final meditation is emblematic of this unity as it represents the full acceptance of death, of change and asserts, at the same time, the power of life. These continuous variations, like the waves of the sea, punctuate the narrative and give the novel a potentially always oscillating and infinite structure, like the undertow of the sea. Indeed, the very conclusion of the novel, "*The waves broke on the shore*"⁸⁰, recalls the cyclical and never-ending movement of the waves of the sea.

Woolf's relationship with music, however, began well before 1931: from childhood, in fact, we know that Woolf had music lessons with her sister Vanessa and both were expected to play the piano⁸¹. Although Woolf never played any instruments professionally, music was an interest of hers throughout her life. She regularly went to concerts, even several times a week, and her short story *The String Quartet* is inspired by the Schubert piano quintet she heard at Campden Hill on 9 March 1920⁸². Her favourite composers were Beethoven and Mozart, whose names often appear in her diary and works. Just think of *The Voyage Out*, where Rachel Vinrace plays a Beethoven sonata, or *Night and Day*, where there is a reference to Mozart to criticise patriarchal society.

Not only her life, therefore, but also her writing was to some extent connoted by music. Woolf's first essays from the early 1900s - *Street Music* (1905), *The Opera* (1906), and *Impressions at Bayreuth* (1909) - already deal with music. At the same time, music is the subject of numerous reflections in letters and diary pages. As critics note, "Woolf claimed the influence of music on shaping the aesthetics of her prose writing and the importance of the intermediary role that she had to play between music and literature"⁸³. As mentioned above, Woolf herself revealed, in a famous letter to Elizabeth Trevelyan, her exuberance at the fact that her friend had compared her *Roger Fry* to music:

Its [sic] odd, for I'm not regularly musical, but I always think of my books as music before I write them.⁸⁴

⁷⁹ Ivi, pp. 167-168.

⁸⁰ Virginia Woolf, *The Waves*, cit., p. 214.

⁸¹ Cf. Quentin Bell, *Virginia Woolf*, London, Hogarth Press, 1972, p. 27.

⁸² Cf. *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, cit., Vol. 2, p. 24.

⁸³ Kuo Chia-chen, "The Affectivity of Music in Virginia Woolf's *The String Quartet*", *Journal of the Short Story in English* [Online], 66 | Spring 2016, <http://journals.openedition.org/jsse/1697>, p. 2.

⁸⁴ *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, Vol. 6, ed. N. Nicolson and J. Trautmann, New York, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980, p. 426.

In fact, one of the innovations Woolf brought was to compose literature in a new style that had the same power as music, namely that of rendering the transience of life. In *The Waves*, the analogy between fiction and music is evident thanks to the characters' streams of consciousness that, corresponding to their subjective perceptions, flow like music. In *The Waves*, in short, music is taken as a reference model for the structure of the novel, just as Werner Wolf argued in *The Musicalisation of Fiction*⁸⁵. This was also possible because, while writing *The Waves*, Woolf listened to a particular piece of music that she used for the composition of her work: Beethoven's late *String Quartet in B-flat Major, Opus 130*, including the piece's original finale, the *Grosse Fuge, Opus 133*. This is also proven by the diary Leonard Woolf kept of music listened to in the Woolf household - *Diary of music listened to, 1939-69* - which shows that the composers most listened to were Beethoven and Mozart. However, what we know about the long composition of *The Waves* is very little. As Nigel Nicolson writes with respect to Woolf's letters, "we will never know why Virginia Woolf recast *The Waves* so many times, nor why she made her detailed changes. [...] [Her] letters tell us next to nothing about her methods of composition. [...] It was a private labour, the printed book the only public declaration of her intent"⁸⁶. However, considering that the novel itself deals with music and makes metanarrative references to it, the connection is made explicit. Explicit references include mentions of Beethoven that appear, as already pointed out, within the novel itself but also in the diary: "I do a little work on it in the evening when the gramophone is playing late Beethoven sonatas"⁸⁷. It is also significant that Woolf reconceived Bernard's final soliloquy, altering the structure of the novel, during the second draft, "while listening to a Beethoven quartet", deciding to "merge all the interjected passages into Bernard's final speech, and end with the words O solitude: thus making him absorb all those scenes, and having no further break [...] but I am not sure of the effect artistically; because the proportions may need the intervention of the waves finally so as to make a conclusion"⁸⁸. This was shortly after having declared to Ethel Smyth "that I am writing to a rhythm and not to a plot"⁸⁹. The influence of Beethoven's music is thus clear and proven: not only did it condition the structure of *The Waves*, but also the thematic innovations and contrapuntal style are strongly influenced by the composer that Woolf had in her ears while writing the novel. The structure of *The Waves* seems to reveal parallels with that of *The String Quartet*: Beethoven uses six movements instead of the traditional four, just as Woolf uses six characters. Furthermore, there is the seventh element, coinciding with Percival, which

⁸⁵ Werner Wolf, *The Musicalization of Fiction: A Study in the Theory and History of Intermediality*, cit.

⁸⁶ *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, 6 vols, cit., *Letters 4*, xxi.

⁸⁷ *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, cit., Vol. 3, p. 139.

⁸⁸ Ivi, p. 339.

⁸⁹ *Letters 4*, p. 204.

reflects the more traditional ending rewritten by Beethoven shortly before his death in 1827⁹⁰. Finally, as Jane Goldman notes, just as the characters in *The Waves* are inexplicable and talk to each other through references and reflections in the soliloquies, similarly the structural patterns of the first and last movements of the *Quartet* talk to each other⁹¹. According to the terminology coined by Werner Wolf, this would be a case of “covert” intermediality, in which there is the participation of at least two distinct media in a work in which only one of them appears directly, the dominant one, while the other is indirectly present in the first⁹². If, therefore, each of the six characters in *The Waves* structures the novel and thematises music, the interludes, which are more lyrical in character, can be traced back to another Woolf short story, *The String Quartet*, where we find a kind of musical mimesis. Interludes, also musically, are in fact short parts that serve to connect the episodes of a musical work. Elicia Clements notes that: “Thematic and technical similarities to the musical mimesis of *The String Quartet* are prominent in the interludes of *The Waves*, especially through the birds and their songs. Passages similar to the flourishing Rhone proliferate in the novel's lyrical passages, but even the particular association between musical sound and nature is made in the fourth segment”⁹³.

Each character in *The Waves* is thus associated with music, albeit with different themes. Elicia Clements's article, “Transforming Musical Sounds into Words: Narrative Method in Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*”, gives a clear overview of all six characters, according to their characteristics.

Neville is described in the same way as the first movement of the quartet. He is extremely focused on precision and order; he follows the conventional patterns of mainstream society and becomes a poet. However, his adherence to a predefined and socially accepted male model is destabilised by his homosexual desire for Percival. This causes Neville, like the first movement of the quartet, to have two contrasting elements that are inextricably linked and both inside and outside simultaneously. Indeed, during his arrival in London he thinks “the centre, and my heart draws out too, in fear, in exultation”⁹⁴.

Louis, according to the analysis proposed by Clements, mirrors the *Presto* that follows the first movement. Louis's stamping marks a rhythm similar to that of the piece of music reflects his angry outlook on life, for which he is not satisfied, as well as his suffering. In fact, he feels like an outsider because of his Australian accent:

⁹⁰ Cf. Elicia Clements, “Transforming Musical Sounds into Words: Narrative Method in Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*”, *Narrative*, May 2005, Vol. 13, No. 2 (May, 2005), pp. 160-181.

⁹¹ Cf. Jane Goldman, *The Feminist Aesthetics of Virginia Woolf: Modernism, Post-Impressionism and the Politics of the Visual*, Cambridge, Cambridge Univ. Press, 1998.

⁹² Cf. Werner Wolf, *The Musicalization of Fiction: A Study in the Theory and History of Intermediality*, cit., p. 41.

⁹³ Elicia Clements, “Transforming Musical Sounds into Words: Narrative Method in Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*”, cit., pp. 167-168.

⁹⁴ Virginia Woolf, *The Waves*, cit., p. 50.

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Meanwhile the hats bob up and down; the door perpetually shuts and opens. I am conscious of flux, of disorder; of annihilation and despair. If this is all, this is worthless. Yet I feel, too, the rhythm of the eating-house. It is like a waltz tune, eddying in and out, round and round. The waitresses, balancing trays, swing in and out, round and round [...]. Where then is the break in this continuity? What the fissure through one sees disaster? The circle is unbroken; the harmony complete. Here is the central rhythm; here the common mainspring. I watch it expand, contract; and then expand again. Yet I am not included.⁹⁵

Susan corresponds to the third movement of the quartet, which begins with pathos but ends playfully. Similarly, Susan at the beginning of the novel uses contradictory words: “I love” and later “I hate”⁹⁶. There is a dissonance between Susan's actions, which are reminiscent of Beethoven's playful rhythm, and her words, which say a prominent dissimilarity. This musical movement is also reminiscent of the climatic changes and variations in the third movement:

Sleep I sing? - I, who am unmelodious and hear no music save rustic music when a dog barks, a bell tinkles, or wheels crunch upon the gravel. I sing my song by the fire like an old shell murmuring on the beach. Sleep, sleep, I say, warning off with my voice all who rattle milk-cans, fire at rooks, shoot rabbits, or in any way bring the shock of destruction near this wicker cradle, laden with soft limbs, curled under a pink coverlet.⁹⁷

Jinny corresponds to the fourth movement, which has a fast rhythm and is a dance. It is characterised by circular movements made such by the repetition of triplets passing through four different voices. From the beginning of the novel, indeed, Jinny is associated with music and dance:

She danced in flecked with diamonds light as dust.⁹⁸

Jinny spins her fingers on the table-cloth, as if they were dancing in the sunshine, pirouetting.⁹⁹

Jinny's pirouetting, all of a piece, limbs and body.¹⁰⁰

Dance represents the connection between sound and sociality, because it is a connector of relationships, it makes human interaction possible. The body, during dance, becomes the medium of performance. It is no coincidence, therefore, that Jinny's existence is marked especially by the body.

⁹⁵ Ivi, p. 66.

⁹⁶ Ivi, p. 9.

⁹⁷ Ivi, p. 121.

⁹⁸ Ivi, p. 8.

⁹⁹ Ivi, p. 16.

¹⁰⁰ Ivi, p. 69.

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We go in and out of this hesitating music. Rocks break the current of the dance; it jars, it shivers. In and out, we are swept now into this large figure; it holds us together; we cannot step outside its sinuous, its hesitating, its abrupt, its perfectly encircling walls. Our bodies, his hard, mine flowing, are pressed together within its body; it holds us together; and then lengthening out, in smooth, in sinuous folds, rolls us between it, on and on. Suddenly the music breaks. My blood runs on but my body stands still.¹⁰¹

Rhoda represents heaviness of heart and fear of everything and everyone. She is totally separate from others and does not participate in social interaction. She is associated with singing, but with solo and solitary voice. However, just as in the *Cavatina*, she has difficulty distinguishing her own voice from that of others and tends to imitate Jinny and Susan. Rhoda is, in short, an alienated character and as the novel progresses, she tends to disappear more and more, eventually leading to suicide:

I am afraid of you all. I am afraid of the shock of sensation that leaps upon me, because I cannot deal with it as you do - I cannot make one moment merge in the next. To me they are all violent, all separate; and if I fall under the shock of the leap of the moment you will be on me, tearing me to pieces. I have no end in view. I do not know how to run minute to minute and hour to hour, solving them by some natural force until they make the whole and indivisible mass that you call life.¹⁰²

Bernard is the most complex of the six and represents the quartet's finale, the *Grosse Fugue*. The latter is reminiscent of Beethoven's late style, which tended towards counterpoint, i.e. incorporating and enabling differences at the same time. It holds together multiple melodies, multiple variations, multiple voices and makes them become a unity. Similarly, Bernard, in the final episode of the novel, incorporates the voices of all six characters and thus emulates the function of the last movement of the quartet. As Clements argues, "Bernard's intermediality is imitative on two levels: he performs analogous actions in the novel to Beethoven's finale, but his final soliloquy is also positioned in a similar manner in terms of the novel's structure"¹⁰³. As proof of this, we read in Woolf's diary that "It occurred to me last night while listening to a Beethoven quartet that I would merge all the interjected passages into Bernard's final speech"¹⁰⁴. Furthermore, Bernard is the one who brings people together and believes in the uniqueness of the individual and independent existence. Just like the *Grosse Fugue*, Bernard incorporates agreement and disagreement into a symphony, which is described in the aforementioned final paragraph of *The Waves*. Bernard finds a

¹⁰¹ Ivi, pp. 72-73.

¹⁰² Ivi, p. 92.

¹⁰³ Elicia Clements, "Transforming Musical Sounds into Words: Narrative Method in Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*", cit., p. 174.

¹⁰⁴ *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, cit., Vol. 3., p. 339.

way to hold together inclusion and exclusion, convergence and divergence: he is the one character who holds together the individual and separate existences of the others. Finally, Clement, echoing that “we are the music” from “A Sketch of the Past”, observes that: “Ultimately, in Bernard's final soliloquy music is thematized but so too is it enacted; life is music, for ‘each played his own tune’”¹⁰⁵.

All that remains, then, is to discover the enigmatic and silent character of Percival. An interesting analysis by Giuseppina Balossi¹⁰⁶ using computer-aided methods attempts to quantitatively verify the occurrences of the name Percival and the pronouns referring to him throughout *The Waves*. This analysis produces an image of Percival that is multifaceted and has many facets, depending on the eyes that observe him. In fact, it is important to take into account the multiple points of view of the six characters who talk about Percival in order to attempt to obtain a 360-degree look at this mysterious figure that everyone talks about but never enters the discourse. The reconstruction of this character thus takes place through the perspectives of others. While, as readers, we tend to believe that what the characters say is authentic, we must also take into account that one character's perception of another character rests on his or her personal characteristics, social role and experiences. We access the speeches of the six characters through the reporting clauses (e.g. “said Jinny”) which are the only sign of the presence of a narrator, who disappears completely, within the novel. We thus attempt to decipher who Percival is and what his silence conceals.

First of all, it should be noted that we only know about his youth and early adulthood, since he makes an appearance in the adolescence of the other characters, when the boys go to public school. An important moment in which we see Percival as a protagonist is at Hampton Court when he meets his friends to say goodbye before his departure for India. Subsequently, his death in India represents the climax of *The Waves*: from this moment, the lives of the six characters begin to decline towards old age and the sun to set.

From Balossi's analysis using the WMatrix programme (Rayson 2007) we read that the frequency of Percival's naming occurs 89 times through the proper name and 180 times through the masculine singular pronoun. Overall, the character who most frequently names Percival is Bernard, partly due to the final role he plays in the soliloquy in which he recollects his life and the lives of his friends. From the quantitative analysis of the data, Balossi went back to a qualitative analysis that allows us to identify certain characteristics of Percival, which we quote:

¹⁰⁵ Elicia Clements, “Transforming Musical Sounds into Words: Narrative Method in Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*”, cit., p. 175.

¹⁰⁶ Cf. Giuseppina Balossi, “Right You Are! (If You Think So): Percival, the ‘absent but spoken about’ character in Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*”, Online Proceedings of the Annual Conference of the Poetics and Linguistics Association (PALA), 2016, [http://www.pala.ac.uk/Annual conferences/proceedings/2016/Balossi2016.pdf](http://www.pala.ac.uk/Annual%20conferences/proceedings/2016/Balossi2016.pdf).

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- **Percival is beautiful and young:** ‘this globe whose walls are made of Percival, of youth and beauty’ (104). ‘I remember his beauty’ (111); ‘He had the kind of beauty’ (172)
- **Percival is strong:** ‘He is heavy’ (26); ‘Percival lying heavy among us’ (27).
- **Percival is gross in the ways he breathes, speaks, laughs, or moves:** ‘He breathes through his straight nose rather heavily’ (25); ‘His slovenly accents’ (27); ‘His curious guffaw’ (27); ‘his surly and complaining accents’ (60).
- **He is conventional:** ‘There is Percival in his billycock’ (43); a type of hat which became (fashionable after Edward VII had adopted it); ‘He is conventional’ (88).
- **He is unintellectual and lazy:** ‘He is allied with the Latin phrases on the memorial brasses’ (25); ‘He reads a detective novel’ (52). ‘I have just pulled Percival out of bed [...] as I pull the blankets off his feet; he burrowing like some vast cocoon meanwhile’ (60).
- **He is athletic and his main interest is cricket:** ‘He is thinking of nothing but the match [...]. He despises me for being too weak to play’ (34).
- **He loves Susan:** ‘when he takes his seat by Susan, whom he loves’ (88); ‘not Susan, whom he loved’ (112); ‘I think sometimes of Percival who loved me’ (137).
- **Neville loves Percival:** ‘It is for that that I love him’ (43); ‘Neville suffers. He loved Percival’ (112).
- **Percival goes to India:** ‘We shall say good-bye to Percival, who goes to India’ (83); ‘he is about to leave us, to go to India’ (88); ‘Percival is going [...] India lies outside’ (97); ‘Percival advances; Percival rides a flea-bitten mare, and wears a sun-helmet’ (97); ‘Percival, riding alone on a flea-bitten mare, advances down a solitary path’ (98).
- **Percival dies in India:** ‘Percival is dead’ (109); ‘Percival by his death’ (114); ‘Percival has died’ (121); ‘He is dead’ ‘He fell. His horse tripped. He was thrown’ (105); ‘He died where he fell’ (108); ‘I have lost friends, some by death – Percival’ (139); ‘Percival fell; was killed; is buried’ (108); ‘Percival’s death’ (129); ‘Percival died’ (137); ‘after Percival died’ (146); ‘Percival comes no more’ (160). ‘The door will not open; he will not come’ (150); ‘Into this crashed death -- Percival’s (186); ‘But now Percival is dead’ (205); ‘Here on my brow is the blow I got when Percival fell.’ (205)
- **Percival as the hero and the catalyst:** ‘His magnificence is that of some mediaeval commander’ (26); Look at us trooping after him, his faithful servants, to be shot like sheep’ (27); ‘He is a hero’ (88); ‘He rides on; the multitude cluster round him, regarding him as if he were -- what indeed he is -- a God. (97); Percival ‘[...] was adored’ (173); ‘He is remote from us all in a pagan universe. But look -- he flicks his hand to the back of his neck. For such gestures one falls hopelessly in love for a lifetime. Dalton, Jones, Edgar and Bateman flick their hands to the back of their necks likewise. But they do not succeed’ (87).¹⁰⁷

The character resulting from this reconstruction of others' gazes is, fundamentally, a stock character: he is a literary-type, corresponding to the hero, the catalyst of the scene, the leader whom others admire or look up to. He is imitated by all and embodies the physical and psychological characteristics of masculinity that are conventionally associated with heroism. Among critics, there are those who have even seen in Percival an emblem of British imperialism. Finally, Percival

¹⁰⁷ Ivi, p. 9.

represents family conventions: he is in love with Susan, who in turn personifies the male fantasy of the perfect wife and mother.

It is also worth dwelling on the name Percival. In fact, Percival was the name of one of the most famous Knights of the Round Table and many critics consider it an emblem of the mythical and romantic figure of the hero¹⁰⁸. However, as Balossi notes, Percival's common and almost ridiculous death disconfirms the assumptions that see the character as the archetypal hero. In fact, Percival dies falling from his horse and not even in battle. His death is entirely ordinary. He thus becomes an anti-modern hero, representing the failure of military and chivalrous virtues. Little states that Percival represents: "a mythos, a narrative or 'sequence' that gives shape to a culture and to individuals within the culture [...] a mock grail-hero [he] mocks the very notion of story, of legend"¹⁰⁹.

Hussey, on the other hand, starting from a more autobiographical analysis, points out that: "[f]or many readers, Percival is another attempt by Woolf at writing some kind of elegy for her dead brother Thoby Stephen"¹¹⁰. In fact, we know from "A Sketch of the Past" and various other autobiographical texts that Thoby was of central importance in Woolf's life, which was punctuated by the early death of family members and loved ones who were, for her, a focus. It is therefore no coincidence that in *The Waves*, too, the central element of the novel is death, which we shall see is closely linked to the theme of silence.

Through the gazes on Percival, of course, we discover not only his characteristics, but also those of the observers, who use Percival both as a projection of their own desires, and "as a model to define themselves"¹¹¹.

Susan, whose thematic focus is on love and possessions, sees Percival as the hero who wins trophies and who could increase his possessions: a desire that is extinguished by his death.

Sleep, I say, desiring sleep to fall like a blanket of down and cover these weak limbs; demanding that life shall sheathe its claws and gird its lightning and pass by, making of my own body a hollow, a warm shelter for my child to sleep in. Sleep, I say, sleep. Or I go to the window, I look at the rook's high nest; and the pear tree. 'His eyes will see when mine are shut,' think. 'I shall go mixed with them beyond my body and shall see India. He will come home, bringing trophies to be laid at my feet. He will increase my possessions.'¹¹²

¹⁰⁸ Cf. Frank D. McConnell, "Death among the apple trees:" *The Waves and the world of things*, in *Virginia Woolf: A Collection of Critical Essays*, Claire Sprague (ed.), 1971, pp. 117-129, Englewood Cliffs NJ, Prentice-Hall; John W. Graham, *Manuscript revision and the heroic theme of The Waves*. *Twentieth Century Literature* 29(3), 1982, pp. 312-332; Keith M. Booker, *Tradition, authority and subjectivity: Narrative constitution of the self in The Waves*. *Literature Interpretation Theory* 3(1), 1991, pp. 33-55; Virginia Woolf, [1931] *The Waves*. Annotated and with an introduction by Molly Hite, New York NY, Harvest, 2006.

¹⁰⁹ Judith Little, *Comedy and the Woman Writer: Woolf, Spark, and Feminism*, Lincoln University of Nebraska Press, 1983, p. 77.

¹¹⁰ Mark Hussey, *Virginia Woolf A-Z. The Essential Reference to Her Life and Writings*, Oxford, OUP, 1995, p. 213.

¹¹¹ Keith M. Booker, *Tradition, authority and subjectivity: Narrative constitution of the self in The Waves*, cit., p. 36.

¹¹² Virginia Woolf, *The Waves*, cit., p. 122.

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Jinny, who is attracted to youth and beauty, sees in Percival the embodiment of the handsome, young hero because being sexually attractive is the priority in her life:

Let us hold it for one moment, [...] love, hatred, by whatever name we call it, this globe whose walls are made of Percival, of youth and beauty.¹¹³

At the same time, Percival's death awakens in her an awareness of her own physical decline:

Here I stand [...]. But look -- there is my body in that looking glass. How solitary, how shrunk, how aged! I am no longer young. I am no longer part of the procession. [...]. Millions have died. Percival died. I still move. I still live. But who will come if I signal?¹¹⁴

As far as Rhoda is concerned, Percival represents the one who can serve her to regain a social dimension to her identity. However, this possibility is destroyed by Percival's death, which throws Rhoda into non-sense and gives her the realisation that she is incapable of playing a social role:

Percival, by his death, has made me this present, has revealed this terror, has left me to undergo this humiliation [...].¹¹⁵

For Louis, Percival represents the two divergent desires that belong to him: on the one hand the power and authority associated with the military and religious world, on the other hand the rejection of this world as an outsider. For Louis, integration into British society remains problematic because of his accent, which makes him feel inadequate:

His magnificence is that of some mediaeval commander. A wake of light seems to lie on the grass behind him. Look at us trooping after him, his faithful servants, to be shot like sheep, for he will certainly attempt some forlorn enterprise and die in battle. My heart turns rough; it abrades my side like a file with two edges: one, that I adore his magnificence; the other I despise his slovenly accents - I who am so much his superior - and am jealous.¹¹⁶

¹¹³ Ivi, p. 103.

¹¹⁴ Ivi, p. 137.

¹¹⁵ Ivi, p.131.

¹¹⁶ Ivi, pp. 26-27.

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Neville is characterised by his nonconformity and homosexual desire for Percival. Indeed, he projects into Percival his alter ego and projections of an ideal self that he will never be. Neville, unlike Percival, does not embody the masculinity and social ambitions of the British man:

Alas! I could not ride about India in a sun helmet and return to a bungalow. I cannot tumble, as you do, like half-naked boys on the deck of a ship, squirting each other with hose-pipes.¹¹⁷

Moreover, his attraction to Percival is explicitly stated after the end of public school:

We are about to part [...]. He will forget me. He will leave my letters lying about among guns and dogs unanswered. I shall send him poems and he will perhaps reply with a picture post card. But it is for that that I love him.¹¹⁸

Finally, Bernard is the novelist and the hero who ultimately takes the unifying role of Percival and represents what he represented for all six characters: the centre, the union, the pivot. Percival, in fact, symbolized a charismatic character that everyone admired and was the one who made the union between the characters at Hampton Court possible.

The flower [...], the red carnation that stood in the vase on the table of the restaurant when we dined together with Percival, is become a six-sided flower; made of six lives.¹¹⁹

If I could measure things with compasses I would, but since my only measure is a phrase, I make phrases – I forget what, on this occasion. We became six people at a table in Hampton Court. We rose and walked together down the avenue.¹²⁰

However, this union vanishes the moment Percival dies.

We sat here together. But now Percival is dead [...] we are divided; we are not here. Yet I cannot find any obstacle separating us. There is no division between me and them. As I talked I felt I am you.¹²¹

But you exist somewhere. Something of you remains.¹²²

¹¹⁷ Ivi, p. 128.

¹¹⁸ Ivi, p. 43.

¹¹⁹ Ivi, p. 162.

¹²⁰ Ivi, p. 200.

¹²¹ Ivi, p. 205.

¹²² Ivi, p. 109.

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This is why Bernard - who according to Balossi is the anti-hero - ends up reuniting within himself that sense of unity that had been dispersed with the death of the central Percival. Bernard is the anti-hero because unlike Percival, he has an entirely ordinary life¹²³: he marries, has children, has a family and does not throw himself into extraordinary undertakings. Percival, on the contrary, according to Flint's analysis is the "absent centre, who fascinates the other characters with his physical, masculine beauty and aura, but who is never allowed a voice"¹²⁴. At the conclusion of the novel, however, Bernard has a voice and is able to visualise his life as a unit as he recognises, right up to the end, the heroic role played by Percival with his last words:

Death is the enemy. It is death against whom I ride with my spear couched and my hair flying back like a young man's, like Percival's, when he galloped in India. I strike spurs into my horse. Against you I will fling myself, unvanquished and unyielding, O Death!¹²⁵

Why then the character of Percival in this novel? What was his purpose? And why his silence? Percival's silence evidently served as a catalyst for the other characters to show sides of their inner selves. We actually not only get to know Percival through the eyes and voices of the others, but we get to know the other six characters through Percival's silence, which allows them to tell something of themselves through him. Percival is the character who does not speak but is spoken about. His silence is the voice of the others.

We thus understand that Bernard, as Percival's successor, not only becomes the novel's new hero, but is also the one who defeats the real enemy: death. This is at the heart of the heroic theme in Woolf, which to some extent also becomes an elegy for her dead brother Thoby Stephen, as we read clearly in Woolf's diary:

I must record [...] the end of *The Waves*. I wrote the words O Death fifteen minutes ago [...]. I have been sitting here these 15 minutes in a state of glory, and calm, and some tears, thinking of Thoby and if I could write Julian Thoby Stephen 1881-1906 on the first page. I suppose not.¹²⁶

Indeed, even death itself is narrated in *The Waves*, thus being somewhat annihilated. From a logical point of view, the first-person narration of one's own death would be impossible since the death of the self coincides with the death of language, yet Bernard, in his final summing-up, speaks

¹²³ "Lines and colours almost persuade me that I too can be heroic, I, who make phrases so easily"; "I recover what he was to me: my opposite". Ivi, p. 110.

¹²⁴ Kate Flint, *The Waves. In Virginia Woolf: Introduction to the Major Works*, Julia Briggs (ed.), 219-247, London, Virago Press., 1994, XXXV.

¹²⁵ Virginia Woolf, *The Waves*, cit., p. 214.

¹²⁶ *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, cit., Vol. 4, p. 10.

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of his own death from a point in time that is placed after it: “It lies deep, tideless, immune, now that he is dead, the man I called ‘Bernard’”¹²⁷. It thus includes not only his life and death, but also the time beyond the latter. This, in John F. Hulcoop's view, is possible because the death Bernard narrates, not once but many times, is a “figurative event”¹²⁸. After Bernard's final soliloquy, he remains silent, but the last six words of the novel, which are written in italics, belong to another voice. Whose? Perhaps “one of the invisible presences who... play so important a role in every life”¹²⁹.

The theme of death is extremely recurrent in both *The Waves* and Woolf's diary. In a situation of loss of personal identity and proximity to death, one wonders how it is that Bernard manages to cope with it. The answer lies in “the universal determination to go on living”¹³⁰. This is the reason why Bernard is able to fight, resist death and defeat it by telling it:

I jumped up. I said, 'Fight! Fight!' I repeated. It is the effort the struggle, it is the perpetual warfare, it is the shattering piecing together-this is the daily battle, defeat or victory, the absorbing pursuit. The trees, scattered, put on order; the thick green of the leaves thinned itself to a dancing light. I netted them [picking up the fin image] under with a sudden phrase. I retrieved them from formlessness with words.¹³¹

Just as Bernard fought death with words, Woolf, in her own life, did the same. In fact, Bernard's words seem to be taken from Woolf's diary:

On the whole, I do not much mind; because, what I like is to & dash from side to side, goaded on by what I call reality. never felt these extraordinarily pervasive strains . . . I float down into acquiescence. Here is something to fight: I wake early I say to myself, Fight, fight. If I could catch feeling, I would: the feeling of the singing of the real world, as one is driven by loneliness and silence from the habitable world; the sense that comes to me of being bound on an adventure; of being strangely free now, with money and so on, to do anything. [...] And this curious steed of life, is genuine.¹³²

Not only does living require effort, but even writing. Woolf, while writing *The Waves*, often quotes phrases that recall the difficulty of writing:

¹²⁷ Virginia Woolf, *The Waves*, cit., p. 210.

¹²⁸ John F. Hulcoop, “Percival and the Porpoise: Woolf's Heroic Theme in *The Waves*”, *Twentieth Century Literature*, Winter, 1988, Vol. 34, No. 4 (Winter, 1988), pp. 468-488, p. 475.

¹²⁹ Virginia Woolf, “A Sketch of the Past”, cit., p. 80.

¹³⁰ Virginia Woolf, *The Waves*, cit., p. 191.

¹³¹ Ivi, p. 194.

¹³² *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, cit., Vol. 3, pp. 259-260.

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never have I screwed my brain so tight over a book. [...] my feeling is that I have insisted upon saying, by hook or by crook, certain things I meant to say. [...] Well, never mind: it is a brave attempt. I think, something struggled for.¹³³

This is the most concentrated work I have ever done – and oh the relief when it is finished. But also the most interesting.¹³⁴

My word, what a heaving *The Waves* was, that I still feel the strain!¹³⁵

Indeed, Woolf feared that no one could understand the “inner loneliness” that she suffered and that is closely connected to a certain kind of silence:

Hence, perhaps, these October days are to me a little strained and surrounded with silence. What I mean by this last word I don't quite know, since I have never stopped “seeing” people [...]. No, it's not physical silence; it's some inner loneliness [...]. How I suffer. And no one knows how I suffer, walking up this street, engaged with my anguish, as I was after Thoby died - alone; fighting something alone. But then I had the devil to fight, and now nothing. And when I come indoors it is all so silent [...] yet I am writing.¹³⁶

Woolf's silence is that which comes from death and loss, just like Bernard's as he sinks into the silent futility of life. The one loses her brother Thoby, the other his friend Percival. Both see the prospect of silence looming, yet they continue to write. Thus, we see a fusion of characters looming: “We melt into each other with phrases. We are edged with mist. We make an unsubstantial territory”¹³⁷ is what Bernard says to Susan, but it is also the unity that exists between Bernard and Woolf, not surprisingly both narrators. The real battle they fight is against the silence of inner solitude which, for Woolf, corresponded to a certain death of self.

Life has destroyed me. No echo comes when I speak, no varied words. This is more truly death than the death of friends, than the death of youth.¹³⁸

In fact, a first attempt to conclude the story had already been made, by Bernard, when a few pages before the conclusion we read:

¹³³ Virginia Woolf, *A Writer's Diary, Being Extracts from the Diary of Virginia Woolf*, cit., pp. 162-163.

¹³⁴ Ivi, p. 167.

¹³⁵ Ivi, p. 173.

¹³⁶ *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, cit., Vol. 3, pp. 259-260.

¹³⁷ Virginia Woolf, *The Waves*, cit., p. 9

¹³⁸ Ivi, p. 205.

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Should this be the end of the story? a kind of sigh? [...] But if there are no stories, what end can there be, or what beginning? Life is not susceptible perhaps to the treatment we give it when we try to tell it. [...] Sitting alone, it seems we are spent [...]. It is over, we are ended. But wait – I sat all night waiting – an impulse again runs through us; we rise, we toss back a mane of white spray; we pound on the shore; we are not to be confined.¹³⁹

The temptation of a tragic end, which rested on Percival's tragic death and the prospect of silence being better, had been envisaged, but through the adversative conjunction “but” a turning point occurs in the text. The recalling of the event of Percival's death in Bernard's summing up indeed takes on a new value in the light of “the eternal renewal, the incessant rise and fall and fall and rise again”¹⁴⁰ of life. The death of one in fact signifies the life of the other, as Bernard had previously experienced:

My son is born; Percival is dead. I am upheld by pillars, shored up on either side by stark emotions; but which is sorrow, which is joy? I ask, and do not know, only that I need silence, and to be alone and to go out, and to save one hour to consider what has happened to my world, what death has done to my world.¹⁴¹

Thus, in Percival's death, we can read a perennial cycle of life that is renewed precisely in death, of unity that comes from separateness:

I am not one person; I am many people; I do not altogether know who I am – Jinny, Susan, Neville, Rhoda, or Louis; or how to distinguish my life from theirs.¹⁴²

If I could measure things with compasses I would, but since my only measure is a phrase, I make phrases – I forget what, on this occasion. We became six people at a table in Hampton Court.¹⁴³

For this is not one life; nor do I always know if I am a man or a woman, Bernard or Neville, Louis, Susan, Jinny, or Rhoda – so strange is the contact of one another.¹⁴⁴

Similarly, Jung's motif of the shadow and Rovatti's word born of silence return. Death has indeed deprived Bernard of his shadow, so much so that he says: “I walk unshadowed”, “a shadow, I

¹³⁹ Ivi, p. 192.

¹⁴⁰ Ivi, p. 214.

¹⁴¹ Ivi, p. 108.

¹⁴² Ivi, p. 199.

¹⁴³ Ivi, p. 200.

¹⁴⁴ Ivi, p. 202.

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had been sedulous to take note of shadows”¹⁴⁵; “shadows of people one might have been; unborn selves”¹⁴⁶. Shadow, death and silence are extremely connected in this final soliloquy:

Thin as a ghost, leaving no trace where I trod, perceiving merely, I walked alone in a new world, never trodden; brushing new flowers, unable to speak save in a child’s words of one syllable; without shelter from phrases [...]. But how describe the world seen without a self? There are no words. [...] How describe or say anything in articulate words again?¹⁴⁷

Death once again coincides with silence and the absence of shadow. Words, in the afterlife, are missing: only the syllables of the language of children remain. As in a circularity that regenerates itself, childhood and death are adjacent and are extremely close places. Bernard's drama seems to be that of no longer being able to access speech. Yet, shortly afterwards we read:

And now I ask, "Who am I?" I have been talking of Bernard, Neville, Jinny, Susan, Rhoda and Louis. Am I all of them? Am I one and distinct? I do not know. We sat here together. But now Percival is dead, and Rhoda is dead; we are divided; we are not here. Yet I cannot find any obstacle separating us. There is no division between me and them. As I talked I felt "I am you." This difference we make so much of, this identity we so feverishly cherish, was overcome.¹⁴⁸

In death, the theme of identity returns: what all characters were struggling with before, the search for a stable and strong identity, becomes simple. In death there is no longer any distinction. In death there is only mystery:

So now, taking upon me the mystery of things, I could go like a spy without leaving this place, without stirring from my chair. [...] Light floods the room and drives shadow beyond shadow to where they hang in folds inscrutable. What does the central shadow hold? Something? Nothing? I do not know.¹⁴⁹

The mystery of death is rendered with the metaphor of the shadow. There is indeed a “central shadow” that is inscrutable and hides something or nothing. There is no immediate answer. However, it is precisely in the shadow that Bernard sees the face of the Other, the face of the stranger that Jabès spoke of, that allows anyone to become an I:

¹⁴⁵ Ivi, p. 206.

¹⁴⁶ Ivi, p. 209.

¹⁴⁷ Ivi, p. 207.

¹⁴⁸ Ivi, p. 208.

¹⁴⁹ Ivi, p. 210.

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Oh, but there is your face. I catch your eye. I, who had been thinking myself so vast, a temple, a church, a whole universe, unconfined and capable of being everywhere on the verge of things and here too, am now nothing but what you see [...].¹⁵⁰

The other is the founder of the self's identity. So much so that relational reflections arise from this passage, such as those related to inflicted suffering: "It is strange that we, who are capable of so much suffering, should inflict so much suffering"¹⁵¹. Along with the gratitude of the other, there is also the pleasure of solitude: "Heaven be praised for solitude! I am alone now"; "Heaven be praised for solitude that has removed the pressure of the eye, the solicitation of the body, and all need of lies and phrases"¹⁵². Loneliness, in turn, is associated with writing, with a "book, stuffed with phrases"¹⁵³. Thus, we come to one of the final meditations:

By what name are we to call death? I do not know. I need a little language such as lovers use, words of one syllable such as children speak when they come into the room and find their mother sewing and pick up some scrap of bright wool, a feather, or a shred of chintz. I need a howl; a cry. When the storm crosses the marsh and sweeps over me where I lie in the ditch unregarded I need no words. Nothing neat. Nothing that comes down with all its feet on the floor. None of those resonances and lovely echoes that break and chime from nerve to nerve in our breasts, making wild music, false phrases. I have done with phrases.

'How much better is silence [...].¹⁵⁴

Bernard does not know how to name death, what words to use to circumscribe its meaning and give it form. The language he needs is elementary: the monosyllabic words of children return. The element of shouting also returns: uncontrolled emotion. Finally, in a descending climax, from the word to the cry we come to silence: "I need no words", "I have done with phrases".

The last word seems to be silence, which is considered the equivalent of death. Indeed, in the aforementioned final paragraph, Bernard will say: "It is death. Death is the enemy"¹⁵⁵.

Death, an omnipresent theme, brings our reflection back to the mute and dead character of Percival. The hero that Bernard has defined by his ridiculous name¹⁵⁶, the centre of the novel, the original death that unites all the characters, the catalyst for all, fails: he dies and never accesses speech. However, Bernard, his successor, concludes in triumph, for through compassion - which he

¹⁵⁰ Ivi, p. 211.

¹⁵¹ Ibidem.

¹⁵² Ivi, p. 212.

¹⁵³ Ibidem.

¹⁵⁴ Ivi, p. 213.

¹⁵⁵ Ivi, p. 214.

¹⁵⁶ "Percival, a ridiculous name". Ivi, p. 109.

recognises in Percival¹⁵⁷ and receives from him - and speech, he shares in the suffering of others. Bernard, in short, is the subject “without a self”¹⁵⁸ who contains everyone's words and silences.

The climax of the novel is thus placed in the central section, the fifth, where the sun is at its Zenith. Yet, in the fifth section, we read the soliloquies of only three characters: Neville, Rhoda and Bernard. For all three, Percival's death represents an experience of revelation, a kind of epiphany, something reminiscent of that “shock-receiving capacity” of which Woolf wrote in “A Sketch of the Past”, defining it as “what makes me a writer”. Indeed, this capacity is followed by “the desire to explain it”¹⁵⁹. This experience of Woolf seems to be the same as that experienced by some of her characters in *The Waves*, particularly with the shock that results from Percival's death. Percival, in short, becomes the emblem of the awakening of the consciences of others. His death becomes a gift for them, which can be both terrible, as for Rhoda, or useful, as for Bernard. In some instances, then, Woolf's experiences in “A Sketch of the Past” immediately following her brother's death are literally echoed by those of the characters: think of Rhoda, who after Percival's death believes herself incapable of stepping across a puddle and hears the sound of “the great grindstone within an inch of [her] head”¹⁶⁰. Returning to Percival, the most silent and significant of the characters, we report Maria Di Battista's theory that he would play the role of the work's true narrator, that “she” of whom Woolf spoke in her diary when she approached to begin *The Waves*: “A mind thinking [...]. But who is she? I am very anxious that she should have no name. I don't want a Lavinia or a Penelope: I want ‘She’”¹⁶¹. Di Battista argues that the dissimulation of the veil that hides the narrative voice of *The Waves* is necessary for the truth to be conveyed unhindered. Percival's name is “a name that denotes in its original French, to pierce the veil (perce-voile)” and it hides “Woolf's private memory and love of her late brother, Thoby Stephen”¹⁶². Images of veils in Woolf are very common¹⁶³, and in *The Waves* they seem to indicate that Percival's existence is a kind of recovery of the author's past and the penetration of a veil that conceals something. According to the analysis proposed by Di Battista, therefore, it follows that “then to pierce this ‘veil of being’ is to risk death, and Percival's name foreshadows his own premature end”¹⁶⁴. Percival's death is therefore necessary so that the other

¹⁵⁷ “he had also great compassion”. Ivi, pp. 110-111.

¹⁵⁸ Ivi, p. 207.

¹⁵⁹ Virginia Woolf, “A Sketch of the Past”, cit., p. 72.

¹⁶⁰ “‘There is the puddle,’ said Rhoda, ‘and I cannot cross it. I hear the rush of the great grindstone within an inch of my head’”. Virginia Woolf, *The Waves*, cit., p. 112.

¹⁶¹ Virginia Woolf, *A Writer's Diary, Being Extracts from the Diary of Virginia Woolf*, cit., p. 140.

¹⁶² Maria Di Battista, *Virginia Woolf's Major Novels: The Fables of Anon*, New Haven, Yale UP, 1980, p. 152.

¹⁶³ Cf. “life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end”. Virginia Woolf, *Collected Essays*, Vol. 2, 1966, London, Hogarth Press, 1972, print., p. 106.

¹⁶⁴ Makiko Minow-Pinkey, *Virginia Woolf and the Problem of the Subject*, Sussex, The Harvest Press, 1987, p. 177.

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characters can see behind the veil and access greater awareness. Because it is a risk, it requires a certain skill, that of handling the “violent shock” Woolf wrote about in “A Sketch of the Past”.

Rhoda, for example, is unable to do this: she succumbs to the meaninglessness of life and the lack of references and, after a moment of revelation and tolerance of death through music, chooses suicide. What she writes, in fact, is that she is aware of the terrible gift Percival has given her by his death: “Percival, by his death, has made me this present, has revealed this terror”¹⁶⁵; “Percival, by his death, has made me this gift, let me see the thing”¹⁶⁶. But what is “the thing” that Rhoda accesses? That is the answer to the question: “‘Like’ and ‘like’ and ‘like’ – but what is the thing that lies beneath the semblance of things?”¹⁶⁷. The answer is found a few lines later:

The structure is now visible; what is inchoate is here stated; we are not so various or so mean; we have made oblongs and stood them upon squares. This is our triumph; this is our consolation.¹⁶⁸

“The real thing” that Rhoda is able to see is exactly an echo of the truth that Woolf accesses after her brother's death: from this experience Virginia “came to think of life as something of extreme reality”¹⁶⁹. The revelation for Rhoda comes in the music hall through the singer's voice. Percival's gift is to be able to put into words the shock received, albeit for a short time. The structure Rhoda sees is reminiscent of that “hidden pattern behind the cotton wool of daily life”¹⁷⁰ Woolf spoke of in “A Sketch of the Past”:

I feel that I have had a blow; but it is not, as I thought as a child, simply a blow from an enemy hidden behind the cotton wool of daily life; it is or will become a revelation of some order; it is a token of some real thing behind appearances; and I make it real by putting it into words. It is only by putting it into words that I make it whole; this wholeness means that it has lost its power to hurt me; it gives me, perhaps because by doing so I take away the pain, a great delight to put the severed parts together. Perhaps this is the strongest pleasure known to me. It is the rapture I get when in writing I seem to be discovering what belongs to what; making a scene come right; making a character come together. From this I reach what I might call a philosophy; at any rate it is a constant idea of mine; that behind the cotton wool is hidden a pattern; that we I mean all human beings are connected with this; that the whole world is a work of art; that we are parts of the work of art. Hamlet or a Beethoven quartet is the truth about this vast mass that we call the world. But there is no Shakespeare, there is no Beethoven; certainly and emphatically there is no God; we are the words; we are the music; we are the thing itself. And I see this when I have a shock.¹⁷¹

¹⁶⁵ Virginia Woolf, *The Waves*, cit., p. 113.

¹⁶⁶ Ivi, p. 115.

¹⁶⁷ Ibidem.

¹⁶⁸ Ivi, p. 116.

¹⁶⁹ Virginia Woolf, “A Sketch of the Past”, cit., p. 118.

¹⁷⁰ Ivi, p. 72.

¹⁷¹ Ibidem.

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We can also find the same ideas of a structure, a pattern, a concealment and a connection between all human beings in Rhoda's soliloquy. The structure that becomes visible signifies the clarity of things. Clarity is given by the ability to circumscribe things with words, which makes one no longer be hurt by an overlying reality. The ability to describe with words gives Rhoda immense pleasure: the consolation she speaks of is in fact writing, just like Woolf. Rhoda's above soliloquy is indeed reminiscent of a passage in "A Sketch of the Past", following the death of her mother Julia, when Virginia, George and Vanessa go to Paddington station to pick up their brother Thoby and Woolf writes:

But I have one memory of great beauty. A telegram had been sent to Thoby at Clifton He was to arrive in the evening at Paddington... and so I was taken in a cab with George and Nessa to meet Thoby at Paddington. It was sunset, and the great glass dome at the end of the station was blazing with light. It was glowing yellow and red and the iron girders made a pattern across it. I walked along the platform gazing with rapture at this magnificent blaze of colour, and the train slowly steamed into the station. It impressed and exalted me. It was so vast and so fiery red. The contrast of that blaze of magnificent light with the shrouded and curtained rooms at Hyde Park Gate was so intense. Also it was partly that my mother's death unveiled and intensified; made me suddenly develop perceptions, as if a burning glass had been laid over what was shaded and dormant. Of course this quickening was spasmodic. But it was surprising as if something were becoming visible without any effort.¹⁷²

The lexicon used is quite similar to Rhoda's because the two experiences are interconnected: both, after the death of a loved one, access perceptions never experienced before and the ability to circumscribe reality with words.

However, in the last section of the novel we learn that Rhoda commits suicide, just as Woolf will. Why does this happen, despite the revelation and access to that "hidden pattern"? An interesting answer is provided by Daniel Ferrer: "If we note that the arrival of the sun at the zenith (i.e., the beginning of its decline) is immediately followed by the brutal announcement of the death of Percival, solar hero, and if we do not forget that Percival represented for Virginia Woolf her brother Thoby, we can establish the equation sun = Percival = Thoby"¹⁷³. In a way, then, Rhoda may represent that possibility that Woolf herself experienced: feeling overwhelmed by events, no longer able to handle reality and make it tolerable, with the fear to "fall down into nothingness"¹⁷⁴. Indeed, we find traces of this analogy between Woolf and Rhoda in Woolf's diary during the writing of *The Waves*:

¹⁷² Ivi, pp. 92-93.

¹⁷³ Daniel Ferrer, *Virginia Woolf and the Madness of Language*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby, London, Routledge, 1990, pp. 75-76.

¹⁷⁴ Virginia Woolf, *The Waves*, cit., p. 30.

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The test of a book (to a writer) is if it makes a space in which, quite naturally, you can say what you want to say. As this morning I could say what Rhoda said. This proves that the book itself is alive: because it has not crushed the thing I wanted to say, but allowed me to slip it in, without any compression or alteration.¹⁷⁵

Also autobiographical is an annotation a few pages later, where we read: “Yet I respect myself for writing this book – yes – even though it exhibits my congenital faults”¹⁷⁶. Woolf displays her feelings, her fears and even her psychoses in the words entrusted to the characters and in particular to Rhoda.

Bernard, on the contrary, is immediately stunned by Percival's death, which contrasts sharply with the birth of his son, and seeks a moment of quiet and reflection. Shortly thereafter, we see him seek Jinny's company and postpone his meditation on Percival's death until the final soliloquy of *The Waves*, where we learn that his friend's death has amplified Bernard's ability to access speech and write. The key difference between Rhoda and Bernard lies in the fact that the latter realises the importance of “words of one syllable”, a “little language” made up of “broken words”¹⁷⁷. Bernard's quest, which was initially about always finding the right words to describe situations and tell stories¹⁷⁸, now concludes on the possibility of the fragment, the broken word, the cry: “to seek among phrases and fragments something unbroken”¹⁷⁹. The cry is somehow reminiscent of Rhoda's epiphany experience at the music hall:

An axe has split a tree to the core; the core is warm; sound quivers within the bark. "Ah!" cried a woman to her lover, leaning from her window in Venice. "Ah, ah!" she cried, and again she cries "Ah!" She has provided us with & cry. But only a cry. And what is a cry? Then the beetle-shaped men come with their violins; wait; count; nod; down come their bows.¹⁸⁰

The question “what is a cry?” is reminiscent of Bernard's question, pages later, when he asks: “A phrase. An imperfect phrase. And what are phrases?”¹⁸¹. The answer lies in music. The singing woman's voice heard by Rhoda is the same music Bernard needs to process the “little language” that will save him from the silence of Percival's death.

'Here again there should be music. Not that wild hunting-song, Percival's music; but a painful, guttural, visceral, also soaring, lark-like, pealing song to replace these flagging, foolish transcripts how much too deliberate! how

¹⁷⁵ Virginia Woolf, *A Writer's Diary, Being Extracts from the Diary of Virginia Woolf*, cit., p. 153.

¹⁷⁶ Ivi, p. 156.

¹⁷⁷ Virginia Woolf, *The Waves*, cit., p. 213.

¹⁷⁸ “But what are stories? Toys I twist, bubbles I blow, one ring passing through another. And sometimes I begin to doubt if there are stories. What is my story?”. Ivi, p. 102.

¹⁷⁹ Ivi, p. 192.

¹⁸⁰ Ivi, p. 115.

¹⁸¹ Ivi, p. 155.

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much too reasonable!-which attempt to describe the flying moment of first love. A purple slide is slipped over the day. Look at a room before she comes and after. Look at the innocents outside pursuing their way.¹⁸²

Indeed, the question Bernard asks is: “but what is the use of painfully elaborating these consecutive sentences when what one needs is nothing consecutive but a bark, a groan?”¹⁸³. That is why Bernard, who discovers the futility of complex, elaborate phrases and the beauty of cry, bark, groan survives: he becomes aware of the importance of music, and it is thanks to music that in the final soliloquy he is able to conceive of the six characters' lives as a unity, a symphony:

How impossible to order them rightly; to detach one separately, or to give the effect of the whole-again like music. What a symphony, with its concord and its discord and its tunes on top and its complicated bass beneath, then grew up!¹⁸⁴

Bernard, just like Virginia Woolf, attempts to write to a rhythm, that of music. Bernard, like Woolf, seeks a musical effect in his sentences. Bernard, like Woolf, appreciates Beethoven and buys a painting of him:

I went, swinging my stick, into a shop, and bought – not that I love music – a picture of Beethoven in a silver frame. Not that I love music, but because the whole of life, its masters, its adventures, then appeared in long ranks of magnificent human beings behind me; and I was the inheritor; I, the continuer; I, the person miraculously appointed to carry it on.¹⁸⁵

Music is thus valued for its all-encompassing quality: it is what unites the divergent parts of a whole. If Percival was the hero of silence, then, we can deduce that Bernard is the hero of music. Once again, Percival, the silence, becomes the key for the other characters to access a deeper awareness of themselves and of life. He is that central shadow that reminds the other six of the possibility of death, and thus enables them to access the mystery behind the veil. The truth that the characters access is that no one can escape death, the ultimate enemy. This will not be coincidental if we recall the premise that Woolf, whose life has been punctuated by the deaths of loved ones since childhood, is the writer of the silences of interiority, accessed by going beyond the “cotton wool” through speech. Kristeva also notes this quality of Woolf, which becomes psychologically unbearable, and writes:

¹⁸² Ivi, p. 179.

¹⁸³ Ivi, p. 180.

¹⁸⁴ Ivi, p. 184.

¹⁸⁵ Ivi, p. 182.

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In women's writing, language seems to be seen from a foreign land; is it seen from the point of view of an asymbolic, spastic body? Virginia Woolf describes suspended states, subtle sensations and, above all, colors - green, blue - but she does not dissect language as Joyce does. Estranged from language, women are visionaries, dancers who suffer as they speak.¹⁸⁶

Woolf's battle, like that of Rhoda and Bernard, was to make the silence represented by death tolerable through the artifice of words. In what is Woolf's most musical novel, then, we read of a death for which there is no room in the autobiography "A Sketch of the Past", a death that has been silenced: that of Thoby. The silence about Thoby's death is broken with the musicality of *The Waves*, reminding us of the cyclical nature of life, which includes death, but also of the infinite possibilities of life, which continually unravels and remakes itself, as put in Jinny's mouth at the beginning of the novel: "I feel a thousand capacities spring up in me. I am arch, gay, languid, melancholy by turns. I am rooted, but I flow"¹⁸⁷. Woolf, in fact, spent her entire life struggling with mood swings, trying to grasp the true meaning of death and questioning the mystery of life and identity, and finally chose, like Rhoda, to end her own existence. The silence of her death, however, echoes like Percival's in the lives of her characters.

¹⁸⁶ Julia Kristeva, "Oscillation Between Power and Denial", in Claire Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron, eds., *New French Feminisms*, Amherst, Univ. of Massachusetts Press, 1980, p. 166.

¹⁸⁷ Ivi, p. 72.

II. *Le Ravisement de Lol V. Stein*: “Son silence l’intriguait de plus en plus”

Le Ravisement de Lol V. Stein is the most iconic novel in terms of the staging of silence in Duras's work. Published in 1964, thus in the post-World War II period characterised by a crisis of conscience, it attracted the attention of psychoanalysts such as Jacques Lacan precisely because of its enigmatic and mysterious character, which lends itself to an investigation of the unconscious.

[Il faut] se rappeler avec Freud qu'en sa matière, l'artiste le précède toujours et qu'il n'a donc pas à faire le psychologue là où l'artiste lui fraie la voie. C'est précisément ce que je reconnais dans *Le Ravisement de Lol V. Stein*, où Marguerite Duras s'avère savoir sans moi ce que j'enseigne.¹⁸⁸

The main character, Lol V. Stein, is in fact unknowable, as the author herself declared to Pierre Dumayet during an interview: “Personne ne peut connaître Lol V. Stein, ni vous, ni moi”. It is no coincidence, in fact, that the author completely erases her own presence within the novel in favour of a narrator who attempts to unravel the mystery surrounding Lol. This character is in fact the embodiment of the word *crisis*: crisis of the novel, crisis of identity and, last but not least, crisis of language. Lol's path seems to be a journey from word to silence, which is reached by concluding the reading. The plot of the novel is simple: Lol V. Stein is to marry Michael Richardson, but their romance is ruined on the evening when, at the T. Beach Municipal Casino Ball, the latter dances with Anne-Marie Stretter and suddenly falls in love with her. Lol, who stays for the evening in the company of her friend Tatiana Karl, is then robbed of her fiancé and this provokes an unprecedented crisis in her, culminating in her madness and a momentary muteness that will nevertheless take the form of an enigmatic silence around her figure in the years that follow. Ten years later Lol, a wife and mother of three, will meet Tatiana again and make the acquaintance of Jacques Hold, the narrator of the story, who will fall in love with her despite being Tatiana's lover. Fascinated by Lol, he will try to understand this woman and reconstruct her story from the dance that has imprisoned her in a permanent obsession. Lol will in fact attempt to redeem her lost love affair with Micheal Richardson because of Anne-Marie Stretter by staging the same sequence of actions at a different time with different characters, namely Tatiana and Jacques. The novel is thus traversed by a twofold *quête*: on the one hand, that of the narrator Jacques Hold who tries to understand the unfathomable mystery surrounding the enigmatic figure of Lol V. Stein with whom he falls in love, and on the other, that of Lol, who tries to relive the past in the present to free herself from an obsession that makes her mad.

¹⁸⁸ Jacques Lacan, “Hommage fait à Marguerite Duras, du *Ravisement de Lol V. Stein*”, *Cahiers Renaud Barrault*, Paris, Gallimard, n. 52, 1965, 7-15.

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What is striking in this novel is the plurality of themes associated with silence: love, passion, mystery, the unspeakable, madness, the loss of identity in an irretrievable past. These themes, profoundly linked to silence in the story, are rendered, from a formal point of view, with fragmentary, laconic and poetic writing, which perfectly presents the madness of the main character and her difficulty in expressing the object of her *quête*, which takes the form of an elusive and ineffable absolute.

From the very first pages, the theme of madness emerges within Lol, who is always referred to by her incomplete name, Lol V. Stein, indicating her lacunar identity:

Tatiana ne croit pas au rôle prépondérant de ce fameux bal de T. Beach dans la maladie de Lol V. Stein. Tatiana Karl, elle, fait remonter plus avant, plus avant même que leur amitié, les origines de cette maladie. [...] Au collège, dit-elle, et elle n'était pas la seule à le penser, il manquait déjà quelque chose à Lol pour être – elle dit : là. [...] Lol était drôle, moqueuse impénitente et très fine bien qu'une part d'elle-même eût été toujours en allée loin de vous et de l'instant. Où ? Dans le rêve adolescent ? Non, répond Tatiana, non, on aurait dit dans rien encore, justement, rien.¹⁸⁹

Je lui ai demandé si la crise de Lol, plus tard, ne lui avait pas apporté la preuve qu'elle se trompait. Elle m'a répété que non, qu'elle, elle croyait que cette crise et Lol ne faisaient qu'un depuis toujours.¹⁹⁰

There is thus an initial mystery related to the origin of Lol's madness, which the narrator does not know where to place on the time axis. The lexicon used – “maladie”, “crise”, “manquait”, “rien” - is particularly suggestive of Lol's lack of sanity. However, right from the start, the mystery deepens further because the narrator Jacques Hold is not reliable. In fact, he obtains the information from Tatiana, whom he does not trust:

Je ne crois plus à rien de ce que dit Tatiana, je ne suis convaincu de rien.

Voici, tout au long, mêlés, à la fois, ce faux-semblant que raconte Tatiana Karl et ce que j'invente sur la nuit du Casino de T. Beach. À partir de quoi je raconterai mon histoire de Lol V. Stein.¹⁹¹

We realise from the start that the narrative is missing pieces of the story, which the reader will have to complete, and that the narrative itself that we read is unreliable because the reality of the story is mixed with the imagination of the narrator, who invents parts of it. These holes in the text are thus silences and omissions around the figure of Lol.

¹⁸⁹ Marguerite Duras, *Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein*, Belin Gallimard, Paris, 2017, p. 12.

¹⁹⁰ *Ivi*, p. 13.

¹⁹¹ *Ibidem*.

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The story of the dance episode, moreover, is narrated from the outset from a moment of silence:

L'orchestre cessa de jouer. Une danse se terminait.
La piste s'était vidée lentement. Elle fut vide.¹⁹²

The atmosphere of the encounter between Richardson and Stretter is cinematic and takes place in an imagined silence in which the music ceases and the dance floor empties to make room for the two lovers. The verbs most frequently used in this scene, not by chance, are see/observe/look. It is in fact through looking¹⁹³, and not through words, that Lol senses the change in her fiancé and realises she has lost him forever.

Lol, frappée d'immobilité, avait regardé s'avancer, comme lui, cette grâce abandonnée, ployante, d'oiseau mort.¹⁹⁴

C'était impossible de le savoir, c'est impossible de savoir quand, par conséquent, commence mon histoire de Lol V. Stein: le regard, chez elle [...] logeait dans toute la surface des yeux, il était difficile à capter.¹⁹⁵

Lol sans aucun doute s'aperçut de ce changement [...].
Il était devenu différent. Tout le monde pouvait le voir. Voir qu'il n'était plus celui qu'on croyait. Lol le regardait, le regardait changer.¹⁹⁶

The scene remains mute, no dialogue is reported but only glances, and the reader, too, must access an understanding of Richardson's change through Lol's attentive and desperate gaze, which she never verbalises.

Lol, suspendue, attendit, elle aussi. La femme ne refusa pas.
Ils étaient partis sur la piste de danse. Lol les avait regardés [...].¹⁹⁷

The atmosphere is still cinematic, theatrical, and seems to take place in a suspended, silent time, where we only access the movements of the characters but not their dialogues, which in fact do not take place as everything happens in silence:

¹⁹² Ivi, p. 13.

¹⁹³ On the subject of the gaze, see: Sylvie Loignon, *Le regard dans l'oeuvre de Marguerite Duras. Circulez, y'a rien à voir*, Paris, L'Harmattan, coll. "Critiques littéraires, 2001.

¹⁹⁴ Marguerite Duras, *Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein*, cit., p. 14.

¹⁹⁵ Ivi, p. 15.

¹⁹⁶ Ibidem.

¹⁹⁷ Ivi, p. 16.

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Ils avaient dansé. Dansé encore. [...] Ils ne s'étaient pas parlé.¹⁹⁸

Vers cette même heure, tout en dansant, ils se parlèrent, quelques mots. Pendant les pauses, ils continuèrent à se taire complètement.¹⁹⁹

Richardson and his new lover therefore do not fall in love through the exchange of jokes or words, but simply through their gaze: he is struck by her presence in the room as much as Lol is attracted and fascinated by the scene before her eyes, to which she continues to submit in silence and total stillness, like a plant:

Lol resta toujours là où l'événement l'avait trouvée lorsque Anne-Marie Stretter était entrée, derrière les plantes vertes du bar.²⁰⁰

Finally, the dance scene ends just as it began: in silence.

L'orchestre cessa de jouer. Le bal apparut presque vide. [...] Ils ne s'étaient pas aperçus que l'orchestre avait cessé de jouer : au moment où il aurait dû reprendre, comme des automates, ils s'étaient rejoints, n'entendant pas qu'il n'y avait plus de musique.²⁰¹

The dance thus comes to a close in the same cinematic and silent atmosphere as its beginning, but with an extra couple. The music, a fundamental element of the dance, is completely ignored by the two protagonists of the scene, who are astonished and completely caught up in themselves, as if transported to another dimension. The character of Lol, hitherto ignored and remained a spectator of the scene, finally comes into play, but only to be discarded and left once again on the margins of the narrative as well as the dance floor.

Michael Richardson se passa la main sur le front, chercha dans la salle quelque signe d'éternité. Le sourire de Lol V. Stein, alors, en était un, mais il ne le vit pas.

Ils s'étaient silencieusement contemplés, longuement, ne sachant que faire, comment sortir de la nuit.²⁰²

Richardson and Lol look at each other in silence and search for a way out of that night, yet Lol will never find it and will remain imprisoned in that dance from which she has been excluded all

¹⁹⁸ Ivi, p. 17.

¹⁹⁹ Ibidem.

²⁰⁰ Ivi, p. 18.

²⁰¹ Ibidem.

²⁰² Ibidem.

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her life. As Lahouste notes, “le bal constitue donc la scène originelle et obsédante de l’œuvre, qui scelle d’emblée le destin de Lol. Spectrale, elle ne cesse de faire retour au sein du roman [...] portant en elle le mystère du centre fascinant, existentiel, qui retient l’héroïne”²⁰³. The triangulation formed by Lol, Richardson and Stretter is precisely the element she will obsessively try to find again. In fact, a fourth dramatic element inserts itself into the triangle, making dialogue, clarification and a meeting impossible and causing this scene to become fatal for Lol's life.

À ce moment-là une femme d’un certain âge, la mère de Lol, était entrée dans le bal. En les injuriant, elle leur avait demandé ce qu’ils avaient fait de son enfant. [...] Lorsque sa mère était arrivée sur Lol et qu’elle l’avait touché, Lol avait enfin lâché la table. Elle avait compris seulement à cet instant-là qu’une fin se dessinait mais confusément, sans distinguer encore au juste laquelle elle serait. L’écran de sa mère entre eux et elle en était le signe avant-coureur.²⁰⁴

Lol's mother, like a screen, interposes herself between the pair of lovers and Lol herself, forever interrupting the moment of the end of a love that will not come to be spoken and verbalised. This sudden interruption becomes the moment in which Lol understands the end of her love affair and finally comes to terms with the trauma, emerging from the vegetal state in which she had protected herself until before:

Lol cria pour la première fois. [...]

Ils commencèrent à bouger, à marcher vers les murs, cherchant des portes imaginaires. [...]

Lol avait crié sans discontinuer des choses sensées : il n’était pas tard, l’heure d’été trompait. Elle avait supplié Michael Richardson de la croire. Mais comme ils continuaient à marcher – on avait essayé de l’en empêcher mais elle s’était délogée – elle avait couru vers la porte, s’était jetée sur ses battants. [...]

Lol les suivit des yeux à travers les jardins. Quand elle ne les vit plus, elle tomba par terre, évanouie.²⁰⁵

Lol's silence breaks into a cry of pain and madness. Lol's suffering is so acute that it has to be emitted, so that Lol's whole body turns into a scream and begins to shake. However, Lol is unable to follow the two lovers as they leave the ballroom and remains behind, imprisoned in the room, through the glass panes of which she is able to observe the two lovers walking off into the night. Lahouste writes in this regard: “Circonscrire dans la périphérie de l’action, ne pouvant faire aucun geste, ne formuler aucun mot, elle reste focalisée, durant toute cette nuit, sur le couple que forment Anne-Marie

²⁰³ Corentin Lahouste, « Silence absolu. Du *Ravissement de Lol V. Stein* de Marguerite Duras », *Postures*, no. 28 (Automne), 2018: Dossier « Paroles et silences: réflexions sur le pouvoir de dire ». <http://revuepostures.com/fr/articles/lahouste-28>, no pagination.

²⁰⁴ Marguerite Duras, *Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein*, cit., pp. 18-19.

²⁰⁵ Ivi, p. 19.

Stretter et Michael Richardson²⁰⁶. Lol follows them with her gaze, just as she will do later in the story with Tatiana and Jacques. Following this event, Lol retreats to her room for several weeks and we see the beginning of her madness looming:

La prostration de Lol, dit-on, fut alors marquée par des signes de souffrance. Mais qu'est-ce à dire qu'une souffrance sans sujet ?

Elle disait toujours les mêmes choses : que l'heure d'été trompait, qu'il n'était pas tard.

Elle prononçait son nom avec colère : Lol V. Stein - c'était ainsi qu'elle se désignait.

Puis elle se plaignit, plus explicitement, d'éprouver une fatigue insupportable à attendre de la sorte. Elle s'ennuyait, à crier. Et elle criait en effet qu'elle n'avait rien à penser tandis qu'elle attendait, réclamait avec l'impatience d'un enfant un remède immédiat à ce manque. Cependant aucune des distractions qu'on lui avait offertes n'avait eu raison de cet état.²⁰⁷

Lol's madness takes on peculiar traits: the repetition of the same things, the anger at saying her own name, the constant crying. However, shortly afterwards, Lol slowly becomes a silent and suffering character:

Puis Lol cessa de se plaindre de quoi que ce soit. Elle cessa même petit à petit de parler. Sa colère vieillit, se découragea. Elle ne parla que pour dire qu'il lui était impossible d'exprimer combien c'était ennuyeux et long, long d'être Lol V. Stein. On lui demandait de faire un effort. Elle ne comprenait pas pourquoi, disait-elle. Sa difficulté devant la recherche d'un seul mot paraissait insurmontable. Elle parut n'attendre plus rien.²⁰⁸

The silence seems to stem from the realisation that Lol is unable to express the discomfort it causes her to be herself. Lol searches for a word to say to herself, but cannot find it. The only word that seems to describe her is, paradoxically, “rien”. Lahouste writes in this regard: “Elle ne cherche rien, ou plutôt elle cherche le rien, ce rien, ce vide (non seulement le sien mais aussi et surtout celui de l'absolu), ce vertige, auquel elle a été confrontée lors de la nuit du bal; ce qu'elle a vu sans voir et sur quoi elle ne sait poser des mots”²⁰⁹. Those who know her come to doubt whether her cognitive faculties are impaired, so much so that they wonder: “Pensait-elle à quelque chose, à elle?”²¹⁰. Yet, the response from Lol is not issued, as she has become completely silent: “Elle ne répondait pas”²¹¹. Jabès's image of the desert returns at this juncture: “elle était devenue un désert dans lequel une faculté nomade l'avait lancée dans la poursuite interminable de quoi?”²¹². Her condition is defined as a

²⁰⁶ Corentin Lahouste, « Silence absolu. Du *Ravissement de Lol V. Stein* de Marguerite Duras », cit.

²⁰⁷ Marguerite Duras, *Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein*, cit., p. 21.

²⁰⁸ Ibidem.

²⁰⁹ Corentin Lahouste, « Silence absolu. Du *Ravissement de Lol V. Stein* de Marguerite Duras », cit.

²¹⁰ Marguerite Duras, *Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein*, op. cit., p. 22.

²¹¹ Ibidem.

²¹² Ibidem.

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“prostration”²¹³ and a “délire”²¹⁴, thus resorting to the semantic field of mental illness. The observation the narrator arrives at, however, is as follows: “Elle payait maintenant, tôt ou tard cela devait arriver, l’étrange omission de sa douleur durant le bal”²¹⁵. The omission of pain to which Jacques Hold refers is precisely its non-verbalisation: the impossibility of saying it, of expressing it, of clarifying it. The pain, which remained contained within Lol, slowly makes room for itself and renders her mute. Lol's muteness, however, slowly seems to heal so that she can at least satisfy her basic needs:

Puis, tout en restant très silencieuse, elle recommença à demander à manger, qu'on ouvrit la fenêtre, le sommeil. Et bientôt, elle aima beaucoup que l'on parle à ses côtés. Elle acquiesçait à tout ce qui était dit, raconté, affirmé devant elle. L'importance de tous les propos était égale à ses yeux. Elle écoutait avec passion. D'eux elle ne demanda jamais de nouvelles. Elle ne posa aucune question.²¹⁶

Lol is still described as a silent being, however, no longer mute. Slowly she seems to recognise the words addressed to her and Lol becomes present again. However, she still appears as a being without wishes, without questions, without requests. Indifference seems to have crept into her heart. Later, the novel tells how Lol meets her future husband, Jean Bedford, quite by chance wandering the streets at night, and how she marries him without any hint of a choice on her part: “Ainsi, Lol fut mariée sans l’avoir voulu [...], sans passer par la sauvagerie d’un choix [...], sans avoir trahi l’abandon exemplaire dans lequel il l’avait laissée”²¹⁷. The meeting with Bedford is also characterised by silences, mystery and incommunicability:

Elle ne répondit pas.²¹⁸

Quand même, son silence l'intriguait de plus en plus.²¹⁹

-Que désirez-vous ?

Elle n’arriva pas à répondre malgré un effort visible.²²⁰

The dialogues between the two are laconic: Lol does not respond, she searches for words but cannot find them, and she appears as a character without a will of her own, transported by chance.

²¹³ Ibidem.

²¹⁴ Ibidem.

²¹⁵ Ibidem.

²¹⁶ Ibidem.

²¹⁷ Ivi, p. 27.

²¹⁸ Ivi, p. 23.

²¹⁹ Ivi, p. 24.

²²⁰ Ivi, p. 25.

We intuit that there is a search in her, but we cannot understand its object: “On aurait dit non seulement qu’elle venait d’arriver dans cette ville, mais qu’elle y était venue pour y retrouver ou y chercher quelque chose”²²¹. However, as soon as Jean Bedford offers to help her in her search, “Elle répondit avec netteté: - Rien”²²².

In the following pages, we see more and more of an indifferent Lol emerge, so much so that “la mort de sa mère [...] la laissa sans une larme”²²³ and “elle était naturellement devenue impitoyable”²²⁴. All we know about Lol's husband is that “Il aimait cette femme-là, Lola Valérie”²²⁵. In the text, Lol's full name is used for the first time, without abbreviations or truncations. The fact that the full name is associated with her husband, who does not really know her deeply, suggests that Lol is only herself in the absence, in the fragment, in the lack. Her whole name does not suit her, it says nothing about her. Married life is characterised by “cette virtualité constante et silencieuse”²²⁶ of Lol and by “un ordre rigoureux”²²⁷ inside the house, reminiscent of that of her childhood to such an extent that she returned to live in the house of her deceased parents to reintroduce “le même ordre glacé”²²⁸. Here, questions about Lol's silent and enigmatic presence begin to thicken:

Lol imitait, mais qui ? [...] La maison, l’après-midi, en son absence, ne devenait-elle pas la scène vide où se jouait le soliloque d’une passion absolue dont le sens échappait ?²²⁹

Meaning eludes; Lol's character is elusive; Lol imitates someone, but it is not known who. The text poses unanswered questions and the silence around Lol does not reveal her true nature. Furthermore, we learn that, of the figure of Michael Richardson, “Lol n’en avait jamais parlé”²³⁰. Lol's omissions and silences are a counterpoint to the perfect order that seems to reign in her life as a married woman. However, we learn that in her copious free time Lol starts to take walks in the town of her childhood: “Ces promenades lui devinrent très vite indispensables comme tout chez elle l’était devenu jusque-là: la ponctualité, l’ordre, le sommeil”²³¹. Lol almost seems to be a robot without willpower, programmed to follow a perfect order, to always be on time, and to sleep. Moreover, we begin to perceive the immense loneliness of this character, who wanders without company and speaks

²²¹ Ivi, p. 24.

²²² Ibidem.

²²³ Ivi, p. 29.

²²⁴ Ibidem.

²²⁵ Ivi, p. 30.

²²⁶ Ibidem.

²²⁷ Ibidem.

²²⁸ Ivi, p. 31.

²²⁹ Ivi, p. 30.

²³⁰ Ivi, p. 31.

²³¹ Ivi, p. 32.

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to no one. The narrator Jacques Hold, in the following pages, comes in without revealing that he is the one whom Lol meets on her walks.

Lol bougea, elle se retourna dans son sommeil.²³²

Elle passait alors dans un silence religieux. [...] Elle devait s'excuser mais à voix si basse que personne n'avait jamais dû entendre ses excuses.²³³

Lol's walks are as silent as religious rites and the few words spoken are in a low voice. Moreover, sleep is another element that connotes her. It is unclear what Lol's purpose is in wandering the streets aimlessly: "La seule chose qui eût pu le faire c'était son personnage lui-même, Lola Stein, la jeune fille abandonnée du casino de T. Beach [...]"²³⁴. In short, Lol is similar only to herself and seems to reincarnate the same young girl who was abandoned years before, in a sort of perpetual repetition compulsion. Lol's reserve remains so even in her dialogues with her husband, who seems to be married to a stranger:

Lol ne précisa pas.²³⁵

Jean Bedford trouvait naturelle la réserve de sa femme sur ses promenades. Du moment que cette réserve couvrait toute la conduite de Lol, toutes ses activités. Ses avis étaient rares, ses récits, inexistantes. [...]

Lol ne parlait jamais d'achats qu'elle aurait pu faire.²³⁶

Lol, in short, never communicates anything: she is mysterious, reserved, almost mute. She tells nothing about herself and is presented to the reader as an extremely impenetrable character. The narrator begins, however, by offering his observations on Lol, and states:

Je crois qu'elle devait trouver là, dans la monotonie de la pluie, cet ailleurs, uniforme, fade et sublime, plus adorable à son âme qu'aucun autre moment de sa vie présente, cet ailleurs qu'elle cherchait depuis son retour à S. Tahla.²³⁷

²³² Ivi, p. 34.

²³³ Ivi, p. 35.

²³⁴ Ibidem.

²³⁵ Ivi, p. 37.

²³⁶ Ivi, pp. 37-38.

²³⁷ Ivi, p. 38.

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We begin to understand that Lol's return to her hometown is not accidental and that Lol lives in an elsewhere that does not coincide with the present: Lol's quest is therefore located in another time, which is why we perceive her as so absent and incomplete.

Qu'avait-elle fait à ces heures-là pendant les dix années qui avaient précédé ? Je le lui ai demandé. Elle n'a pas su bien me dire quoi. À ces mêmes heures ne s'occupait-elle à rien à U. Bridge ? À rien. Mais encore ? Elle ne savait dire comment, rien. [...]

Ce que je crois :

Des pensées, un fourmillement, toutes également frappées de stérilité une fois la promenade terminée - aucune de ces pensées jamais n'a passé la porte de sa maison - viennent à Lol V. Stein pendant qu'elle marche. On dirait que c'est le déplacement machinal de son corps qui les fait se lever toutes ensemble dans un mouvement désordonné, confus, généreux.²³⁸

The reported dialogue between Lol and the narrator suggests that there is a relationship between the two, but no answer is given by Lol, who continues to say nothing or not know why. The word “rien” returns to characterise this character, who seems to be inhabited by an abyss to the point of walking like an automaton through the streets. The narrator's thoughts are transposed onto the page and suggest that Lol's inaccessible thoughts are all about that ancient dance:

Le bal tremblait au loin, ancien, seule épave d'un océan maintenant tranquille, dans la pluie, à S. Tahla. Tatiana, plus tard, quand je le lui ai dit, a partagé mon avis.

- Ainsi c'était pour ça qu'elle se promenait, pour mieux penser au bal.

Le bal reprend un peu de vie, frémit, s'accroche à Lol. Elle le réchauffe, le protège, le nourrit, il grandit, sort de ses plis, s'étire, un jour il est prêt.

Elle y entre.

Elle y entre chaque jour.

La lumière des après-midi de cet été-là Lol ne la voit pas. Elle, elle pénètre dans la lumière artificielle, prestigieuse, du bal de T. Beach. Et dans cette enceinte largement ouverte à son seul regard elle recommence le passé, elle l'ordonne, sa véritable demeure, elle la range.²³⁹

The dance is thus presented as the obsession that Lol cultivates and nurtures within her mind during her walks. In Gauthier's words, the dance represents the “scène première, enfouie, inaltérable, qui fait l'histoire, l'entrée dans l'histoire, l'unique scène, en quelque sorte, qui ne fera que se chercher, s'oublier, se répéter”²⁴⁰. A glimpse into Lol's interiority is provided through the narrator's investigation, who seems to be the first to grasp her fixation and torment. The same manic order with

²³⁸ Ibidem.

²³⁹ Ivi, p. 39.

²⁴⁰ Gauthier Xavière, « La danse, le désir », *Cahiers Renaud Barrault*, Paris, Gallimard, n°89 : 23-32, 1975, p. 28.

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which Lol tends her house is used to arrange her past inside her mind, as in an obsessive-compulsive disorder. Nothing on the outside suggests such obsession, as Lol makes no mention of it and guards everything in her silence. It is at this point that the narrator Jacques Hold declares his feelings towards Lol:

Je connais Lol V. Stein de la seule façon que je puisse, d'amour.

C'est en raison de cette connaissance que je suis arrivé à croire ceci : dans les multiples aspects du bal de T. Beach, c'est la fin qui retient Lol. C'est l'instant précis de sa fin, quand l'aurore arrive avec une brutalité inouïe et la sépare du couple que formaient Michael Richardson et Anne-Marie Stretter, pour toujours, toujours. Lol progresse chaque jour dans la reconstitution de cet instant.²⁴¹

The knowledge that comes from love, and thus from attention, suggests to Hold that Lol is trapped in a precise moment of the dance: the end. Indeed, having been abruptly cut short by her mother's arrival, Lol continues to experience this moment on a loop. The sense of sight returns again:

Elle se promène encore. Elle voit de plus en plus précisément, clairement ce qu'elle veut voir. Ce qu'elle rebâtit c'est la fin du monde.

Elle se voit, et c'est là sa pensée véritable, à la même place, dans cette fin, toujours, au centre d'une triangulation dont l'aurore et eux deux sont les termes éternels [...].²⁴²

Lol seems to see others and herself, but something is missing from her vision and haunts her. There is a moment, the end, to which Lol has no access and which continues to appal her. Lol is described as "sans voix"²⁴³ again, i.e. powerless against the scene looming before her. But what scene is it?

Que se serait-il passé ? Lol ne va pas loin dans l'inconnu sur lequel s'ouvre cet instant. Elle ne dispose d'aucun souvenir même imaginaire, elle n'a aucune idée sur cet inconnu. Mais ce qu'elle croit, c'est qu'elle devait y pénétrer, que c'était ce qu'il lui fallait faire, que c'aurait été pour toujours, pour sa tête et pour son corps, leur plus grande douleur et leur plus grande joie confondues jusque dans leur définition devenue unique mais innommable faute d'un mot. J'aime à croire, comme je l'aime, que si Lol est silencieuse dans la vie c'est qu'elle a cru, l'espace d'un éclair, que ce mot pouvait exister.²⁴⁴

There is an unknown, inaccessible, unimaginable element to which Lol aspires. Lol cannot penetrate the mystery of what she has not had access to: the love between Richardson and Stretter.

²⁴¹ Marguerite Duras, *Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein*, cit., p. 39.

²⁴² *Ivi*, p. 40.

²⁴³ *Ibidem*.

²⁴⁴ *Ibidem*.

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This moment looms as an impenetrable and unspeakable absolute. As Corentin Lahouste also argues, “l’œuvre de Duras tend irrémédiablement vers le silence, celui propre au rêve, à la contemplation, en démontrant qu’il y a un vrai cheminement vers le silence qui est opéré dans le texte”²⁴⁵. Indeed, she lacks a word that can tell the absolute towards which Lol tends. This causes her to be silent, as she does not have the word she needs to tell the enigma that inhabits her wounded heart.

Faute de son existence, elle se tait. C'aurait été un mot-absence un mot-trou, creusé en son centre d'un trou, de ce trou où tous les autres mots auraient été enterrés. On n'aurait pas pu le dire mais on aurait pu le faire résonner. Immense, sans fin, un gong vide, il aurait retenu ceux qui voulaient partir, il les aurait convaincus de l'impossible, il les aurait assourdis à tout autre vocable que lui-même, en une fois il les aurait nommés, eux, l'avenir et l'instant. Manquant, ce mot, il gâche tous les autres, les contamine, c'est aussi le chien mort de la plage en plein midi, ce trou de chair. Comment ont-ils été trouvés les autres ? Au décrochez-moi-ça de quelles aventures parallèles à celle de Lol V. Stein étouffées dans l'œuf, piétinées et des massacres, oh! qu'il y en a, que d'inachèvements sanglants le long des horizons, amoncelés, et parmi eux, ce mot, qui n'existe pas, pourtant est là: il vous attend au tournant du langage, il vous défie, il n'a jamais servi, de le soulever, de le faire surgir hors de son royaume percé de toutes parts à travers lequel s'écoulent la mer, le sable, l'éternité du bal dans le cinéma de Lol V. Stein.²⁴⁶

The missing word is called a “mot-trou”, a hole within her being in the absence of which all other words lose their meaning, leaving Lol in a constant muteness. Duras's challenge, in these lines, highlights the crisis of language, which is incapable of saying everything and lacks the words that can translate the thoughts that lurk in our minds. The absolute cannot be said: the word-hole does not exist. Because of this, Lol becomes inconsolable. In fact, Jacques Hold explains:

Il n'est pas pensable pour Lol qu'elle soit absente de l'endroit où ce geste a eu lieu. Ce geste n'aurait pas eu lieu sans elle : elle est avec lui chair à chair, forme à forme, les yeux scellés à son cadavre.

Elle est née pour le voir. D'autres sont nés pour mourir. Ce geste sans elle pour le voir, il meurt de soif, il s'effrite, il tombe, Lol est en cendres.

Le corps long et maigre de l'autre femme serait apparu peu à peu. Et dans une progression rigoureusement parallèle et inverse, Lol aurait été remplacée par elle auprès de l'homme de T. Beach.

Remplacée par cette femme, au souffle près. Lol retient ce souffle : à mesure que le corps de la femme apparaît à cet homme, le sien s'efface, s'efface, volupté, du monde.

- Toi. Toi seule.

Cet arrachement très ralenti de la robe de Anne-Marie Stretter, cet anéantissement de velours de sa propre personne, Lol n'a jamais réussi à le mener à son terme.²⁴⁷

²⁴⁵ Corentin Lahouste, « Silence absolu. Du *Ravissement de Lol V. Stein* de Marguerite Duras », cit.

²⁴⁶ Marguerite Duras, *Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein*, p. 41.

²⁴⁷ Ivi, pp. 41-42.

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Lol's absence from the instant of the union between the two lovers causes her to disappear, to die, to vaporise. Lol feels replaced by the other woman and completely loses her identity, until she becomes the ghost who wanders the streets and marries a man without exercising a choice or a will. As Stretter takes her place, Lol erases herself: the advance of one implies the annulment of the other. What we notice in Lol, then, is not a love still alive for Richardson, but a present trauma linked to his abandonment, which imprisons her in the past. As the title of the novel suggests, in fact, Lol finds herself in a kind of rapture or ecstasy: she does not live in the present, but is placed in an unreachable and unspeakable elsewhere.

The transposition of the past into the present continues during Lol's walks, which take on the features of *quête*, even if still unnamed:

Lol savait-elle déjà nommer celle qu'il allait rencontrer ? Pas tout à fait encore. Elle ignore que c'est elle qu'elle a suivie à travers cet homme de S. Tahla.²⁴⁸

The plot undergoes an unexpected change when it is made clear to the reader that the couple on whom Lol fixes her attention and whom she begins to spy on is that between Jacques Hold, the narrator, and his lover Tatiana Karl. The exchanges between these two characters are also described as silent:

Ils échangèrent quelques mots [...].

Ils parlaient à peine [...].

Ils ont la même expression de consternation silencieuse, d'effroi, d'indifférence profonde. [...] Lol V. Stein guette, les couve, les fabrique, ces amants. [...] Ils ne s'aiment pas. Qu'est-ce à dire pour elle ? D'autres le diraient du moins. Elle, différemment, mais elle ne parle pas.²⁴⁹

One element that appears from the outset is the fact that Lol, in her own way, invents and creates these two lovers. She aims to recreate, in her fantasies, the night she did not have access to ten years earlier: "Une place est à prendre, qu'elle n'a pas réussi à avoir à T. Beach, il y a dix ans"²⁵⁰.

Lol is later identified as the one who is distant from the others, the one who is isolated and elsewhere. In fact, Lol spies on the union between the two lovers from a hidden field from which she can glimpse what is happening thanks to a window in the room. Lol, therefore, is the one who is outside, on the fringe of the scene that instead takes place inside, in the centre of a room: "Et peut-être Lol a-t-elle peur, mais si peu, de l'éventualité d'une séparation encore plus grande d'avec les

²⁴⁸ Ivi, p. 50.

²⁴⁹ Ivi, p. 56.

²⁵⁰ Ivi, p. 57.

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autres”²⁵¹. Her isolation and placement in the past also costs her a kind of inner fatigue, so we find the element of sleep as her trait: “Elle ne se demande pas d’où vient la faiblesse merveilleuse qui l’a couchée dans ce champ. Elle la laisse agir, la remplir jusqu’à la suffocation, la bercer rudement, impitoyablement jusqu’au sommeil de Lol V. Stein”²⁵². The following pages describe not so much the scene between the two lovers, but Lol’s field of vision, whereby the sense of sight continues to predominate, in a general silence of the scene:

C’est peut-être dans le rectangle de vision de Lol qu’elle s’arrête. [...]

La fenêtre est petite et Lol ne doit voir des amants que le buste coupé à la hauteur du ventre. [...]

Elle ne voit que le mouvement de leurs visages [...]. Ils parlent peu. [...] L’expression muette de leurs visages se ressemble encore, trouve Lol.²⁵³

The silence of the two lovers is reminiscent of that between Richardson and Stretter during the ball. Likewise, the play of glances returns: the two lovers look at each other and Lol, in turn, looks at the couple while being excluded. Everything takes place in an apparently quiet silence. Lol looks for a scene similar to the one she has already experienced, or perhaps invents it, in order to avoid her exclusion from it this time, if only in being able to observe. Observing the two lovers from the window gives Lol a chance to relive the T. Beach dance. After witnessing the union between Tatiana and Jacques, Lol’s *quête* begins, as she tries to get in touch with her childhood friend to the surprise of her husband, who had always seen her as silent and indifferent:

Comme Lol n’exprimait jamais le désir de voir ou de revoir quiconque, cette initiative étonna Jean Bedford.²⁵⁴

L’image de Lol bavardant avec quiconque était inimaginable [...].²⁵⁵

On s’étonna, mais en silence.²⁵⁶

In an attempt to recreate the same scene from ten years ago and her own image from then, Lol buys a white dress like the one on the evening of the ball. Entering Tatiana’s house is described as Lol’s tenacious attempt, her first real expression of will and desire. Also at Tatiana’s house is the man, Jacques Hold, whose company Lol had seen her with and who was the object of her search.

²⁵¹ Ivi, p. 59.

²⁵² Ivi, p. 58.

²⁵³ Ivi, p. 59.

²⁵⁴ Ivi, p. 62.

²⁵⁵ Ivi, pp. 62-63.

²⁵⁶ Ivi, p. 63.

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Immediately, a very eloquent exchange of glances takes place between the two, reminiscent of that between lovers at the first dance: “Elle lui trouve le même regard intéressé que dans la rue”²⁵⁷; “Avant que cela arrive l’homme que Lol cherche se trouve tout à coup dans le plein feu de son regard. Lol, la tête sur l’épaule de Tatiana, le voit”²⁵⁸. Similarly, Lol's arrival at the house is described theatrically and through the eyes and thoughts of Tatiana Karl: “Lol l’intruse, la petite du préau, Lol de T. Beach, ce bal, ce bal, la folle, l’aimait-elle toujours? Oui”²⁵⁹. The meeting between the two friends is unnatural: Lol tries to conform to social rules to hide her madness, but the estrangement between the two women and the strangeness of this encounter emerge. Tatiana, however, is the piece of the puzzle that Lol was missing in order to reconstruct her past and her fragmented memories. It is at this point in the story that the narrator Jacques Hold finally unmask his identity and comes into play not only as the narrator's voice, but also as an active character, who has a different gaze on Lol from the others. The game of glances and silences between the characters continues, just as on the evening of the ball:

Dès que Lol a pénétré dans la maison elle n’a plus eu un regard pour moi.²⁶⁰

Tatiana n’est pas bavarde et ce jour-là elle l’était encore moins que d’habitude.²⁶¹

Lol parla peu [...].²⁶²

Puis de nouveau le silence s’installa.²⁶³

C’était inévitable : elle n’avait rien à dire à Tatiana, rien à raconter [...].²⁶⁴

J’étais le seul à savoir, à cause de ce regard immense, famélique qu’elle avait eu pour moi en embrassant Tatiana, qu’il y avait une raison précise à sa présence ici.²⁶⁵

Elle évitait de me voir. Je ne lui adressais pas la parole.²⁶⁶

Lol la suit des yeux. Nous la regardons, Lol V. Stein et moi.²⁶⁷

²⁵⁷ Ivi, p. 65.

²⁵⁸ Ibidem.

²⁵⁹ Ibidem.

²⁶⁰ Ivi, p. 67.

²⁶¹ Ibidem.

²⁶² Ibidem.

²⁶³ Ivi, p. 68.

²⁶⁴ Ibidem.

²⁶⁵ Ivi, p. 69.

²⁶⁶ Ibidem.

²⁶⁷ Ivi, p. 70.

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Among the characters there are thus very few words and a great many silences, with many eloquent glances. The language of words seems to be insufficient to communicate what exists between the characters. At the same time, Lol is so unknowable that any attempt to circumscribe her with words is futile:

On devait ne jamais guérir tout à fait de la passion. Et, de plus, celle de Lol avait été ineffable [...].²⁶⁸

Rien ne pouvait faire entrevoir dans cette femme-ci, même fugitivement, le deuil étrange qu'avait porté Lol V. Stein de Micheal Richardson.

De sa folie, détruite, rasée, rien ne paraissait subsister [...].²⁶⁹

Lol's madness is therefore ineffable: there are no words that can recount it. Moreover, it is mysterious and hidden: it does not appear in the public eye. Lol is described by Tatiana as a strange girl all her life, even “étrangement incomplète”²⁷⁰. Yet, the narrator, who studies Lol from the very first moment, finally finds the key to deciphering her mysterious presence:

Ceci est arrivé. Alors que Tatiana ajuste une nouvelle fois sa coiffure je me souviens d'hier – Lol la regarde – je me souviens de ma tête à ses seins mêlés, hier. Je ne sais pas que Lol a vu et pourtant la sorte de regard qu'elle a sur Tatiana me fait en souvenir.²⁷¹

Lol's gaze on Tatiana coincides with Jacques's because, in the triangulation of the experience of the love union that Lol has only passively witnessed, there is the sharing of an intimacy that Lol experiences as an overlap. This constant interplay of glances and silences provokes in the narrator a very strong curiosity towards Lol, about whom, however, he soon realises he can know almost nothing:

En ce moment, moi seul de tous ces faussaires, je sais : je ne sais rien. Ce fut là la première découverte à son propos : ne rien savoir de Lol était la connaître déjà. On pouvait, me parut-il, en savoir moins encore, de moins en moins sur Lol V. Stein.²⁷²

Lol, a silent character, is the enigma par excellence. If Lol's *quête* is to relive an experience of the past to which she had no access, the *quête* of Jacques is to know Lol's unfathomable mystery.

²⁶⁸ Ivi, pp. 67-68.

²⁶⁹ Ivi, p. 68.

²⁷⁰ Ivi, p. 70.

²⁷¹ Ibidem.

²⁷² Ivi, p. 71.

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Both quests, however, are destined to fail not only in concrete experience but also in language: there are in fact no adequate words to say these two *quêtes*.

In the course of the evening, however, a change takes place: Lol, from mute, starts talking non-stop and begins exchanging glances with the narrator.

Elle décrit encore. Elle parle de U. Bridge. [...] Elle parle plus vite, à voix plus haute, son regard nous a lâchés [...].

Je voulais revoir ses yeux sur moi [...].

Elle me regarda, comme je le désirais. Ce regard lui échappa détourna le cours de sa pensée.²⁷³

The *bavardage*, as well as the weeping cry, is the only alternative we see in Lol when she is not silent. However, in this case, we soon realise that her *bavardage* is related to madness and that Lol is not present at that moment. At the same time, Lol gives in and starts looking at the narrator: “Lol V. Stein perde contenance, elle me cherche des yeux”²⁷⁴.

During a second evening, this time at Lol's house, the encounter between the three characters takes on even more laconic and fragmentary traits. The dialogues are broken up: the narrator, in fact, cannot report everything because there are pieces of speech he does not hear. This means that the reader only partially accesses the dialogues between the two women, which are in any case punctuated by pauses and silences:

Tatiana doit être sur le bord de faire une confidence à Lol. Elle parle, prend des pauses [...] Elle ne veut pas de confidences de Tatiana [...]. Nous sommes dans ses mains ? Pourquoi ? Comment ? Je ne sais rien.²⁷⁵

Lol caresse toujours les cheveux de Tatiana. D'abord elle la regarde intensément puis son regard s'absente [...]. Elle a un regard opaque et doux. Ce regard qui était pour Tatiana tombe sur moi : elle m'aperçoit derrière la baie. [...] Tatiana ne s'aperçoit de rien. [...] Ainsi, je les entends. Tout à coup, voici leurs voix entrelacées [...]. Je les entends. C'est ce que Lol désirait.²⁷⁶

Once again, the game of glances and silences returns. The speech is completely fragmented as the narrator only occasionally hears the conversation. Not only is the speech incomplete because of a physical obstacle, Jacques' inability to hear everything, but also because Lol's own sentences are often not completed:

²⁷³ Ivi, p. 72.

²⁷⁴ Ivi, p. 75.

²⁷⁵ Ivi, pp. 78-79.

²⁷⁶ Ivi, pp. 79-80.

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-Presque toujours. Surtout quand je
Tatiana attend. Le reste de la phrase ne viendra pas.²⁷⁷

The typographical blank, without any punctuation, suggests Lol's immediate interruption of speech, which is as incomplete as her sentences are.

The game of silences, concealments and glances continues throughout the rest of the evening: “Je les vois, ses yeux cherchent les miens. Tatiana n’a rien vu encore”²⁷⁸. In this case, unlike on the evening of the ball, Lol is an active participant in the looming triangulation and the excluded element is Tatiana. Moreover, the element of sleep continues to characterise Lol: “comme s’il y avait un sommeil d’enfant à préserver”²⁷⁹. The conversation between the two women becomes fragmentary again:

Elles se taisent. [...] Tatiana murmure.
-Après tant d’années je voulais te demander si...
Je n’entends pas le reste de la phrase [...].²⁸⁰

The sentence, which once again is not finished, is nevertheless followed by suspension points, unlike the previous blank. The suspension points that interrupt Tatiana's sentence are in fact the sign of a continuity of the sentence that exists, but which the narrator-reader cannot hear. Otherwise, the blank that had abruptly interrupted Lol's sentence remains as if to indicate that beyond that blank space there is nothing: “rien”, precisely.

The fault-filled conversation between the two women returns to the dance of ten years ago and transports them both to an elsewhere far removed from Jacques Hold: “Dans ce bal, toutes les deux, embusquées, m’oublie”²⁸¹. Again, the dialogues between the women are fragmented by pauses and silences: “Elles se taisent”; “Elles se taisent encore”²⁸². Finally, Jacques, having been excluded from the conversation, abruptly enters into it with an uncomfortable question:

C’est à Tatiana, alors, que je demande :
-Comment était Michael Richardson ?
Elles ne sont pas surprises, se regardant sans fin, sans fin, décident de l’impossibilité de raconter, de rendre compte de ces instants, de cette nuit dont elles connaissaient, seules, la véritable épaisseur [...].²⁸³

²⁷⁷ Ivi, p. 81.

²⁷⁸ Ivi, p. 83.

²⁷⁹ Ibidem.

²⁸⁰ Ibidem.

²⁸¹ Ivi, p. 85.

²⁸² Ibidem.

²⁸³ Ivi, p. 86.

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Words cannot render the absolute that characterised the night of the ball, so the two women, with a complicit play of glances, choose not to tell what cannot be told. A veritable crisis of language is staged: “La perte du moment d'éternité et d'absolu qu'a connue Lol lors de la scène inaugurale dubal (qui se clôt aussi sur un silence), elle peut la contrer en investissant le silence, état dans lequel ‘toute trace de sentiment est chassée’”²⁸⁴. Verbal language continues to fail in favour of that of gestures and glances. Finally, the increasingly unintelligible and fragmented conversation becomes a fast-paced exchange of jokes that culminates in the affirmation of Lol's wish: that of seeing the two lovers lost forever.

-Que vouliez-vous ?

Lol se tait. Personne n'insiste. Puis elle me répond.

-Les voir.

Je vais sur le perron. Je l'attends. Depuis la première minute, lorsqu'elles se sont embrassées devant la terrasse, j'attends Lol V. Stein. Elle le veut. Ce soir, en nous retenant, elle joue avec ce feu, cette attente, elle le déplace sans cesse, on dirait qu'elle attend encore à T. Beach ce qui va arriver ici. Je me trompe. Où va-t-on avec elle ? On peut se tromper sans cesse mais voici que non, je m'arrête : elle veut voir venir avec moi, s'avancer sur nous, nous engloutir, l'obscurité de demain qui sera celle de la nuit de T. Beach. Elle est la nuit de T. Beach.²⁸⁵

Eventually, the narrator and Lol enter into a personal encounter, which culminates in the ignition of desire between the two, and which is characterised by Jacques's recognition that Lol is still stuck on the night of the ball. The narrator allows himself to be transported into this madness and past and takes the reader with him, who eagerly reads the continuation of the story from his point of view.

L'approche de Lol n'existe pas. On ne peut pas se rapprocher ou s'éloigner d'elle. Il faut attendre qu'elle vienne vous chercher, qu'elle veuille. Elle veut, je le comprends clairement, être rencontrée par moi et vue par moi dans un certain espace qu'elle aménage en ce moment. Lequel ? Est-il peuplé des Cantômes de T. Beach, de la 960 seule survivante Tatiana, piégé de faux-semblants, de vingt femmes aux noms de Lol ? Est-il autrement ? Tout à l'heure aura lieu ma présentation à Lol, par Lol. Comment m'amènera-t-elle près d'elle ?

- Je crois depuis dix ans qu'il n'était resté que trois personnes, eux et moi.

Je demande encore :

- Que désiriez-vous ?

Avec strictement la même hésitation, le même intervalle de silence, elle répond :

- Les voir.

²⁸⁴ Corentin Lahouste, « Silence absolu. Du *Ravissement de Lol V. Stein* de Marguerite Duras », cit.

²⁸⁵ Marguerite Duras, *Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein*, cit., p. 88.

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Je vois tout. Je vois l'amour même. Les yeux de Lol sont poignardés par la lumière : autour, un cercle noir. Je vois à la fois la lumière. et le noir qui la cerne. Elle avance vers moi, toujours, au même pas.

[...]

Mais qu'est-ce que j'ignore de moi-même à ce point et qu'elle me met en demeure de connaître ?²⁸⁶

Lol seems to exert a powerful fascination on the narrator, who cannot choose to move away or get closer to her and can only wait for her. Jacques senses that Lol is constructing an imaginary space of her own where she wishes to be joined by him, and understands that this space is inhabited by the ghosts of the past. In fact, not surprisingly, the previous question returns, with the same answer: Lol's desire is to see the two lovers. The text at this point takes on the features of a dream: we are transported into another dimension and it is not clear who is present among the characters nor what the precise context is. It seems like a *rêverie*: “c’est elle seule qui l’a prononcé – mais en silence – dans un rêve si fort qu’il lui a échappé et qu’elle ignore l’avoir eu”²⁸⁷. In this dreamlike space, the narrator's desire grows stronger and stronger, just as the mystery around the figure of Lol, who manifestly cultivates a secret, deepens:

Je désire comme un assoiffé boire le lait brumeux et insipide de la parole qui sort de Lol V. Stein, faire partie de la chose mentie par elle.²⁸⁸

-Tu nous caches quelque chose, Lola, dit Tatiana.²⁸⁹

What Lol seems to keep silent, to lie, not to reveal is “le bonheur”²⁹⁰. However, the conversation remains mysterious because Lol is unable to find suitable words to explain what she means to express:

-Tu ne peux pas dire pourquoi ? demande Tatiana.

-Ce ne serait pas clair, ça ne serait pas utile.²⁹¹

Attempting to explain would be unhelpful as Lol is already aware that the word she is searching for does not exist, it is the “mot-trou” that lies at the centre of her existence and causes her to live in silence. In this text, Duras explores the limits of language by staging characters who struggle to find the words to express what they think. Yet, despite the hesitations and silences, we notice a

²⁸⁶ Ivi, p. 89.

²⁸⁷ Ivi, p. 90.

²⁸⁸ Ibidem.

²⁸⁹ Ivi, p. 91.

²⁹⁰ Ibidem.

²⁹¹ Ivi, p. 92.

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rapprochement between Lol and Jacques, as the two seem to understand each other beyond words. Indeed, Lol claims to have chosen Jacques - “Je vous ai choisi”²⁹² - to repeat the past experience of which she is a prisoner, to the extent that the narrator states: “Je suis dans la nuit de T. Beach”²⁹³; “Je suis l’homme de S. Tahla qu’elle a décidé de suivre”²⁹⁴. The exchange between the two characters is scarce in words, so much so that Lol often interrupts her own sentences:

-Mais qu’est-ce que vous voulez ?

Elle ne sait pas.

-Je veux, dit-elle.

Elle se tait, regarde ma bouche.²⁹⁵

In this fragmentary and laconic conversation, it is no coincidence that the two characters call each other by name and that their full names emerge, including “Lola Valérie Stein”²⁹⁶. However, the realisation soon dawns that this identity is actually unattainable and located elsewhere:

Au moment où mes mains se posent sur Lol le souvenir d’un mort inconnu me revient : il va server l’éternel Richardson, l’homme de T. Beach, on se mélangera à lui, pêle-mêle tout ça ne va faire qu’un, on ne va plus reconnaître qui de qui, ni avant, ni après, ni pendant, on va se perdre de vue, de nom, on va mourir ainsi d’avoir oublié morceau par morceau, temps par temps, nom par nom, la mort.²⁹⁷

The overlap of present and past is such that Hold, almost by osmosis, sees a past and a man he has never known personally. There is a real confusion between the identities of the characters, in the literal sense of the term: the characters are fused together and can no longer be distinguished. The conversation between Lol and Hold becomes thicker and thicker until the woman confesses to him that she spied on him while he was with Tatiana in the hotel room, between one silence and another:

Je ne lui réponds pas.²⁹⁸

Le violon cesse. Nous nous taisons.²⁹⁹

²⁹² Ivi, p. 99.

²⁹³ Ibidem.

²⁹⁴ Ivi, p. 100.

²⁹⁵ Ibidem.

²⁹⁶ Ibidem.

²⁹⁷ Ivi, pp. 100-101.

²⁹⁸ Ivi, p. 102.

²⁹⁹ Ibidem.

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La phrase vient de mourir, je n'entends plus rien, c'est le silence, elle est morte aux pieds de Lol, Tatiana est à sa place.³⁰⁰

Je ne réponds pas.³⁰¹

Elle se laisse glisser sur le sol, muette, elle prend une pose d'une supplication infinie.³⁰²

The dialogue seems to enact silence rather than words. Only one important sentence emerges and makes its way through: the one in which Lol describes the scene of the union between the two lovers as seen from the window.

L'intensité de la phrase augmente tout à coup, l'air a claqué autour d'elle, la phrase éclate, elle crève le sens. Je l'entends avec une force assourdissante et je ne la comprends pas, je ne comprends même plus qu'elle ne veut rien dire.³⁰³

Lol also manifests to Jacques her desire that he should not leave Tatiana for her: her desire, in fact, is simply in her gaze. Lol wants to witness their union: she does not want to be cut off from it, but she longs to take a marginal and not a leading role in this triangulation of desire. This triangulation is also a triangulation of gazes as Jacques joins Tatiana:

Nous nous sommes donc regardés, je l'ai cru. [...]

Ainsi, Tatiana, je la lui ai montrée.³⁰⁴

Moreover, for Lol, accessing the love scene takes on a fundamental significance, because it is the achievement of the absolute that she had been missing:

Cet instant d'oubli absolu de Lol, cet instant, cet éclair dilué, dans le temps uniforme de son guet, sans qu'elle ait le moindre Espoir de le percevoir, Lol désirait qu'il fût vécu. Il le fut.³⁰⁵

However, in this absolute moment, it seems that Lol replaces Tatiana at least in Jacques's mind. This gives rise to a mental overlap of the characters and the confusion mentioned earlier:

³⁰⁰ Ivi, p. 103.

³⁰¹ Ibidem.

³⁰² Ibidem.

³⁰³ Ivi, p. 102.

³⁰⁴ Ivi, p. 107.

³⁰⁵ Ivi, p. 108.

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Il devait y avoir une heure que nous étions là tous les trois, qu'elle nous avait vus tour à tour apparaître dans l'encadrement de la fenêtre, ce miroir qui ne reflétait rien et devant lequel elle devait délicieusement ressentir l'éviction souhaitée de sa personne.³⁰⁶

In this condition, Hold begins to confuse Tatiana with Lol to the extent that "il parla continûment à une autre qui ne voyait pas, qui n'entendait pas"³⁰⁷. Moreover, the dialogues between the two are fragmented and interrupted by suspension points, or even castrated by the characters themselves: "Ah ces mots, tu devrais te taire, ces mots, quel danger"³⁰⁸; "Ah! Tu ne devrais pas parler comme ça, tu ne devrais pas"³⁰⁹. In the meantime, Lol's figure seems to plunge more and more into silence, in which she also involves Hold given the secret they share:

Elle ne bouge pas, absente, elle ne parle pas aux enfants, les enfants non plus ne lui adressent pas la parole.³¹⁰

Elle ne réclame aucune parole et elle pourrait supporter un silence indéfini. Je voudrais faire, dire, dire un long mugissement fait de tous mots fondus et revenus au même magma, intelligible à Lol V. Stein. Je me tais.³¹¹

At the same time, Lol declares her love for Hold, but does so in a low voice. Lol's love, moreover, is a transposition of an old desire that has nothing to do with the present:

Elle aime, aime celui qui doit aimer Tatiana. Personne. Personne n'aime Tatiana en moi. Je fais partie d'une perspective qu'elle est en train de construire avec une obstination impressionnante, je ne lutterai pas.³¹²

The level of overlap between the characters is such that Tatiana, in a gesture of love, hides her own head under the sheets and pretends to be Lol so that Jacques can love her: "Il faut de nouveau faire taire Tatiana sous le drap"³¹³. Once again, the game of silences between the characters returns so that each can be what they are not. A general unknowability emerges from this situation:

-Ce qui s'est passé dans cette chambre entre Tatiana et vous je n'ai pas les moyens de le connaître. Jamais ne saurai. Lorsque vous me racontez il s'agit d'autre chose.³¹⁴

³⁰⁶ Ibidem.

³⁰⁷ Ivi, p. 109.

³⁰⁸ Ibidem.

³⁰⁹ Ivi, p. 110.

³¹⁰ Ivi, p. 112.

³¹¹ Ivi, p. 113.

³¹² Ivi, p. 115.

³¹³ Ivi, p. 117.

³¹⁴ Ibidem.

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In this judgment of Lol, there emerges on the one hand an absolute that is impossible to know and inaccessible except by direct experience, and on the other hand the limit of language, which cannot restore experience. Moreover, Lol becomes a character increasingly characterised by absence and lack, and this is perceptible: “Je reconnais l’absence, son absence d’hier, elle me manque à tout moment, déjà”³¹⁵. Not only is Lol a character who lacks something, but she especially lacks the words to tell herself:

-Quand je dis que je ne l’aimais plus, je veux dire que vous n’imaginez pas jusqu’où on peut aller dans l’absence d’amour.

-Dites-moi un mot pour le dire.

-Je ne connais pas.

- La vie de Tatiana ne compte pas plus pour moi que celle d'une inconnue, loin, dont je ne saurais même pas le nom.

- C'est plus que ça encore.

[...]

-C'est un remplacement.

[...]

-Vous vouliez les voir ?

[...]

-Oui. Je n'étais plus à ma place. Ils m'ont emmenée. Je me suis retrouvée sans eux.

[...]

-Je ne comprends pas qui est à ma place.

Je la ramène vers moi. Ses lèvres sont fraîches, presque froides.

- Ne change pas.

- Mais si un jour je... - elle cogne sur le mot qu'elle ne trouve pas – est-ce qu'ils me laisseront me promener ?³¹⁶

Lol cannot find a word for the absence of love. All she is able to say is that it is a replacement: a substitution. Moreover, her desire to see, i.e. to participate passively, comes to the fore again. The absence of her gaze at the crucial moment when Richardson abandoned her, in fact, deprived her of her place: not only within that relationship, but also in the world. Lol is a flawed character: she is devoid of will, devoid of desire, devoid of words, devoid of a place in the world and devoid of a whole name. That is why every conversation ends in silence:

Taisons-nous un instant.

Son silence. Nous nous tenons immobiles, nos visages se touchant à peine, sans un mot, longtemps. [...]

³¹⁵ Ivi, p. 118.

³¹⁶ Ivi, pp. 118-119.

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-Je ne vous aime pas quand je me tais d'une certaine façon.³¹⁷

Silence, then, does not signify love but its absence. Lahouste calls Lol a figure of absence and writes that this is closely linked to emptiness: "En effet, Lol, le bal et l'acte sexuel échappent, et face à ce qui échappe, on est nécessairement confronté à un vide. Vide de/dans la représentation, vide de/dans la perception, vide de/dans l'attente, créant dès lors un vide dans le langage"³¹⁸. Lol seems to be perfectly at ease in social situations even when silence reigns:

Le dîner est relativement silencieux. Lol ne fait aucun effort pour qu'il le soit moins [...]³¹⁹.

De nouveau, Tatiana Karl, Lol V. Stein et moi nous nous retrouvons : nous nous taisons. [...] Nous nous taisons toujours à peu près complètement. [...] Nous nous taisons encore.³²⁰

Besides the silence of the love triangle, we notice that Lol is perfectly at ease:

Soudain elle avance son visage vers moi sans regard, sans expression, comme si elle allait me poser une question qui ne vient pas.³²¹

Lol ne répond pas tout de suite, tous la regardent, il passe quelque chose dans ses yeux, comme un frisson.³²²

Elle répond qu'elle ignore avoir jamais habité. La phrase n'est pas terminée.³²³

Lol's behaviour is reminiscent of madness and she is a character who arouses deep disquiet and confusion in the other diners. And yet, for Hold, her mystery is so fascinating that it draws him to her, even in the knowledge of her lack of love and madness. Back again, at this point in the text, is the word "bonheur", on which Lol had previously paused and fell silent. Once again, we only access parts of the speech, as the narrator is hidden: "Je viens silencieusement, je glisse entre les autres [...]. Pourtant Lol ne répond pas encore"³²⁴. The conversation lingers until it is Tatiana herself, almost impatient and tormented, who asks Lol the question directly once again:

-Dis-moi quelque chose sur le bonheur, dis-le-moi.

³¹⁷ Ivi, p. 120.

³¹⁸ Corentin Lahouste, « Silence absolu. Du *Ravissement de Lol V. Stein* de Marguerite Duras », cit.

³¹⁹ Marguerite Duras, *Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein*, cit., p. 121.

³²⁰ Ivi, p. 122.

³²¹ Ivi, p. 123.

³²² Ivi, p. 124.

³²³ Ibidem.

³²⁴ Ivi, p. 126.

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Lol demande, sans agacement, avec gentillesse :

-Pourquoi Tatiana ?

-Quelle question Lol.

Alors Lol cherche, son visage se crispe, et avec difficulté, elle essaye de parler du bonheur.³²⁵

It is at this point that Lol starts talking about going somewhere, but does not finish the sentence: “Elle ne continue pas”³²⁶. The dialogue continues until Lol finally reveals the place of her pilgrimage, T. Beach, which is followed by a typographical blank. We notice that Lol is characterised by a constant fatigue, which wears her down, as she tries to tell her story. She cannot put her feelings into words: she is a prisoner of them, just as she is of the past. We note, in the course of the dialogues, that a characteristic feature of Lol is that she does not finish her sentences:

-Pourquoi ne rien dire ? Pourquoi ? Pourquoi y aller ?

-Je croyais que

Elle ne termine pas.³²⁷

Like the previous time, Lol's line stops on a blank: there is no punctuation afterwards. However, the conversation, in Hold's invention and in reality, is characterised by silences: “Nous nous taisons”; “Comme ils se taisent encore, pense Tatiana”; “Ce silence”; “sans un mot”³²⁸. Lol seems to provoke the silence and muteness of others around her. For Hold, this stems from the enigma that Lol harbours within herself:

La transparence m'a traversé, je la vois encore, buée maintenant, elle est allée vers autre chose de plus vague, sans fin, elle ira vers autre chose que je ne connaîtrai jamais, sans fin.³²⁹

Lol is unreachable because she is in an endless elsewhere. The words “sans fin” recur in the text and take up the opening episode of the “mot-trou”. Not coincidentally, the dance episode also returns, albeit dislocated in time and space, with other characters as protagonists: “J'ai dansé avec la femme de U. Bridge”³³⁰, Hold says in an echo reminiscent of the first dance depicted in the novel. Duras's style is in fact characterised by multiple repetitions. It is no coincidence that the encounters between Hold and Tatiana are also multiple and similar, which Lol continues to attend surreptitiously,

³²⁵ Ivi, p. 128.

³²⁶ Ivi, p. 129.

³²⁷ Ivi, p. 130.

³²⁸ Ibidem.

³²⁹ Ivi, p. 131.

³³⁰ Ivi, p. 133.

spying on them from the window. What is highlighted is always the sleepiness that characterises Lol: “Elle vient là pour dormir”³³¹. We also note that as the encounters take place, the more Lol is present between the two lovers as the now obvious third element of the love triangle: “Lol est dans son bonheur, notre tristesse qui le porte me paraît négligeable”³³². In this triangulation, silence mingles with the shouting between Hold and Tatiana, who by now no longer knows where to stand: “elle ne sait plus où se mettre elle non plus, elle a quelque chose à dire, elle hésite, qui n’arrive pas à sortir et qui sort tout bas”³³³. Tatiana seems almost to have become infected by Lol and to have taken her place: the place, that is, of someone who cannot find the right words to say to each other and no longer knows what role she plays within a relationship.

The final scenes of the book, as in an eternal return “sans fin”, take Lol back to the place where it all began. Accompanying her this time is the narrator, who is increasingly fascinated by the mystery and strangeness of his beloved:

Puisque je sais – ai-je jamais su à ce point quelque chose ? – qu’elle m’est inconnaissable, on ne peut pas être plus près d’un être humain que je le suis d’elle, plus près d’elle qu’elle-même si constamment envolée de sa vie vivante.³³⁴

Lol's unknowability is the trait that is repeatedly emphasised in the text and which stems largely from her silences: “par son identité fragmentaire – qui est, en réalité, le propre de toute identité -, Lol incarne le non-savoir auprès de Jacques Hold”³³⁵. Lol is in fact constantly juxtaposed with adverbs such as “pudiquement” and it is said of her that: “Elle réclamait d’être embrassée sans le demander”³³⁶ and, as usual, “Elle se blottit de nouveau, ferme les yeux, se tait, attentivement”³³⁷. The fact that Lol does not communicate means that it is the narrator himself who deduces meanings from her silences, without any certainty that his observations are correct. Another trait that is repeatedly emphasised about Lol is her difficulty in expressing herself: “Le lecteur est donc confronté à l’histoire d’un témoignage impossible, d’un échec du dire”³³⁸.

-Je voudrais vous parler un peu du bonheur que j’éprouve à vous aimer, dit-elle. J’ai besoin de vous le dire depuis quelques jours.³³⁹

³³¹ Ivi, p. 137.

³³² Ibidem.

³³³ Ivi, p. 138.

³³⁴ Ivi, pp. 141-142.

³³⁵ Corentin Lahouste, « Silence absolu. Du *Ravissement de Lol V. Stein* de Marguerite Duras », cit.

³³⁶ Marguerite Duras, *Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein*, cit., p. 142.

³³⁷ Ivi, p. 143.

³³⁸ Corentin Lahouste, « Silence absolu. Du *Ravissement de Lol V. Stein* de Marguerite Duras », cit.

³³⁹ Marguerite Duras, *Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein*, cit., p. 144.

Yet, when it comes to actually speaking, we find the usual blank without punctuation after her interrupted sentences:

-Oui. Surtout de cette façon. Vous êtes si près de
Elle raconte ce bonheur d'aimer, matériellement.³⁴⁰

The sentence is interrupted without even the observation of its interruption by Hold. Rather, the emphasis this time is on the fact that Lol is always hiding something: “Je vous caches des choses, c’est vrai”³⁴¹; “Le ton varie, elle cache quelque chose”³⁴².

As Lol gets closer to the place of the initial dance, she also seems to get closer to happiness: “Je suis moins loin qu’avant de savoir. J’ai été longtemps à le mettre ailleurs que là où il aurait dû être. Maintenant je crois que je me rapproche de là où il serait heureux”³⁴³. In fact, Lol begins to alienate herself and to live more and more within her own mind and within her fictional universe located in the past:

Elle parle, se parle. J’écoute attentivement un monologue un peu incohérent, sans importance quant à moi. J’écoute sa mémoire se mettre en marche [...].
Elle est très occupée par ce qu’elle cherche à revoir. C’est la première fois qu’elle s’absente si fort de moi.³⁴⁴

On the train that will take her and Hold to T. Beach, Lol becomes completely detached and absent. What Lol performs is a sort of interior monologue out loud. Hold merely passively witnesses this “avènement”³⁴⁵ that concerns him only as a pawn allowing Lol to relive the past in the present: “Voici venue l’heure de mon accès à la mémoire de Lol V. Stein. [...] Elle revoit sa mémoire-ci pour la dernière fois de sa vie, elle l’enterre”³⁴⁶; “Vous êtes maintenant de ce voyage qu’on m’empêche de faire depuis dix ans”³⁴⁷.

This second trip to T. Beach allows Lol to revisit the casino hall where the ball had taken place and this rediscovery also allows Hold to progress in his *quête* about Lol's mysterious identity. The two *quêtes*, although they have different objects, thus progress at the same time, inextricably

³⁴⁰ Ibidem.

³⁴¹ Ibidem.

³⁴² Ivi, p. 145.

³⁴³ Ivi, p. 146.

³⁴⁴ Ivi, p. 147.

³⁴⁵ Ivi, p. 148.

³⁴⁶ Ibidem.

³⁴⁷ Ivi, p. 149.

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linked. Lol, increasingly captured by the past in the present, which becomes an obsession, continues to speak without finishing her sentences, which remain unfinished like her name and her past:

Peut-être qu'il ne faudrait plus que je vous voie ensemble sauf
Elle a parlé rapidement. Peut-être la phrase a-t-elle été inachevée cette fois-ci par le premier coup de freins de l'arrêt : nous arrivons à T. Beach.³⁴⁸

Not only do her sentences remain incomplete, but it also happens that Hold is actually dragged into Lol's past in a character confusion reminiscent of the one that already took place during the triangulation with Tatiana:

Lol regardait. Derrière elle j'essayais d'accorder de si près mon regard au sien que j'ai commencé à me souvenir, à chaque seconde davantage, de son souvenir. [...] Une trace subsiste, une. Seule, ineffaçable, on ne sait pas où d'abord. Mais quoi ? ne le sait-on pas ? Aucune trace, aucune, tout a été enseveli, Lol avec tout. [...] Elle regarde par à-coups, voit mal, ferme les yeux pour mieux le faire, les rouvre. [...] Elle peut revoir indéfiniment ainsi, revoir bêtement ce qui ne peut pas se revoir.³⁴⁹

The instrument that Lol uses to recapture the past is, however, the gaze: the gesture of seeing, for Lol, is that of appropriation. Lol is not an active participant, but an observer of what passes before her eyes. The same action is performed by Hold, who physically brings his gaze closer to hers in order to see with his own eyes and participate, marginally, in the same past. However, something is impossible to find: we notice in Lol an effort, an extreme concentration, but something escapes. Indeed, it is not possible to regain in the present what has been lost in the past. This causes both characters to sleep.

-Je me suis levée tellement tôt, que j'ai sommeil.
[...]
Elle s'endort.
Sa main s'endort avec elle, posée sur le sable. [...]
Je n'essaie pas de lutter contre la mortelle fadeur de la mémoire de Lol V. Stein. Je dors.³⁵⁰

Elle dort toujours, dans la même position. Il y a une heure qu'elle dort. [...] Sa main est restée à l'endroit où elle s'est endormie [...].³⁵¹

³⁴⁸ Ivi, p. 148.

³⁴⁹ Ivi, p. 152.

³⁵⁰ Ivi, p. 153.

³⁵¹ Ivi, p. 155.

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In this sleep of reason, it almost seems as if the scene that has just unfolded can be placed in a dream, where there is no rational temporal or spatial location. Lol falls asleep and remains frozen in the same position for hours, as if stuck in the past. The moment Lol wakes up, Hold reflects on their eventual separation as an inevitable fact:

Je nie la fin qui va venir probablement nous séparer, sa facilité, sa simplicité désolante, car du moment que je la nie, celle-là, j'accepte l'autre, celle qui est à inventer, que je ne connais pas, que personne encore n'a inventée : la fin sans fin, le commencement sans fin de Lol V. Stein.³⁵²

In a mad game between reality and fiction, Hold realises that Lol's life is an endless circle of endless endings and beginnings, precisely because of a conclusion that never happened at the ball ten years earlier. Communication between the two always remains silent - “sans nous parler”³⁵³ - and Lol continues not to finish the sentences she starts, as Hold remarks:

-Je vais téléphoner à mon mari. Ce n'est quand même pas suffisant que je sois à T. Beach pour qu'il
Elle ajoute :
-Après je serai si raisonnable.³⁵⁴

The novel's conclusion seems to outline a path from madness to sleep and silence. In fact, the entire last chapter is characterised by the thematic core of the dream:

Lol rêve d'un autre temps où la même chose qui va se produire se produirait différemment. Autrement. Mille fois. Partout. Ailleurs. [...] Ce rêve me contamine.³⁵⁵

In this dream, Lol's identity confusion explodes, as in both name and deed she can no longer distinguish herself from Tatiana:

Elle ne bouge plus, se souvient sans doute qu'elle est là avec l'amant de Tatiana Karl.
Mais voici qu'elle doute enfin de cette identité, la seule qu'elle reconnaisse [...].
-Qui c'est ?
Elle gémit, me demande de le dire. Je dis :
-Tatiana Karl, par exemple.³⁵⁶

³⁵² Ivi, p. 156.

³⁵³ Ivi, p. 155.

³⁵⁴ Ivi, p. 156.

³⁵⁵ Ivi, p. 159.

³⁵⁶ Ivi, p. 160.

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Après, dans les cris, elle a insulté, elle a supplié, imploré qu'on la reprenne et qu'on la laisse à la fois, traquée, cherchant à fuir de la chambre, du lit, y revenant pour se faire capturer, savante, et il n'y a plus eu de différence entre elle et Tatiana Karl sauf dans ses yeux exempts de remords et dans la désignation qu'elle faisait d'elle-même - Tatiana ne se nomme pas, elle - et dans les deux noms qu'elle se donnait : Tatiana Karl et Lol V. Stein.³⁵⁷

Between Lol and Tatiana, at this moment, there is therefore a unity: the unity that Lol seeks within herself and which she is unable to achieve except through an intermediary, as Anne-Marie Stretter. In this confusion of identities, a fundamental role is given to the name: Lol calls herself by both her own name and that of Tatiana. We are also told that Lol laughs when she is called by Hold by her name: “Je l’ai appelée par son nom, Lol. Elle a ri”³⁵⁸. Lol seems increasingly characterised by a madness with no return. Hold insists that she tell him about Richardson, in an unhealthy curiosity that would also lead him into the same madness as his lover. Yet, at some point, again: “Elle se tait”³⁵⁹; “Elle ne parle pas de Tatiana Karl”³⁶⁰. Again, Lol's silence returns, as she has no words to communicate her madness, just as the element of sleep, which gives the idea of an illusory end and union, returns and concludes the circle:

Le soir tombait lorsque je suis arrivé à l’Hôtel des Bois.

Lol nous avait précédés. Elle dormait dans le champ de seigle, fatiguée, fatiguée par notre voyage.³⁶¹

The conclusion of the novel refers to both the idea of the inner journey and that of the dream. Borgomano writes: “Dans le ravissement, la scène n'existe d'abord que dans l'imaginaire: elle ne prétend plus à aucun support ‘réel’”³⁶². We do not know whether the trip to T. Beach actually took place between the two characters or not, however, we do know that Lol, as at the beginning, will take the marginal place in the scene between the two lovers and, in the silence of reason, will sleep while observing the others live their lives. Lahouste, as in this analysis, argues that: “Le rêve est alors choisi par Lol, sans aucun mot – le texte se clôt d’ailleurs sur son endormissement. Elle choisit le regard plutôt que le fait de vivre, car la projection n’est jamais décevante ; c’est d’ailleurs seulement par projection, dans l’imaginaire, dans son ‘cinéma’, qu’elle peut atteindre la couple Anne-Marie Stretter/Michael Richardson”³⁶³.

³⁵⁷ Ibidem.

³⁵⁸ Ivi, p. 161.

³⁵⁹ Ibidem.

³⁶⁰ Ibidem.

³⁶¹ Ibidem.

³⁶² Madeleine Borgomano, *Duras. Une lecture des fanatismes*, Bruxelles, Cistres coll “Essais”, 1985, p. 128.

³⁶³ Corentin Lahouste, « Silence absolu. Du *Ravissement de Lol V. Stein* de Marguerite Duras », cit.

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In general, we can see that the novel's open conclusion leaves major doubts about the passion between the two lovers: Lol seems to remain a prisoner of the past and is unable to step into the shoes of Hold's new actual lover. Their union thus appears illusory, like a dream. Hold, for his part, seems to accept Lol's impenetrable mystery, yet he continues to ask her many questions to which she continues to be unable to give an answer, since she is trapped in a silence that sees her unable to use language to express her suffering. Lol's seems to be a trauma that cannot be resolved in words. Moreover, if initially the novel follows a chronological and linear progression and even Lol's life - who after a moment of prostration marries, has three children and moves to a new home - seems to follow a clear order, halfway through the novel this perfect order falters. Lol's story mingles with that of the narrator Hold and that of Tatiana: there is a real fusion between the characters so that we no longer understand the interplay of distance and proximity between them. The dialogues between them, likewise, become fragmented and incomplete: this, together with the unreliability of the narrator and the silences of Lol, who often does not finish her sentences, means that the reader is forced to fill in, with his own meanings, the faults of which the text is full. The very conclusion of the novel, which sees Lol fall asleep in a field opposite the two lovers' hotel, leaves the reader alone with his doubts as to the interpretation of this gesture. In the end, temporality itself is confused: the reader is forced to follow the continuous temporal shifts between past and present following the rhythm of Lol's madness, who is always elsewhere. Further confirming this, we also note that the text is full of repetitive elements that recur several times in the story, further confusing times, spaces and characters. At the heart of this, there is clearly T. Beach's dance, which punctuates the narrative and is the pivot around which all the characters revolve, as in an echo that constantly draws them back to the centre, like a "image-nœud autour de laquelle va pouvoir se constituer le réseau des fantasmes"³⁶⁴. Lahouste writes about the dance: "Transgressant les limites de l'espace et du temps, elle échappe à toute circonscription spatio-temporelle. Elle forme cet événement à la fois passé, présent et futur au coeur de la vie de Lol"³⁶⁵. Marguerite Duras also confirms this in *La vie matérielle*, when she writes: "Lol V. Stein est détruite par le bal de S. Tahla. Lol V. Stein est bâtie par le bal de S. Tahla"³⁶⁶. The motif of dance and music is a further recurring element: music always alternates with silence, in a variation of themes that Lol constantly wants to relive. Indeed, it is within a musical moment - the dance - that the silence within which Lol will remain imprisoned all her life explodes. Lol's epiphany, which is also her *ravissement*, occurs in a moment of pause in the music: silence.

Silence is at the heart of the novel, which unfolds in a series of themes.

³⁶⁴ Madeleine Borgomano, *Duras. Une lecture des fantasmes*, cit., p. 142.

³⁶⁵ Corentin Lahouste, « Silence absolu. Du *Ravissement de Lol V. Stein* de Marguerite Duras », cit.

³⁶⁶ Marguerite Duras, *La vie matérielle*, Paris, P. O. L., 1987, p. 32.

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Love seems to be the core of the story, and yet in every love story there is this feeling of an abduction: the beloved is snatched away from the beloved by an interposed person. Yet, in these triangulations, what always wins is silence: there is no real communication between the lovers and no real desire, since the desire that drives them is induced by the passion of others. What is sought, rather, is possession: this is activated through the gaze, since words constantly fail.

The second central theme is that of the unspeakable: Lol cannot find any words to recount her trauma and thus remains imprisoned in the past of a dance during which her lover was taken from her. Lol emerges, momentarily, from her silence, but what she accesses are interrupted, broken sentences, often incomprehensible to others. The word, in short, is not a means of communication with the other and does not give rise to a communion of meanings. The impossibility of telling her story gets the better of her and that “mot-trou” to which Lol aspires is never found, thus leaving her a prisoner of her silence. The dance thus becomes “une expérience d’absolu au cœur de laquelle défaille le langage”³⁶⁷.

Lol's madness, which becomes contagious, is the third major theme of the novel. Indeed, as Borgomano argues, “dans cette folie seulement se trouve sa plénitude, son accomplissement”³⁶⁸. This madness exposes the unconscious areas of the protagonists' inner lives and allows us access, through the narrator's voice, to the inner mechanisms that drive the characters. We thus learn that it is not so much the kidnapping of Richardson by Stretter that is Lol's trauma, but rather the intrusive and inappropriate intervention of her mother, who stands between the lovers, thus depriving Lol of a direct confrontation with Richardson. This unresolved fracture remains in the heart of Lol, who will never again be able to love except through an intermediary. Her inner unity is in fact broken by this gesture and Lol will never become the protagonist of her life, but only a silent spectator of the lives of others. Even the hypothetically cathartic return to T. Beach will not restore her inner unity: on the contrary, Lol will always experience this internal split whereby her name will be confused with that of Tatiana. Not only, then, did the dance deprive Lol of a lover, but even of her identity. Returning in fact to Lol's name, we note that it is a diminutive of Dolores, just as the second name, Valérie, is always reduced to the initial V. in the text. These two names speak of a void, of a character marked by pain and lack. What Duras wrote in *La vie matérielle* seems perfectly suited to this character: “Écrire [...] c’est raconter une histoire et l’absence de cette histoire. C’est raconter une histoire qui en passe par son absence”³⁶⁹. Indeed, it is no coincidence that Lol's defining trait is her silence and her exclusion from all love, which she is content to observe without words.

³⁶⁷ Corentin Lahouste, « Silence absolu. Du *Ravissement de Lol V. Stein* de Marguerite Duras », cit.

³⁶⁸ Madeleine Borgomano, *Duras. Une lecture des fanatismes*, cit., p. 218.

³⁶⁹ Marguerite Duras, *La vie matérielle*, cit., pp. 31-32.

III. *Un homme qui dort*: “Tu t’es arrêté de parler et seul le silence t’a répondu”

Georges Perec published *Un homme qui dort* in 1967 as part of the collection *Les Lettres nouvelles* edited by Maurice Nadeau. In 1974, the novel became a fairly successful film.

The novel, which does not belong to the writer's oulipist period, tells the story of a young university student who wakes up one morning and decides not to get up and not to show up for the exam he was supposed to take. From this minimal fact, there follows a chain of events increasingly oriented towards a growing indifference towards the world, and the young man becomes more and more isolated until he reaches total immobility and muteness. The young man, now estranged from the world, seems to train himself in indifference almost as if in search of a modern asceticism. We see him move in only two environments: his *chambre de bonne* and the city of Paris. However, if these two dimensions of interior and exterior seem opposed, they actually point towards the same result: meaningless, aimless, endless movement. In this dreariness that seems to engulf everything, the boy reaches aphasia: he no longer speaks to anyone and language itself seems to fail in the possibility of narrating the crisis he is going through.

The whole story is narrated in the second person singular, achieving an effect of involving the reader but also of confusion between narrator, character and narratee. This effect is amplified because the narrative time is the present. As Yvan writes, the text stages “une triple dissolution: de l’espace, du temps et du corps; disparition du sujet, donc, comme jouissance ou extase du vide”³⁷⁰. If the absence of the subject is rendered through the use of the second person singular and the absence of time through the present tense of the indicative - which cancels any duration -, the absence of space occurs through the staging of two places - the room and the city - equally inert. The city is an open and potentially multiple, rich, inhabited space, but in reality, in Perec's descriptions, it resembles a collection of non-places deprived of their identity and traversed by people who have no goals; the bedroom, on the other hand, is a cramped, narrow, small, isolated space: it is the place of exile and withdrawal from the world. Yet, both spaces end up radicalizing the protagonist's separateness from the world. His inertia as he strolls aimlessly through Paris is identical to the immobility that affects him inside his bedroom: between aimless movement and changeless immobility, there is no difference. The character seems like a ghost, a shadow, a wandering somnambulist repeating mechanical gestures devoid of resonance. In fact, all spaces resemble each other: “chaque endroit étant équivalent à tous les autres, la ville n’est pas un système de lieux identifiés mais une zone homogène et indifférenciée. [...] Si la chambre et la ville apparaissent constituer un système de lieux

³⁷⁰ Frédéric Yvan, “L’extase du vide de *Un homme qui dort* à *Espèces d’espaces* de Georges Perec”, *Ères* | « Savoirs et clinique » 2007/1 n° 8 | pp. 143-153, p. 143.

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opposés – dedans vs dehors – ils ne sont pas moins l'un et l'autre extérieurs à la scène du monde : la chambre est un lieu retranché et la ville ne produit aucun lieu – c'est-à-dire aucune intériorité³⁷¹.

The atemporality due to the indicative present also resolves itself into a kind of prolonged present where nothing lasts and everything is contemporary. In this state of constant immanence, the past and future are swallowed up by the present and there is no nostalgia or desire: everything is neutral and sterilised.

In a novel in which space and time are abolished, the subject is completely emptied: Yvan even speaks of a “dissolution du corps”³⁷² that disappears in front of the mirror's reflection, since identity is an unfathomable enigma and, in this case, empty. It is no coincidence that there is never an appearance of a 'je' in the text: there is a monologue, certainly, but it is all addressed to an unidentified 'tu'. That is, there is no opposition between you and I: the subject is flattened. The use of the second person singular also generates confusion between character, narrator, author and reader.

Cet échappement de la voix narrative révèle alors simultanément une non adhérence, un défaut d'inscription ou de déposition du sujet dans l'écriture. D'ailleurs, le langage aussi se défait [...]. Signifiants sans signifiés, les mots ne sont plus que sons ou graphes non seulement indéchiffrables mais également désamarrés. Cette défaillance des signes désigne certes une exténuation du sens mais plus précisément aussi une stase hors langage. L'atopie d'*Un homme qui dort* est alors structurellement associée à une aphasie. L'extase est ici expérience d'un hors lieu et d'un hors mots ; d'un dehors simultané au monde et au langage.³⁷³

Silence or aphasia are thus the epilogue of an absence on multiple levels: language fails in its ability to describe reality because the narrative is outside time, outside space and outside the subject itself. The words Perce plays with are thus a challenge to language, in an attempt to say even what cannot be said: nothingness. The words lose their meaning, but in the same way as the aimless steps of the story's protagonist, they are emitted and create an expectation. This is because Perce, unlike Blanchot, never surrenders to absolute silence: the silence he stages in this novel is a silence that tends towards subversion, not renunciation. Indeed, for this writer, words and writing were too important to give up.

The novel, which stages a story with a fictional character, is in reality part of an autobiographical project, the continuity of which is revealed in a letter to Maurice Nadeau³⁷⁴, considered a kind of “portrait de l'artiste”³⁷⁵. *Un homme qui dort* would thus be in continuity with the project to which *L'Âge*, *Lieux où j'ai dormi* and *W ou le souvenir d'enfance* - which is the only one

³⁷¹ Ivi, p. 144.

³⁷² Ivi, p. 145.

³⁷³ Ivi, p. 146.

³⁷⁴ Georges Perce, “Lettre à Maurice Nadeau” (1969); “Notes sur ce que je cherche” (1978), in *Je suis né*, cit.

³⁷⁵ Ivi, pp. 56-57.

that has actually come to light - should have belonged: this denotes that between *fictio* and autobiography there is a very strong link and that the sleeping man is, to some extent, a representation of the artist as a young man. Philippe Lejeune, in *La Mémoire et l'oblique*, identifies this text as the close of the first of three great periods in the evolution of writing in Perec. The period closed by *Un homme qui dort* would be described by critics as “l’espace autobiographique assez classique d’un jeune écrivain qui s’exprime à travers des fictions”³⁷⁶. Going back to the genesis of the novel, Lejeune points out that a version of this text had already been written between 1961 and 1964 in a project with the title “Auto-portraits”, the last item on the list of which was precisely “Bartleby”. It is no coincidence, in fact, that Perec's text is largely inspired by Melville's *Bartleby the Scrivener*, as well as by Kafka, from whom Perec quotes in the exergue. But why Bartleby? We identify it through the words of Gianni Celati:

Bartleby è lo scrivano che rinuncia a scrivere e rimane immobile a guardare un muro, imperturbabile e laconico, sordo ad ogni ragionevole persuasione, inespugnabilmente mite. È una figura senza nessuna possibile salvezza, figura di ciò che non può essere salvato. Ma si può anche pensare che sia la figura di chi non ha nessuna voglia di farsi salvare [...].

Nessuna tragedia vera e propria, nessun fatto avventuroso, soltanto il fruscio del divenire entro gli stretti limiti del suo luogo d’apparizione. [...] Ma soprattutto è un personaggio con un’estrema scarsità di parole – personaggio strambo e incantato, che riduce tutto il suo parlare a un’unica frase usata come ritornello: “I would prefer not to” [...].³⁷⁷

We can easily guess that there is a similarity between Melville's scribe and Perec's sleeping man. Bartleby in fact leads a life of minimal acts, in a constant abandonment of all desire and in a renunciation expressed in very few words, only to give way to silence. The only sentence he utters is emblematic of his way of life, that of someone who has nothing to say and resigns himself to everything. Bartleby, like the sleeping man, leads existence like a dream. His resignation has abolished all intention and all tenacity. Bartleby's silence, according to Celati, thus indicates a “assenza di specificazioni personali”³⁷⁸: that is, he has no distinctive traits, preferences or peculiarities. Indeed, “il linguaggio con cui si manifesta l’insondabile immanenza delle cose è il loro silenzio, la sospensione di ogni risposta”³⁷⁹. The same can be said for *Un homme qui dort*. Bartleby's silence says that he is unreachable, distant, but present: “Bartleby, col suo silenzio, ci fa sentire il carattere incondizionato, assoluto, d’uno stato di presenza”³⁸⁰. His renunciation of writing makes us

³⁷⁶ Philippe Lejeune, *La Mémoire et l'oblique. Georges Perec autobiographe*, cit., p. 29.

³⁷⁷ Gianni Celati, *Narrative in fuga*, A cura di Jean Talon, Quodlibet, Macerata, 2019, pp. 11-12.

³⁷⁸ Ivi, p. 19.

³⁷⁹ Ivi, p. 21.

³⁸⁰ Ivi, p. 25.

perceive the futility of all rhetoric and his laconic sentences are evidence of his mute presence. *Bartleby*, in short, makes us grasp the power of silence. Perec's sleeping man also does the same, but in different ways. Gianni Celati, who worked on the Italian translation of *Un homme qui dort*, writes that if the man who sleeps is the “storia di un anonimo studente che si educa all’indifferenza rispetto a tutto”³⁸¹, then “*Bartleby* è lo scrivano che non vuole più scrivere, indifferente a tutte le sollecitazioni, insondabile nel suo silenzio e nella sua inerzia totale. Questo richiamo sembra suggerire la centralità della sua figura nel libro, come ispiratore delle reazioni dello studente, e soprattutto ispiratore del tipo di atarassia che lo studente insegue, nella sua deriva verso l’indifferenza assoluta”³⁸². The influence of Melville's *Bartleby*, which is also evoked in *W ou le souvenir d'enfance*, is stated by Perec himself in a well-known interview:

[...] je voulais par exemple refaire la nouvelle de Melville que je préfère, *Bartleby The Scrivener*. C’est un texte que j’avais envie d’écrire : mais comme il est impossible d’écrire un texte qui existe déjà, j’avais envie de le réécrire, pas de le pasticher, mais de faire un autre, enfin, le même *Bartleby*, mais un peu plus... comme si c’était moi qui l’avait fait.³⁸³

It is evident that Perec's text presents itself, at first glance, as a kind of rewriting of Melville. In an unpublished letter to Denise Gleizer, Perec wondered about Melville's effect on his writing and wrote: “Il faudrait lier ces deux pôles: l’ennui, le vide, le creux, le rien, d’un côté [...] et la contestation, la négation [de l’autre]”³⁸⁴. Why the character of *Bartleby*? What attributes do the two characters have in common? Firstly, they are two silent and obstinate characters. Both are characterised by renunciation. As for *Bartleby*, one only has to think of the iconic phrase: “I would prefer not to” with which he constantly denies himself. Moreover, both characters deploy a subversion that occurs through the negative, that is, through the multiple no's they say or act. Fortin-Tillard notes a number of common elements:

Plusieurs des motifs de *Un homme qui dort* de Georges Perec reprennent ceux de la nouvelle d’Herman Melville : l’isolement, le mutisme, un travail de conscience, mais aussi la négation; le refus, le désir d’absence et l’impossibilité de pactiser avec la réalité sociale figurent tout au long de la quête individuelle du personnage.³⁸⁵

³⁸¹ Ivi, p. 228.

³⁸² Ivi, p. 232.

³⁸³ *Les Lettres françaises*, n° 1188, 2 décembre 1965, p. 14, quoted by David Bellos, *Georges Perec : une vie dans les mots*, cit., p. 365.

³⁸⁴ « Lettre inédite » à Denise Gleizer dans *L’Arc*, n° 76, 1979, p. 65.

³⁸⁵ P. Fortin-Tillard, “L’effet-Bartleby: répétitions et nouveautés dans *Un homme qui dort* de Georges Perec”, *Études littéraires*, 42(2), 2011, pp.181–193. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1011528ar>, p. 184.

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While it is therefore true that there are many similar traits between the two characters, among which denial, contestation, emptiness and a sense of melancholy stand out, it is equally fair to note that there are notable differences in the path the two take and the goal they reach at the end of the stories:

Pourtant la crise révélée dans les deux cas — refus social et aspiration à l’absence pour le moins — conduit l’homme qui dort à un état limite de flottaison entouré d’abîmes alors que pour Bartleby, l’irréductibilité devant l’univers vital devient l’élément de son triomphe et de la distinction qui le submerge. De l’un à l’autre, l’altération se concrétise, semblant intarissable et multiple pour l’homme qui dort, un aimant mystérieux et contrôlé pour Bartleby. Désagrégation, émiettement, fragmentation affectent grandement le récit de Perec ; la crise générale de l’homme qui dort marque son impossibilité à se libérer de la malédiction du monde, de ses valeurs et de son essence avec comme corollaire la dissolution de tous liens véritablement vivants. Lesté de cette infortune dans laquelle il se délite, victime de la violence du monde, il sera défait et réduit par elle. L’homme qui dort vit dans un cadre dégradé dont il a conscience mais il y tourne en rond, jusqu’à ce que l’impossibilité d’en sortir devienne évidente.

Bartleby prend conscience de son impossibilité à être compte tenu de l’emprise du cadre, social, professionnel, humain, dans lequel il évolue. Il ne prétend pas se libérer mais conserver l’intégrité de sa conscience sans avoir à fuir. Melville projette donc dans le champ de bataille de Bartleby les éléments mêmes de la crise rencontrée par l’homme qui dort mais le suicide de la parole permet à son personnage de faire dévier les impacts cumulés de la violence du monde qui tendent tous à le nier. Il saisit là l’unique voie qui lui permet de demeurer lui-même, la formule (I would prefer not to) et le silence qui est aussi une manière de dire, de réfuter, voire de retrouver une intégrité par nature volatile dans le dévoilement dû à la langue. [...]

Ainsi, quête, solitude, déchirures, si elles donnent lieu aux mêmes angoisses, ne vont pas à la même conclusion dans le roman de Perec : l’angoisse est porteuse de défaite dans un cas, de victoire dans l’autre.³⁸⁶

Bartleby's silence and that of the sleeping man thus lead to two very different outcomes: if the former can claim to be the winner, the latter is the loser. If Bartleby succeeds in asserting himself through his denial and his resistance to everything - money, friendship, kindness, etc. -, the sleeping man, on the other hand, is subservient to the world and fails to achieve real change. As Tillard argues, Perec's sleeping man resembles “un Bartleby redéfini dont les névroses et les fantasmes ouvrent sur le XX siècle”³⁸⁷.

Kafka's influence, on the other hand, is linked to *Méditations sur le péché, la souffrance, l'espoir et le vrai chemin*. *Méditation 94*, in fact, reports the two attitudes of the protagonist, which we also find in Perec's sleeping man: “restreindre de plus en plus ton cercle et t’assurer constamment que tu ne tiens pas caché quelque part à l’extérieur restreindre de plus en plus ton cercle et t’assurer

³⁸⁶ Ivi, p. 184.

³⁸⁷ Ivi, p. 187.

constamment que tu ne tiens pas caché quelque part à l'extérieur". We thus note that intertextuality is a fundamental feature of this text by Perec, as well as of many of his other novels.

The protagonist of Perec's novel seems to follow a path similar to that of detachment from the world proper to those who practise a contemplative life. In what appears to be a kind of exaltation of passive virtues - silence, indifference, stillness, waiting, neutrality - Klein³⁸⁸ considered that *Un homme qui dort* could resemble those writings of the "pure perte" described by Carlo Ossola³⁸⁹. In fact, *Un homme qui dort* stages a true renunciation of everything: he strips himself of all contact with the rest of the world and all exercise of will, ultimately renouncing sociality. This project is recounted in a letter to Paulette Perec found in the novel's manuscript:

Tu n'es pas sans savoir que mon projet porte sur le thème n° 1 de la litt[érature] contemporaine pour son « contenu » : la solitude (la nausée, l'étranger, etc, etc, etc) par sa « substance » (?) : la déambulation citadine et généralement nocturne (t[ou]t le nouveau roman et bien d'autres) t[ou]s les livres qui traitent ces sujets s'en sortent par le recours à la littérature de témoignage (*la Nausée*) le suicide romantique (Le Clezio) l'exclusion sociale (*L'Etranger*) la folie (*La vie à l'envers*) [...]

Or ce que je voudrais montrer c'est l'impertinence de ces solutions. L'indifférence n[ou]s appartient au m[ême] titre que la fascination.³⁹⁰

Perec thus seems to want to investigate indifference in all its forms, showing an alternative to the texts that already thematise it: "*Un homme qui dort*, c'est les lieux rhétoriques de l'indifférence, c'est tout ce que l'on peut dire à propos de l'indifférence"³⁹¹. What is emphasised in the text is a muteness chosen by a character who, in a kind of passive rebellion against the *status quo*, initiates a neutral contemplation of the world without participating in it. In fact, the boy's sensory perceptions are minutely described and attention is often placed on minute details, as in an inventory exercise aimed at exploring the outside world in order to achieve greater inner awareness. The student's journey is in fact a path towards an ever-deeper introspection that results in indifference to everything.

³⁸⁸ Paula Klein, « Surmonter le sommeil, espérer contre toute attente. *Un homme qui dort* et l'exploration des « lieux » de l'indifférence. », in *Fabula-LhT*, n° 15, « "Vertus passives" : une anthropologie à contretemps », dir. Matthieu Vernet et Alexandre de Vitry, October 2015, <http://www.fabula.org/lht/15/klein.html>.

³⁸⁹ Cf. Carlo Ossola, *En pure perte*, Paris, Rivages, 2011.

³⁹⁰ Cf. Nicolas Neyman, *Un homme qui dort. Analyse et description des brouillons de Georges Perec*, tome 2, Transcription, Université de Paris 7, 1996-1997, 88, 47, 1 r°/v°.

³⁹¹ Georges Perec, *Entretiens et conférences*, Nantes, Joseph K, 2003, Vol. I, p. 84.

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This indifference, stylistically, is rendered through multiple elements: the nominal constructions, the use of the infinitive, the fragmented sentences as if they were aphorisms, the multiplicity of negative phrases. All this displays even better the idea of an annihilation of the subject and the search for impersonality.

The text, which is divided into sixteen sections, is characterised by a strong fragmentariness and seemed to some critics to be a symphony rhythmised by the transformations of the young man, which is even more evident in the film version:

Composée à la manière d'une symphonie, la version filmique incorpore ces deux parties majeures du texte dans de grands cycles jalonnant le rythme narratif et la progression des états d'âme du personnage : de l'indifférence au bonheur plat, de la peur à l'angoisse pour en finir avec l'attente de quelque chose de « minime ». ³⁹²

If this text can also be likened to a kind of symphony, it is equally true that the novel is characterised by the silence of its hero, or anti-hero. His total reclusion from the world and his choice to estrange himself from social life resembles an ascetic practice. Philippe Lejeune has noted that there is a similarity between Perec's autobiographical *écriture blanche* and certain spiritual exercises, such as Loyola's, from which modern rhetoric derives³⁹³. In fact, the writing of such a novel is characterised by a repetitive and monotonous rhythm, reminiscent of litanies or interior monologues. Claude Burgelin also argues that that of the sleeping man is a “exercice constant d'isolationnisme et d'annulation du corps”³⁹⁴ similar to what mystics do. This neutrality and aspiration to detachment also recalls the *degré zero* of which Barthes is the spokesman as well as a type of minimal existence characterised by a “vie dépouillée d'attributs”³⁹⁵. The desire to experience emptiness, nothingness, which already characterised Duras's Lol V. Stein, is also experienced by Perec's sleeping man. The result of this is necessarily absolute silence, which translates into aphasia. The main character is in fact mute, he does not talk to anyone. As Klein writes, “Si le silence constitue le contrepoint fictionnel de cette quête d'une écriture neutre, il est aussi un exemple privilégié du principe d'inactivité que le personnage perecquien emprunte au Bartleby de Melville [...]”³⁹⁶. The silence of the main character is thus a counterpoint to Perec's neutral writing: the meeting point between orality and writing seems to be reached in aphasia.

³⁹² Cf. Paula Klein, « Surmonter le sommeil, espérer contre toute attente. *Un homme qui dort* et l'exploration des « lieux » de l'indifférence. », cit., p. 4.

³⁹³ Cf. Philippe Lejeune, *La Mémoire et l'oblique. Georges Perec autobiographe*, cit., p. 39.

³⁹⁴ Claude Burgelin, *Georges Perec*, cit., p. 65.

³⁹⁵ Roland Barthes, *Le Neutre. Cours au Collège de France (1977-1978)*, Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 2002, p. 111.

³⁹⁶ Paula Klein, « Surmonter le sommeil, espérer contre toute attente. *Un homme qui dort* et l'exploration des « lieux » de l'indifférence. », cit., pp. 6-7.

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The silence staged in this novel, then, is the silence of indifference: the main character makes a conscious choice to renounce the outside world, and withdraws. His is a kind of subversive choice: he wakes up one morning and decides to renounce living, he becomes passive, he vegetates on the streets of Paris and in his bedroom, his life no longer makes sense. As well as recounting the passivity of its hero, the text is punctuated by various reflections on words and silence. Indeed, silence is the corollary of the protagonist's indifference and loneliness. He is a shadow among other shadows: a character who wanders aimlessly around Paris or who lets himself live in his room without exercising any will and without uttering a word. The shadow of the sleeping man, which echoes Jung's, is a shadow of passivity and absence: it is carried around by the protagonist without any direction. There is no tension in the text: the style is neutral just as we do not notice strong emotional resonances or facts that create a dynamic plot. The text expresses a constant feeling of suspension, melancholy and dreariness. The protagonist is in a permanent state of neutrality and disinterest. In this condition he seems at first to be the emblem of resistance against the squalor of modern life, characterised by perpetual motion without meaning or feeling, but later this *modus vivendi* proves to be a failure. If, like *Bartleby*, the sleeping man is symbolic of the exaltation of passive virtues and states "I would prefer not to", yet we also notice that in this absence of hierarchies and will, the world becomes indecipherable. Language, in fact, fails: it is dissolved by indifference. It is not only the protagonist who no longer speaks to the world, but it is also the world that no longer speaks to him³⁹⁷. Since silence reigns supreme and language suffers a severe crisis, the balance of the protagonist's experiences is entirely negative. Only sensory perceptions remain to tell us something about him: it is through his gaze and hearing that he is still in communication with the outside world. Yet his gaze is a neutral, passive one, letting life pass before his eyes, and his hearing is an imposed listening, since hearing occurs against all will. What emerges at the end of the text is that the indifference sought by the sleeping man is useless: it has not made him different from others. The radical experience of detachment from the world, an almost ascetic practice, has not led the character to wisdom, but rather he has painfully returned to the world of the living - in the anonymous multitude of modernity - with the same initial emptiness. As Celati writes:

Si potrebbe dire così: è un testo dove a un certo punto le conclusioni retroagiscono sulle premesse, dunque vediamo apparire un libro diverso, con una completa inversione di rotta nel finale. La solitaria deriva dello studente avrebbe dovuto portarlo all'indifferenza rispetto a qualsiasi valore, per vedere il cibo solo come cibo, un albero come un albero, e se stesso come uno dei tanti. Stranamente invece la sua deriva va a parare in un

³⁹⁷ Cf. *Lettre de Georges à Paulette Percec*, citée par Hartje, 1997, p. 81: "Cet homme qui ne veut plus parler au monde, le monde ne lui parle plus".

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miraggio dell'autocoscienza: la lusinga di un sé intoccabile, il sogno d'una soggettività autosufficiente, distaccata da tutto il resto. [...] È l'uomo che parla come in un sogno – “l'uomo che dorme” del titolo.³⁹⁸

The aspiration to silence, aphasia, loneliness, purposelessness, waiting, oblivion, and social withdrawal have led the sleeping man to nothingness. The strategy of subtraction, muteness and inertia does not work. The closing sentences of the novel refer back to Melville's text, where there is a reference to being an orphan. The same occurs in *Un homme qui dort*. Celati comments: “Questa citazione ribaltata è la negazione delle parole con cui lo studente cantava vittoria. E ora tutto il libro sembra la storia d'una liberazione fallita. [...] Strano e straordinario finale, dove all'idea d'una soggettività autosufficiente subentra quella d'una esposizione generale ai fenomeni esterni”³⁹⁹.

In order to consider the protagonist's journey in detail, we will now analyse the text. Right from the quotation in the exergue, Perec reveals the reference to Kafka and seems to warn the reader of what he will encounter in the following pages:

Il n'est pas nécessaire que tu sortes de ta maison. Reste à ta table et écoute. N'écoute même pas, attends seulement. N'attends même pas, sois absolument silencieux et seul. Le monde viendra s'offrir à toi pour que tu le démasques, il ne peut faire autrement, extasié, il se tordra devant toi.

The invitation is to stillness, waiting and silence. This is exactly what will be accomplished by the main character. Indeed, Perec's text begins with an explicit reference to sleep: “Dès que tu fermes les yeux, l'aventure du sommeil commence”⁴⁰⁰. In fact, it is precisely an aspiration to constant sleep that the protagonist tends towards, as he progressively seeks to disappear and annul himself. The following sentences, which seem to be a stream of consciousness devoid of punctuation, dwell on the meticulous description of the condition of sleepiness: the protagonist's gaze rests on every detail with almost obsessive attention. This slow start, which in fact does not recount any action but is a pure description of the sensory perceptions of the protagonist - of whom we only learn that he has a slight headache - is reminiscent of the slowness of Tristram Shandy, who writes a lot but says almost nothing.

In the second section, the focus is shifted to the minimal gestures made by the character and the description of his Parisian *chambre de bonne*. We learn that the condition of the room is as shabby as that of its inhabitant:

³⁹⁸ Gianni Celati, *Narrative in fuga*, cit., p. 236.

³⁹⁹ Ivi, p. 237.

⁴⁰⁰ Georges Perec, *Un homme qui dort*, Paris, Sodis, 2013, p. 11.

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En face de toi, à la hauteur de tes yeux, sur une étagère de bois blanc, il y a un bol de Nescafé à moitié vide, un peu sale, un paquet de sucre tirant sur sa fin, une cigarette qui se consume dans un cendrier publicitaire en fausse opaline blanchâtre.⁴⁰¹

The description of the objects suggests that this is a rather sloppy way of life and that the character is letting himself live and not caring for himself or his surroundings. Not only is the room abandoned to itself, but the protagonist also exiles himself into self-abandonment: a state in which it is even impossible to say “je”. We are also told that the protagonist stops reading, but it had already been a while since he did so. This suggests a willingness to let go or, rather, an absence of willingness. The sentence that interrupts this flow of descriptions and finally signals an action, or rather a non-action, is: “Plus tard, le jour de ton examen arrive et tu ne te lèves pas. Ce n’est pas un geste prémédité, ce n’est pas un geste, d’ailleurs, mais une absence de geste, un geste que tu ne fais pas, des gestes que tu évites de faire”⁴⁰². Once again, the main character simply does not accomplish anything. His life seems characterised by absence: the absence of gestures, of will, of words, of commitment, of action, of resolve. The main character simply waits for life to flow slowly before his eyes: “Ton réveil sonne, tu ne bouges absolument pas, tu restes dans ton lit tu refermes les yeux”⁴⁰³. In this moment, we see contrasting the stillness of the sleeping man and the start-up of the neighbours, who get up to start their day and go to work. The perception of this juxtaposition is auditory: the actions of others are detected through sounds and noises. Then, again, the negative gesture of the protagonist returns: “Tu ne bouges pas. Tu ne bougeras pas. Un autre, un sosie, un double fantomatique et méticuleux fait, peut-être, à ta place, un à un, les gestes que tu ne fais plus : il se lève, se lave, se rase, se vêt, s’en va”⁴⁰⁴. Through the enactment of a double, the reader gains access to what would have happened if the protagonist had set himself in motion. This further reinforces the contrast between the immobility of one and the activity of the other. Yet, our character remains motionless: “Tu te lèves trop tard. Là-bas, des têtes studieuses ou ennuyées se penchent pensivement sur les pupitres”⁴⁰⁵. Once again, it is through contrast that we are presented with the immobility of our character. The space also says something: “ta place restée libre”⁴⁰⁶ is the indicator of absence. Finally, through a series of negative phrases that signal what the protagonist will *not* do, we begin to see a kind of rejection and subversion in this unhealthy immobility:

⁴⁰¹ Ivi, pp. 17-18.

⁴⁰² Ivi, pp. 18-19.

⁴⁰³ Ivi, p. 19.

⁴⁰⁴ Ibidem.

⁴⁰⁵ Ivi, p. 20.

⁴⁰⁶ Ibidem.

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Tu ne diras pas sur quatre, huit ou douze feuillets ce que tu sais, ce que tu penses, ce que tu sais qu'il faut penser [...]. De toute façon, tu n'aurais rien dit car tu ne sais pas grand-chose et tu ne penses rien. Ta place reste vide. Tu ne finiras pas ta licence, tu ne commenceras jamais de diplôme. Tu ne feras plus d'études. [...] Tu ne te laves pas, tu t'habilles à peine. [...]
Tu ne vas pas à la sortie de la salle d'examen t'enquérir des sujets qui ont été proposés à la perspicacité des candidats. Tu ne vas pas au café où la coutume aurait voulu que tu ailles [...].⁴⁰⁷

Our protagonist is a character of absence. Not only does he do nothing that he is supposed to do with respect to the rules of social life, but he even seems to think nothing. He is a character completely absent to himself. The series of negative phrases is reminiscent of a litany of indifference, where each renunciation of life is punctuated by “ne... pas”.

The character is joined by friends who, unlike him, are active and try to get in touch with him and bring him back to life. However, he lets them and does not respond. He remains still and seems to feel nothing. The search of others for him is a movement from outside to inside: friends come to his house. We recognise their actions, once again, through the sounds of footsteps and the door. However, the protagonist does not awaken from the sleep of reason into which he has fallen. He seems to lead a vegetable life: he simply satisfies his basic needs and provides himself with coffee, bread and cigarettes. Any attempt by friends to get in touch with him - even through notes left under the door - is disregarded: “Tu lis les billets et tu les froisses en boule. On t’y fixe des rendez-vous auxquels tu ne te rends pas”⁴⁰⁸. The character's position is that of a man lying down and passive: “Tu restes étendu sur ta banquette étroite, les bras derrière la nuque, les genoux haut”⁴⁰⁹. The man looks at the ceiling and perceives every detail, with meticulous attention. The character's visual perceptions are amplified in his solitude. However, in terms of his inner world, he seems inhabited by nothingness: “Tu n’as envie de voir personne, ni de parler, ni de penser, ni de sortir, ni de bouger”⁴¹⁰. Finally, comes the discovery that turns the protagonist's way of thinking:

C'est un jour comme celui-ci, un peu plus tard, un peu plus tôt, que tu découvres sans surprise que quelque chose ne va pas, que, pour parler sans précautions, tu ne sais pas vivre, que tu ne sauras jamais.⁴¹¹

But what does it mean not to know how to live? The discovery comes without surprise and without arousing epiphanies or expressions of interest. It is simply accepted as a neutral fact, in the same way as an abandoned cigarette that is consumed by time.

⁴⁰⁷ Ivi, pp. 20-21.

⁴⁰⁸ Ivi, p. 21.

⁴⁰⁹ Ibidem.

⁴¹⁰ Ibidem.

⁴¹¹ Ivi, p. 21.

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Quelque chose se cassait, quelque chose s'est cassé. Tu ne te sens plus - comment dire ? - soutenu : quelque chose qui, te semblait-il, te semble-t-il, t'a jusqu'alors réconforté, t'a tenu chaud au cœur, le sentiment de ton existence, de ton importance presque, l'impression d'adhérer, de baigner dans le monde, se met à te faire défaut.⁴¹²

The character feels suspended: somehow, the sensation we grasp is that of emptiness. He lacks a foundation on which to stand, he is no longer supported by the certainties of having to be and having to do, so all his movements and all his thoughts cease. The sleeping man is a character of lack.

Mais, rien ne reste de cette trajectoire en flèche, de ce mouvement en avant où tu as été, de tout temps, invité à reconnaître ta vie, c'est-à-dire son sens, sa vérité, sa tension : un passé riche d'expériences fécondes, de leçons bien retenues, de radieux souvenirs d'enfance, d'éclatants bonheurs champêtres, de vivifiants vents du large, un présent dense, compact, ramassé comme un ressort, un avenir généreux, verdoyant, aéré. Ton passé, ton présent, ton avenir se confondent : ce sont la seule lourdeur de tes membres, ta migraine insidieuse, ta lassitude, la chaleur, l'amertume et la tiédeur du Nescafé.⁴¹³

The idea of the future, of progress and that there is a line to follow to get somewhere is here called into question. If nothing makes sense, we might as well stay put, keep quiet and do nothing. What is missing in the new life of the sleeping man is meaning, truth and tension: he tends towards nothing. Time itself, which was once divided into past, present and future, is now no longer distinct: it becomes duration, just like the present time of the narrative. The new scenario of the student's life is “ce boyau en soupente qui te serte de chambre, ce galetas [...] soit un tout petit peu de cinq mètres carrés”⁴¹⁴. The closure of the boy's environment is tantamount to the closure of his outlook on life and the future, i.e. hopeless immobility: “Tu restes dans ta chambre, sans manger, sans lire, presque sans bouger”⁴¹⁵. The only actions performed by man are passive ones: “Tu regardes”, “Tu écoutes”⁴¹⁶. Thus, Perec takes stock of the boy's life and presents him to us in these terms:

Ceci est ta vie. Ceci est à toi. Tu peux faire l'exact inventaire de ta maigre fortune, le bilan précis de ton premier quart de siècle. Tu as vingt-cinq ans et vingt-neuf dents, trois chemises et huit chaussettes, quelques livres que tu ne lis plus, quelques disques que tu n'écoutes plus. Tu n'as pas envie de te souvenir d'autre chose, ni de ta famille, ni de tes études, ni de tes amours, ni de tes amis, ni de tes vacances, ni de tes projets. Tu as voyagé et tu n'as rien rapporté de tes voyages.

⁴¹² Ibidem.

⁴¹³ Ivi, pp. 21-22.

⁴¹⁴ Ivi, pp. 22-23.

⁴¹⁵ Ivi, p. 23.

⁴¹⁶ Ibidem.

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Tu es assis et tu ne veux qu'attendre, attendre seulement jusqu'à ce qu'il n'y ait plus rien à attendre : que vienne la nuit, que sonnent les heures, que les jours s'en aillent, que les souvenirs s'estompent.

Tu ne revois pas tes amis. Tu n'ouvres pas ta porte. Tu ne descends pas chercher ton courrier. Tu ne rends pas les livres que tu as empruntés à la Bibliothèque de l'Institut pédagogique. Tu n'écris pas à tes parents.

Tu ne sors qu'à la nuit tombée, comme les rats, les chats et les monstres. Tu traînes dans les rues, tu te glisses dans les petits cinémas crasseux des Grands Boulevards. Parfois, tu marches toute la nuit ; parfois, tu dors tout le jour.⁴¹⁷

The student's life is reduced to nothingness. He is characterised by purely negative phrases, i.e. the absence of any thought or gesture. The only movement he makes is to wander the streets of Paris at night, aimlessly, in a comparison with the most disgusting beings (rats, monsters). It seems that there is no difference between walking at night and sleeping during the day: man reverses the rhythms of sleep-wake and action-passivity, but the result does not change. He no longer wants to do anything, to remember or to desire. He exists only in the present, and this causes the eternal duration of the contingent moment to immobilise him: how to move, in fact, if there is no memory worth recalling or no desirable future? The only thing left to do is to wait.

Tu es un oisif, un somnambule, une huître.

Les définitions varient selon les heures, selon les jours, mais le sens reste à peu près clair : tu te sens peu fait pour vivre, pour agir, pour façonner; tu ne veux que durer, tu ne veux que l'attente et l'oubli.⁴¹⁸

The man is compared to a somnambulist, or one who walks while sleeping: the student in fact does not sleep, but is as if in an eternal sleep of reason and feeling in which he lives without dreams, maintaining a state of stillness and immobility, physical and psychological, similar to the sleeper. The metaphor of the oyster is also interesting: this seafood contains a pearl, but if it is closed, its value is nil. Moreover, the dimension of waiting returns again. It is not, however, a waiting aimed at an end - like Duras's anguished waiting for her husband's hypothetical return, for example - but rather a waiting as duration, as the meaningless flow of time. In this sense, the life of the sleeping man is completely different from that proposed by modernity:

La vie moderne apprécie généralement peu de telles dispositions : autour de toi tu as vu, de tout temps, privilégier l'action, les grands projets, l'enthousiasme : homme tendu en avant, homme les yeux fixés sur l'horizon, homme regardant droit devant lui. Regard limpide, menton volontaire, démarche assurée, ventre rentré.

⁴¹⁷ Ivi, pp. 24-25.

⁴¹⁸ Ivi, p. 25.

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La ténacité, l'initiative, le coup d'éclat, le triomphe tracent le chemin trop limpide d'une vie trop modèle, dessinent les sacro-saintes images de la lutte pour la vie.⁴¹⁹

In short, modern life requires one to struggle, to lean towards the future in search of something. However, our silent character rejects exactly this kind of attitude, which he considers the result of “les illusions perdues des milliers de laissés-pour-compte”⁴²⁰. In contrast to the deluded ones who keep on going, the sleeping man lives in eternal suspension:

Mais tu n'as plus besoin d'excuses, de regrets, de nostalgies. Tu ne rejettes rien, tu ne refuses rien. Tu as cessé d'avancer, mais c'est que tu n'avançais pas, tu ne repars pas, tu es arrivé, tu ne vois pas ce que tu irais faire plus loin [...].⁴²¹

The sleeping man does not seek justification for his attitude: he simply does not care about anything, not even the opinions of others. What he experiences is a state of meaninglessness: if nothing makes sense, he might as well stop doing everything, from those things that require effort - such as studying, working, building social relationships - to the most mundane things like eating or talking: “Tu n'as pas besoin de parler, de vouloir”⁴²².

The conclusion of this second section of the novel is dedicated to the discovery of illusions, which soon turn into bitter disillusion:

Pendant vingt-cinq ans, n'as-tu rien su de ce qui aujourd'hui est déjà l'inexorable ? Dans ce qui te tient lieu d'histoire, n'as-tu jamais vu de failles ? Les temps morts, les passages à vide. Le désir fugitif et poignant de ne plus entendre, de ne plus voir, de rester silencieux et immobile.⁴²³

Reality is portrayed as inexorable and full of holes, i.e. gaps from which the nonsense of the hustle and bustle of everyday life can be discerned. The result of this discovery is stillness and silence.

Comme si, sous ton histoire tranquille et rassurante d'enfant sage, de bon élève [...], avait depuis toujours couru un autre fil, toujours présent, toujours tenu lointain, qui tisse maintenant la toile familière de ta vie retrouvée, le décor vide de ta vie désertée, souvenirs resurgis, images en filigrane de cette vérité dévoilée, de cette démission si longtemps suspendue, de cet appel au calme, images inertes et floues, photographies surexposées, presque blanches, presque mortes, presque déjà fossiles [...].⁴²⁴

⁴¹⁹ Ivi, pp. 25-26.

⁴²⁰ Ivi, p. 26.

⁴²¹ Ibidem.

⁴²² Ivi, p. 27.

⁴²³ Ivi, p. 28.

⁴²⁴ Ivi, pp. 28-29.

Reality is perceived almost as a deception: the truth of existence lies hidden *beneath* the apparent story of one's own life, and turns out to be empty scenery, a barren desert, an overexposed photograph. All these images refer to white, to neutrality, to fixity, to silence, to death, to absence. Jabès's motif of the desert populates the text again, as does Jung's motif of the shadow:

Tu n'es qu'une ombre trouble, un dur noyau d'indifférence, un regard neutre fuyant les regards. Lèvres muettes, yeux éteints, tu sauras désormais repérer dans les flaques, dans les vitres, sur les carrosseries luisantes des automobiles, les reflets fugitifs de ta vie ralentie.⁴²⁵

The sleeping man is constantly compared to a shadow, i.e. something that drags along behind something else, has no will of its own and simply follows. The protagonist's gaze is absent, neutral, as white as the photographs of his memories. His lips are mute: he lives in strict silence. His muteness is the counterpoint to his immobility: he does not move or speak, he has no intentions or actions. The silence of the sleeping man is a passive rejection of the *status quo*, it is a total abandonment to a world of illusions, it is a social withdrawal from friends he does not want. The past itself is questioned, so that the character's identity is increasingly anonymous: "L'oubli s'infiltré dans ta mémoire. Rien ne s'est passé. Rien ne se passera plus"⁴²⁶. Our character aspires to nothingness, a word that is constantly repeated. In this slide towards meaninglessness and emptiness, everything else is perceived as heavy, as it would require an activation to which our character is not available, as he is in a perpetual sleep: "Tout est lourdeur, bourdonnement, torpeur. Tu te laisses glisser. Tu plonges dans le sommeil"⁴²⁷.

The story of our hero continues without anything significant happening. As in the first chapter, completely insignificant events are narrated in the following chapters, such as the inspection of the pillow on which the boy sleeps. The first significant action is that of the protagonist's move from Paris to the countryside of Auxerre, where his parents live. Yet even this relocation and change of scenery is not marked by a stance or activity, but by the protagonist's usual absent passivity. He, in fact, vegetates and entertains himself in elderly pastimes without even engaging in them. The characteristic of silence also persists: "Tu parles à peine à tes parents"; "Tu manges en silence"⁴²⁸. The main actions performed by the character are passive ones: observing, listening, sitting, being served. The character's muteness soon also results in a loss of contact with words and names, which he no longer knows: "Tu ne connais pas le nom des arbres, ni celui des fleurs, des plantes, des

⁴²⁵ Ivi, pp. 29-30.

⁴²⁶ Ivi, p. 30.

⁴²⁷ Ibidem.

⁴²⁸ Ivi, p. 38.

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nuages”⁴²⁹. Knowledge, for the student, no longer occurs through language, which he gradually unlearns to use, but through his eyes. Indeed, his visual perceptions become acute, and the amplification of these is inversely proportional to his knowledge of names and words.

Au fur et à mesure que ta perception s'affine, se fait plus patiente et plus souple, l'arbre explose et renaît, mille nuances de vert, mille feuilles identiques et pourtant différentes. Il te semble que tu pourrais passer ta vie devant un arbre, sans l'épuiser, sans le comprendre, parce que tu n'as rien à comprendre, seulement à regarder [...].⁴³⁰

The gaze of our protagonist, always solitary and mute, rests on the details until it becomes a macroscopic gaze, which gets closer and closer to the subject until it loses sight of the subject as a whole and gets lost in its details. The image obtained, as in a photograph, is distorted and the macroscopic world obtained is infinite and inexhaustible in its details. In his observation of nature, our character does not attempt to investigate or understand anything: his is pure gaze, devoid of any intention. Moreover, the tree is compared to the dog: if the former is motionless, rooted, mute, devoid of desire, the latter is active, barks, has requests. The company that our mute hero prefers is naturally that of the tree because it resembles him; indeed, both live in muteness and a vegetative state:

Mais tu ne dialogueras jamais avec un arbre. [...] Mais l'arbre ne te demande rien. [...] Tu ne pourras jamais que vouloir devenir arbre à ton tour.⁴³¹

From the animal and plant kingdoms, then, the reflections shift to that of human beings. Our protagonist does not hate man, since hatred is a feeling that would require effort and energy that he does not wish to put forth. However, the sleeping man does not tolerate “cette perpétuelle indigestion de mots, de projets, de grands départs”⁴³². In short, life, with its obligations, with the swing of strong emotions, with all the actions it requires of us, is not something the sleeping man wants to subject himself to. He absents himself from life itself and vegetates like a tree. Moreover, the protagonist believes in a kind of determinism in which “tout est déjà dit, déjà fini”⁴³³ and the trajectory of life is already decided: what would be the point of striving for another course of events? In other words: “Pourquoi ferais-tu semblant de vivre? Pourquoi continuerais-tu ? [...] N'as-tu pas déjà été tout ce que tu devais être [...] ?”⁴³⁴. Faced with a series of hypothetical implications about the future and possible careers, projects, personalities, our character's only response is subtraction: “Non. Tu

⁴²⁹ Ivi, p. 40.

⁴³⁰ Ivi, p. 41.

⁴³¹ Ivi, p. 42.

⁴³² Ivi, p. 43.

⁴³³ Ibidem.

⁴³⁴ Ivi, p. 44.

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préfères être la pièce manquante du puzzle”⁴³⁵. The image of the missing piece of the jigsaw puzzle is extremely recurrent in *Perec*: here it designates a whole from which the protagonist escapes, evidently leaving a void, the same void that the writer feels is at the centre of his life. Indeed, it should not be forgotten that this novel was conceived as part of an autobiographical project. The sleeping man will no longer listen to advice or ask for a remedy for this life: “Tu restes près de l’arbre. Tu ne demandes même pas au bruit du vent dans les feuilles de devenir oracle”⁴³⁶. The tree represents the only possible anchorage for the protagonist, that is, a life lived waiting for time to pass, in the motionless waiting of one who neither desires anything nor demands anything, not even the meaning of everything. Speaking of meaning, even words end up having none.

Tu ne sors plus de la maison, à peine de ta chambre. Tu lis à voix haute, tout le our, en suivant du doigt les lignes du texte, comme les enfants, comme les vieillards, jusqu'à se que les mots perdent leur sens, que la phrase la plus simple devienne bancale, chaotique.⁴³⁷

The words are almost consumed by the sleeping man, who strives to read them aloud to erode and wear them out, until they no longer mean anything. Finally, with the same indifference and apathy with which he left, the sleeping man returns to his original habitat, but always in silence: “Tu reviens à Paris et tu retrouves ta chambre, ton silence”⁴³⁸. The relationship with time also remains unchanged, in an eternal duration:

Dans le silence de ta chambre, le temps ne pénètre plus, il est alentour, bain permanent, encore plus présent, obsédant, que les aiguilles d’un réveil que tu pourrais ne pas regarder, et pourtant légèrement tordu, faussé, un peu suspect : le temps passe, mais tu ne sais jamais l’heure [...].⁴³⁹

The disinterest in the passing of time is in line with the student's non-life conduct. His bedroom and the city of Paris - the two places he visits - are compared to the desert. The desert is indeed an arid, lonely, silent, immense and disorientating place that forces one into a mental and physical torpor.

Ta chambre est la plus belle des îles désertes, et Paris est un désert que nul n'a jamais traversé. Tu n'as besoin de rien d'autre que de ce calme, de ce sommeil, que de ce silence, que de cette torpeur.

⁴³⁵ *Ivi*, p. 45.

⁴³⁶ *Ivi*, p. 46.

⁴³⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁴³⁸ *Ivi*, p. 49.

⁴³⁹ *Ivi*, p. 51.

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Que les jours commencent et que les jours finissent, que le temps s'écoule, que ta bouche se ferme, que les muscles de ta nuque, de ta mâchoire, de ton menton, se relâchent tout à fait, que seuls les soulèvements de ta cage thoracique, les battements de ton cœur témoignent encore de ta patiente survie.⁴⁴⁰

The image of the desert is accompanied by those of sleep and silence. Time that has become duration forces one to wait, but there is nothing to wait for. Life becomes duration and the futile scrolling of seconds, as Perec explains in the next paragraph:

Ne plus rien vouloir. Attendre, jusqu'à ce qu'il n'y ait plus rien à attendre. Traîner, dormir. Te laisser porter par les foules, par les rues. Suivre les caniveaux, les grilles, l'eau le long des berges.

Longer les quais, raser les murs. Perdre ton temps. Sortir de tout projet, de toute impatience.

Être sans désir, sans dépit, sans révolte.

Ce sera devant toi, au fil du temps, une vie immobile, sans crise, sans désordre : nulle aspérité, nul déséquilibre.

Minute après minute, heure après heure, jour après jour, saison après saison, quelque chose va commencer qui n'aura jamais de fin : ta vie végétale, ta vie annulée.⁴⁴¹

Waiting for nothingness is tantamount to wasting time. The passive virtues deployed by the sleeping man mean that the text presents no plot, only reflections on indifference, immobility and silence. The student's life thus seems to have been transformed: from having to give university exams, he now finds himself wanting to learn another way of life, which coincides with the absence of any project, any desire for words.

Tu as tout à apprendre, tout ce qui ne s'apprend pas : la solitude, l'indifférence, la patience, le silence. Tu dois te déshabituer de tout [...].

Tu es seul, et parce que tu es seul, il faut que tu ne regardes jamais l'heure, il faut que tu ne comptes jamais les minutes. [...]

Tu dois oublier d'espérer, d'entreprendre, de réussir, de persévérer.

Tu te laisses aller, et cela t'est presque facile.

Tu évites les chemins que tu as trop longtemps empruntés. Tu laisses le temps qui passe effacer la mémoire des visages, des numéros de téléphone, des adresses, des sourires, des voix.

Tu oublies que tu as appris à oublier, que tu t'es, un jour, forcé à l'oubli. [...]

Tu es seul. Tu apprends à marcher comme un homme seul, à flâner, à traîner, à voir sans regarder, à regarder sans voir. Tu apprends la transparence, l'immobilité, l'inexistence.⁴⁴²

⁴⁴⁰ Ivi, p. 52.

⁴⁴¹ Ibidem.

⁴⁴² Ivi, pp. 54-55.

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The student's training is a training in reverse: rather than strengthening himself and striving for an end, he trains himself not to feel, to disuse himself, to let go completely. His is an exercise in indifference and silence.

The following pages report visions of Paris, thus of the outside world, which seem to flow like a film in front of the gaze of the young student, who is merely a passive spectator of the world unfolding. The random walks of the sleeping man through Paris are reminiscent of Perec's *Tentative d'épuisement d'un lieu parisien*, where the writer passively records everything that comes into his gaze.

En face du monde, l'indifférent n'est ni ignorant ni hostile. Ton propos n'est pas de redécouvrir les saines joies de l'analphabétisme, mais, lisant, de n'accorder aucun privilège à tes lectures. Ton propos n'est pas d'aller tout nu, mais d'être vêtu sans que cela implique nécessairement recherche ou abandon ; ton propos n'est pas de te laisser mourir de faim, mais seulement de te nourrir. Non que tu veuilles exactement accomplir ces actions en toute innocence, car l'innocence est un terme tellement fort: seulement, simplement, si ce « simplement » peut avoir un sens, les laisser dans un terrain neutre, évident, dégagé de toute valeur, et non pas, surtout pas, fonctionnel, car le fonctionnel est la pire des valeurs, la plus sournoise, la plus compromettante, mais patent, factuel, irréductible; qu'il n'y ait rien à dire sinon : tu lis, tu es vêtu, tu manges, tu dors, tu marches, que ce soient des actions, des gestes, mais pas des preuves, pas des monnaies d'échange: ton habillement, ta nourriture, tes lectures ne parleront plus à ta place [...].⁴⁴³

The indifference that the sleeping man is building is the opposite of performing functional actions, that is, actions that have a purpose. Even eating, dressing, reading must be actions devoid of nuance. Everything must be neutral, that is, aseptic, undifferentiated. The sleeping man does not want to be recognised by any positive or negative characteristic and does not want his exterior to speak of him. He wants to be pure appearance. In this training in indifference and uniformity of living, it is the word that is the hardest element to fight: “Le langage a été plus résistant”⁴⁴⁴. This is not because the character struggled to keep silent, but because words buzz in the head and unite in the form of thoughts, and to unify language means, fundamentally, to be without thoughts.

The following pages continue without any plot. The reader follows without particular interest the life of the young man, who strolls around Paris and plays cards alone. Perec wastes time, as does his character, in describing the workings of *solitaire* and the reasoning for winning, to the point that he writes: “Comme si cette stratégie solitaire et muette constituait ton seul chemin, était devenue ta

⁴⁴³ Ivi, pp. 65-66.

⁴⁴⁴ Ivi, p. 66.

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raison d'être"⁴⁴⁵. The laying out of cards - a futile gesture, a game, a pastime - becomes an exercise in silence and solitude in the young man's ascetic practice.

The narrative continues through descriptions. At first, the young man's attention is on his own eye, inspected microscopically; later, it shifts to his breath, the cracks in the ceiling, the insects that inhabit it. The story is a long list of actions, an endless list with no end in sight.

After this long training, the student finally seems to achieve the desired effect:

Au fil des heures, des jours, des semaines, des saisons, tu te déprends de tout, tu te détaches de tout. Tu découvres, avec presque, parfois, une sorte d'ivresse, que tu es libre, que rien ne te pèse, ne te plaît ni ne te déplaît. Tu trouves, dans cette vie sans usure et sans autre frémissement que ces instants suspendus que te procurent les cartes ou certains bruits, certains spectacles que tu te donnes, un bonheur presque parfait, fascinant, parfois gonflé d'émotions nouvelles. Tu connais un repos total, tu es, à chaque instant, épargné, protégé. Tu vis dans une bienheureuse parenthèse, dans un vide plein de promesses et dont tu n'attends rien. Tu es invisible, limpide, transparent. Tu n'existes plus : suite des heures, suite des jours, le passage des saisons, l'écoulement du temps, tu survis, sans gaieté et sans tristesse, sans avenir et sans passé, comme ça, simplement, évidemment [...].⁴⁴⁶

Training in indifference has led the student, apparently, to freedom. The detachment from all desires has made him free, for he, like Bartleby, has no preferences, no sorrows and no pleasures. There is nothing to disrupt the protagonist's inner life, as he is completely empty and impersonal. In this way, he feels protected, since being without expectations guarantees him peace. He is described as invisible, transparent: this means that he is pure appearance. There is nothing hidden or deep within him: there is simply nothing.

Next, the darkness of the room is compared to the sea and the student to a prow that lets itself sail. The image of the ship, however, arouses in the student an awakening, a kind of epiphany, which he does not want to experience and which he will postpone in time: "déjà, tu le sais, le réveil te guette, c'est ton impatience justement qui vient de le déclencher et tous tes efforts pour le retarder ne font que précipiter davantage"⁴⁴⁷. The feelings experienced by the student are defined as dangerous, simply because they arouse an upset in him.

Time seems to reinforce the student's longed-for indifference:

Avec le temps, ta froideur devient fabuleuse. Tes yeux ont perdu tout ce qui faisait leur éclat, ta silhouette s'est faite parfaitement tombante. Une sérénité sans lassitude, sans amertume, s'inscrit au coin de tes lèvres. Tu glisses

⁴⁴⁵ Ivi, p. 74.

⁴⁴⁶ Ivi, pp. 76-77.

⁴⁴⁷ Ivi, p. 83.

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dans les rues, intouchable, protégé par l'usure pondérée de tes vêtements, par la neutralité de tes pas. Tu n'as plus que des gestes appris. Tu ne prononces plus que les mots qui sont nécessaires.⁴⁴⁸

The detachment from all desires has brought the student not only freedom, but also the serenity that goes with it. The gestures made are automatic, the only words spoken are those for ordering coffee or the menu. Language is curtailed, as if words are tiring to speak and need to be spared: “Tu ne dis jamais s’il vous plaît, bonjour, merci, au revoir. Tu ne t’excuses pas. Tu ne demandes pas ton chemin”⁴⁴⁹; “Tu ne parles pas tout seul, pas encore. Tu ne hurles pas, surtout pas”⁴⁵⁰. The scream, which would be equivalent to the word emitted with a strong emotional impulse, is mostly avoided, as it is unthinkable for someone as invisible, untouchable and insensitive as the sleeping man.

The story continues with the tasteless list of actions performed by the character: walking, reading, eating and above all sleeping. There is nothing interesting in this reading as well as in the character's life: the effect of Perec's writing perfectly follows the course of the protagonist's indifferent existence.

L’indifférence n’a ni commencement ni fin : c’est un état immuable, un poids, une inertie que rien ne saurait ébranler. [...]

L'indifférence dissout le langage, brouille les signes. Tu es patient, et tu n'attends pas, tu es libre et tu ne choisis pas, tu es disponible et rien ne te mobilise. Tu ne demandes rien, tu n'exiges rien, tu n'imposes rien. Tu entends sans jamais écouter, tu vois sans jamais regarder [...].⁴⁵¹

Language is dissolved by indifference, words lose their meaning and there is no longer any need to speak. The sleeping man is a silent man. His renunciation of the world also passes through the renunciation of speech, the primary means of communicating something. The man who sleeps no longer has anything to communicate, because he has nothing to ask, to express, to demonstrate. He lives like an automaton: “Gestes d’automate: te lever, te laver, te raser, te vêtir”⁴⁵². Every day is identical to itself, with the same silences and noises, and every gesture of the protagonist is repeated in the eternal duration of the present. The existence led by the 25-year-old is similar to that of a pensioner, who does nothing all day and waits for time to pass, until the end. Even walking is devoid of connotations: “Marche incessante, inlassable. Tu marches comme un homme qui porterait d’invisibles valises, tu marches comme un homme qui suivrait son ombre. Marche d’aveugle, de

⁴⁴⁸ Ivi, p. 85.

⁴⁴⁹ Ivi, p. 86.

⁴⁵⁰ Ivi, p. 90.

⁴⁵¹ Ivi, p. 90.

⁴⁵² Ivi, p. 91.

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somnambule [...]”⁴⁵³. The walk is that of someone who carries an invisible weight, i.e. it is slow, curved. The student has no goal, so he is said to follow his shadow, and not vice versa. Night and day life do not differ except in the frequentation of the city by night and the bedroom by day: “Vie sans surprise. Tu es à l’abri. Tu dors, tu manges, tu marches, tu continues à vivre, comme un rat de laboratoire [...]”⁴⁵⁴. The student seems to want to meet as few people as possible; he resembles a mouse locked in a laboratory, given the size of his room.

Nulle hiérarchie, nulle préférence. Ton indifférence est étale : homme gris pour qui le gris n’évoque aucune grisaille. Non pas insensible, mais neutre. L’eau t’attire comme la pierre, l’obscurité comme la lumière, le chaud comme le froid. Seule existe ta marche, et ton regard, qui se pose et glisse, ignorant le beau, le laid, le surprenant, ne retenant que des combinaisons de formes et de lumières qui se font et se défont sans cesse, partout dans ton œil, aux plafonds, à tes pieds, dans le ciel, dans ton miroir fêlé, dans l’eau, dans la pierre, dans les foules. [...] Tu es le maître anonyme du monde, celui sur qui l’histoire n’avait plus de prise, celui qui ne sent plus la pluie tomber, qui ne voit pas la nuit venir.⁴⁵⁵

This passage strongly evokes the figure of Bartley the scrivener, who constantly expresses his non-preference. The sleeping man, like him, lives without any preference or distinction. The anonymity of the protagonist is such that he becomes untouchable, inaccessible. He no longer feels anything: his indifference coincides with his freedom from the game of life.

However, in this perpetual indifference, the body becomes the element that marks a disturbance and thus a variation in the text. In particular, the student sees himself in the mirror, and this generates a strong crisis in him, which can be traced back to the nightmare of being observed by oneself:

Il te regarde et il te cloue. Tu ne cesseras jamais de te voir. Tu ne peux rien faire, ne peux pas t’échapper, tu ne peux pas échapper à ton regard, tu ne pourras jamais [...]. Tu ne dors pas, mais le sommeil ne viendra plus. Tu n’es pas éveillé et tu ne te réveilleras jamais. Tu n’es pas mort et la mort même ne saurait te délivrer...⁴⁵⁶

The protagonist's state of calm dramatically seems to have a flaw. The character realises that he is not as free as he thought, nor as indifferent as he wanted to be. He no longer controls sleep and wakefulness and death does not come to free him completely from the burdens of life. He also notices that he continues to dream, but has nightmares and wakes up in a daze; he gnaws his nails; he plays

⁴⁵³ Ivi, p. 93.

⁴⁵⁴ Ivi, p. 94.

⁴⁵⁵ Ivi, pp. 94-95.

⁴⁵⁶ Ivi, p. 103.

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pinball for hours like an addict. In short, his life is not completely devoid of turmoil of the heart or desires. His indifference is not total; on the contrary, he realises that he is unhappy and lonely.

Tu es seul et tu ne connais personne ; tu ne connais personne et tu es seul. Tu vois les autres s'agglutiner, se serrer, se protéger, s'enlacer. Mais tu n'es, regard mort, qu'un fantôme transparent, lépreux couleur de muraille, silhouette déjà rendue à sa poussière, place occupée dont nul ne s'approche. Tu t'efforces à l'espoir de rencontres improbables. [...] Tu es seul [...], seul dans la chaleur ouatée des bars, dans les rues vides où tes pas résonnent, dans la complicité mal réveillée des bistrots restés seuls ouverts.⁴⁵⁷

The perception of loneliness creeps into the life of the young man, who has been betrayed by his eye in the mirror and now begins to feel sadness: “Le malheur n’a pas fondu sur toi, ne s’est pas abattu sur toi; il s’est infiltré avec lenteur, il s’est insinué presque suavement”⁴⁵⁸. Unhappiness permeated the young man's life: it was camouflaged, denied, but still present in the faults. Where was the trap? Perec answers: “Le piège, c’était ce sentiment parfois presque exaltant, cet orgueil, cette sorte d’ivresse; tu croyais n’avoir besoin que de la ville [...]; besoin seulement de ta chambre [...]. Le piège : cette illusion dangereuse d’être – comment dire ? – infranchissable, de n’offrir aucune prise au monde extérieur [...]. Somnambule éveillé, aveugle qui verrait”⁴⁵⁹. The sleeping man seems to realise that he has fallen into a trap: he has believed himself unconquerable, with his indifference, but he is not. He still feels, he still feels desires, he is still a slave to life with its horizons and perspectives. There is no way out or ultimate truth to be sought:

Seule existe la solitude, que tôt ou tard, chaque fois, tu retrouves en face de toi, amicale ou désastreuse ; chaque fois, tu demeures seul, sans secours, en face d'elle, démonté ou hagard, désespéré ou impatient.

Tu t'es arrêté de parler et seul le silence t'a répondu. Mais ces mots, ces milliers, ces millions de mots qui se sont arrêtés dans ta gorge, les mots sans suite, les cris de joie, les mots d'amour, les rires idiots, quand donc les retrouveras-tu ?

Maintenant tu vis dans la terreur du silence. Mais n’es-pas tu le plus silencieux de tous ?⁴⁶⁰

There is a total reversal in the protagonist's life: from being untouchable, indifferent, a shadow among shadows, he becomes a terrified, anguished, lonely young man without company who fears even his silence. The word and dialogue he so rejected now become something soothing. Yet, the

⁴⁵⁷ Ivi, p. 109.

⁴⁵⁸ Ivi, p. 110.

⁴⁵⁹ Ivi, pp. 111-112.

⁴⁶⁰ Ivi, p. 113.

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words that have been stuck in his throat all this time are not found. Silence is the only response to silence.

The citizens that the student encounters are called monsters - and brothers, in an echo of Baudelaire - and they horrify and dismay the young student; the city of Paris itself is called putrid and hideous. The young man's wait is no longer duration, but becomes hope: "Tu attends, tu espères"⁴⁶¹. The boy slowly begins to speak again: these are only pleasantries, brief greetings, but they are saving words.

Tu peux parler sans crainte, ils te répondront chaque fois d'une voix égale. Leurs visages maintenant te sont familiers. Ils t'identifient, ils te reconnaissent. Ils ne savent pas que ces simples saluts, ces seuls sourires, ces signes de tête indifférents sont tout ce qui chaque jour te sauve, toi qui, toute la journée, les a attendus, comme s'ils étaient la récompense d'un fait glorieux dont tu ne pourrais parler, mais qu'ils devineraient presque.⁴⁶²

The student's loneliness and silence throw him into despair, terror and anguish. To cope with these unpleasant feelings, he adjusts his life like clockwork, devoting himself to futile pursuits so as not to be engulfed by his existential crisis.

One element that attracts the student's attention is his neighbour, whose every noise he tries to perceive and towards whom he tries to maintain such a strict silence as to cancel his own presence: "Mais tu fais si peu de bruit"⁴⁶³; "tu t'efforces de rester silencieux le plus longtemps possible"⁴⁶⁴. The game of silence played with the neighbour nevertheless designates a desire for contact and dialogue, so much so that we read that the protagonist almost wants to send him messages of greeting and that he perceives the old neighbour in a kind of symbiosis with himself. It is now clear that the student's life has taken an irrevocable turn and he is slowly reverting to sociality and emotions, particularly fear. One of the final sections evokes these feelings in a way that is absolutely relatable to the experiences of those who were deported to concentration camps:

Maintenant tu n'as plus de refuges. Tu as peur, tu attends que tout s'arrête, la pluie, les heures [...].⁴⁶⁵

Parfois, tu rêves que le sommeil est une mort lente qui te gagne, une anesthésie douce et terrible à la fois, une nécrose heureuse [...].

Tu n'es plus qu'un grain de sable, homoncule recroquevillé, petite chose inconsistante, sans muscles, sans os, sans jambes, sans cou, pieds et mains confondus, lèvres immenses qui t'avalent.⁴⁶⁶

⁴⁶¹ Ivi, p. 119.

⁴⁶² Ibidem.

⁴⁶³ Ivi, p. 129.

⁴⁶⁴ Ivi, p. 130.

⁴⁶⁵ Ivi, p. 131.

⁴⁶⁶ Ivi, p. 132.

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The images used by Perec are strongly reminiscent of the battered and skeletal bodies of Auschwitz prisoners, such as his mother: the thinness, the terror, the senselessness of the days, the automatic and repetitive gestures without any meaning, the despondency and depression, are all traits that can be traced back to that experience. In particular, man is seen as a mouse: he lives in a cage and is the victim of a mad researcher's experiments, as Perec had previously written.

The conclusion of the novel echoes Pirandello: the student looks at himself in the mirror and, without any feeling, does not recognise himself⁴⁶⁷. In the concluding pages, we also find an explicit reference to Bartelby the scrivener:

Jadis, à New York, à quelques centaines de mètres des brisants où viennent battre les dernières vagues de l'Atlantique, un homme s'est laissé mourir. Il était scribe chez un homme de loi. Caché derrière un paravent, il restait assis à son pupitre et n'en bougeait jamais. [...] Il était inutile de lui demander quoi que ce soit, relire un texte ou aller à la poste. Les menaces ni les prières n'avaient de prise sur lui. A la fin, il devint presque aveugle. On dut le chasser. Il s'installa dans les escaliers de l'immeuble. On le fit enfermer, mais il s'assit dans la cour de la prison et refusa de se nourrir.⁴⁶⁸

The explicit reference to Melville's story should not surprise us, if we consider that *Un homme qui dort* is actually an heir to *Bartleby* living in late 20th century modernity. The two beginnings, however, are different. In fact, the sleeping man goes on living and realises that his training in indifference has not changed him or made him wiser⁴⁶⁹. It has been completely useless. Indeed, the book seems to be the story of a failed liberation. Compared to the rest of the story, the conclusion marks a clear change of course. The end of the novel seems to be a hymn to man as a fake prisoner of reality.

Combien d'histoires modèles exaltent ta grandeur, ta souffrance ! Combien de Robinson, de Roquentin, de Meursault, de Leverkühn ! Les bons points, les belles images, les mensonges : ce n'est pas vrai. Tu n'as rien appris, tu ne saurais témoigner.⁴⁷⁰

Mais nulle errante Rachel ne t'a recueilli sur l'épave miraculeusement préservée du Péquod pour qu'à ton tour, autre orphelin, tu viennes témoigner.⁴⁷¹

⁴⁶⁷ “Quels secrets cherches-tu dans ton miroir? Quelle vérité dans ton visage?”. Ivi, p. 134; “il ne te reconnaissait pas”. Ivi, p. 135.

⁴⁶⁸ Ivi, p. 136.

⁴⁶⁹ “Tu n'es pas mort et tu n'es pas plus sage”. Ivi, p. 137.

⁴⁷⁰ Ivi, p. 138.

⁴⁷¹ Ivi, p. 139.

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If in the quotations above we read important intertextual references that refer back to Melville - and which, as Celati writes, slowly pave the way to the final realisation that separation from the world is only a mirage -, in those below we read personal references that refer back to Perec's own life story:

Ta mère n'a pas recousu tes affaires. Tu ne pars pas, pour la millionième fois, rechercher la réalité de l'expérience ni façonner dans la forge de ton âme la conscience incréée de ta race.

Nul antique ancêtre, ni antique artisan ne t'assistera aujourd'hui ni jamais.

Tu n'as rien appris, sinon que la solitude n'apprend rien, que l'indifférence n'apprend rien : c'était un leurre, une illusion fascinante et piégée. Tu étais seul et voilà tout et tu voulais te protéger ; qu'entre le monde et toi les ponts soient à jamais coupés.⁴⁷²

The explicit reference to the mother and to being an orphan are two important statements: the sleeping man could be Perec. The loneliness and non-sense experienced are his; the attempts to possess all of Paris with his passive gaze are his; the immobility and silence are his. The connection with the mother is, not surprisingly, linked to that of race: this inevitably leads back to *W ou le souvenir d'enfance* and the concentration camps. The loneliness that Perec writes about in the last quotation is that of a man without reference points who seeks indifference in order to free himself from pain, only to discover that “L’indifférence est inutile. Tu peux vouloir ou ne pas vouloir, qu’importe! [...] Mais ton refus est inutile. Ta neutralité ne veut rien dire. Ton inertie est aussi vaine que ta colère”⁴⁷³. The whole novel that the reader has just read appears to be nothing, for to nothingness it is reduced:

Mais rien ne s’est passé : nul miracle, nulle explosion.⁴⁷⁴

Le monde n’a pas bougé et tu n’as pas changé. L’indifférence ne t’as pas rendu différent.⁴⁷⁵

The narrative voice, if there is one, asserts this uselessness even in telling us that nothing has actually happened: not even a death, illness or catastrophe worthy of note or mention. The character's life is, in short, drab, devoid of interest as it is devoid of negative events that could justify speaking out: “Mais tu n’es même pas malade”⁴⁷⁶. In this dull everyday life, it is possible to find some

⁴⁷² Ivi, p. 140.

⁴⁷³ Ivi, pp. 140-141.

⁴⁷⁴ Ivi, p. 141.

⁴⁷⁵ Ivi, p. 142.

⁴⁷⁶ Ibidem.

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autobiographical elements. Indeed, the search for something to say about death, illness or guilt is a remarkable element: “Tu n’as pas à te traîner devant tes juges, criant grâce, implorant pitié. Nul ne te condamne et tu n’as pas commis de faute. Nul ne te regarde pour aussitôt se détourner de toi avec horreur”⁴⁷⁷. These aspects again bring back images of those who were desperate and doomed during the war, like Perec's mother. Finally, the novel ends as it began: with the simple passage of time bringing things back to where they belong.

C'est un jour comme celui-ci, un peu plus tard, un peu plus tôt, que tout recommence, que tout commence, que tout continue.

Cesse de parler comme un homme qui rêve.⁴⁷⁸

The appeal that the narrator makes to the reader, or to the sleeping man, is to stop talking like a sleepwalker, that is, alone. Perec does not tolerate silence, which is the death of dialogue, and this statement seems to be an ode to communication. The protagonist's silence turns out to be a refusal and a completely futile rebellion. There is no self-sufficient subjectivity: we are all exposed to external reality, from which we cannot escape. In fact, nothing has changed: neither the world, nor the sleeping man, who in fact at the novel's conclusion is no longer “le maître anonyme du monde”⁴⁷⁹, but a man among “des milliers et des milliers, sentinelles silencieuses”⁴⁸⁰.

⁴⁷⁷ Ivi, p. 143.

⁴⁷⁸ Ibidem.

⁴⁷⁹ Ivi, p. 145.

⁴⁸⁰ Ibidem.

IV. *Baratto*: “Tutto avviene in tranquillo silenzio”

Published in 1987, *Quattro novelle sulle apparenze* is a collection of four short stories, or novellas, described as philosophical. At the centre of each novella, in fact, Celati poses a more or less explicit question. In the first, which we will analyse here, the protagonist, *Baratto*, who gives the story its title, stops talking because he is tired of the hypocrisy of words.

In the second, entitled *Condizioni di luce sulla via Emilia*, we witness the painter Menini's meticulous description of the landscape, analysing the vibrations of light. The latter, which is iridescent, gives the impression that sensory perceptions only give us access to the appearance of things, in a constant wavering. There is thus no possibility of finding a fixed point, that 'still state of things' to which the painter yearns.

The third, *I lettori di libri sono sempre più falsi*, is a harsh and open criticism of the book market. In fact, the young student protagonist of the story finds himself confronted by his university professors, whose words seem insubstantial and empty to him, and is swallowed up by the vortex of door-to-door book sales. If at first the student disdains those who sell books and make reviews of them, he later ends up succeeding in the same practice. His concluding remarks, however, are bitter: he finds no salvation, no foothold, in writing, which is nothing but the appearance of things already written by others.

The fourth, *Scomparsa d'un uomo lodevole*, has as its protagonist a business executive in deep existential crisis. At the centre of this tale is the father-son relationship. The father would like to separate from his son, but due to the latter's indolence, he cannot. The lack of communication and affection between the two causes the protagonist to come to the conclusion that he feels like anyone, hence the impossibility of identifying and defining himself in relation to the outside world, which becomes a handful of appearances.

All four novellas have at their core the gap between reality and illusion and a shrewd critique of appearances: they seem to tell us that we live in a world of words, rituals, habits in which we feel alienated, and yet we belong to it. The protagonists of these novellas leave the reader bewildered at the mechanicalness of living that is exposed and revealed. Interpersonal bonds are devoid of emotional resonance, the characters seem to fulfil functions within predefined social mechanisms, the individual appears as a lost and impersonal dowel in a larger picture that lacks connotations. Social conventions are exposed in their crude functioning. The epiphanies of the characters, who realise the mechanisms in which they are entangled, often do not generate a happy ending. Tearing the veil of Maya and unmasking appearances does not, in short, lead to salvation: the illusory nature of reality

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engulfs everything. Indeed, it is no coincidence that right from the epigraph, which quotes Kafka, the word “appearance” emerges:

Poiché noi siamo come tronchi d'albero nella neve. Apparentemente vi aderiscono sopra, ben lisci, e con una scossa si dovrebbe poterli spingere da parte. No, non si può, perché sono legati saldamente al suolo. Però guarda, anche questa è soltanto un'apparenza.

Franz Kafka, *Die Bäume*

The novella that seems most relevant to this study is the first, *Baratto*, because it deals with the theme of appearances associated with words: in fact, the protagonist chooses a selective, stubborn, subversive muteness because he no longer has any faith in the power of words. The latter ultimately seem to him to be nothing more than instruments that convey lies.

Baratto, the protagonist, is a PE teacher with a passion for rugby. Suddenly he stops talking and interrupts any active relationship with the world. His living becomes passive: he attends and listens, but does not communicate with words and seems to live like an automaton. The characters around him come to wonder whether he is still sane. Not only does Baratto stop talking, in a kind of aphasia, but sometimes he even stops breathing: his apnoea, then, is twofold. On the one hand he interrupts the communicative channel of speech, on the other he seems to want to check what happens when he interrupts any emission of breath, even breathing. Baratto, unlike Perec's sleeping man, however, does not close himself off from the world: on the contrary, the doors of his house always remain open, as do his ears, which are available for listening. A circle of characters is thus created around this comic character whose silence gives voice to a multiplicity of narratives. Baratto's void of words thus becomes a centre, a pivot around which hundreds of stories revolve. The silence of the one is, in short, the open space of communication of the other. In fact, many characters seem more interested in uttering words than in engaging in dialogue: the result is that often, when confronted with Baratto's muteness, we witness veritable monologues, which become ramblings through words. Baratto, inhabited by the emptiness of words, also seems to be inhabited by the emptiness of thought: he is passive, helpless, open, available, but empty. He gives himself no thoughts or worries, he becomes a shadow, a somnambulist. Acting, thanks to the silence of words, becomes meaning: there is no other way of interpreting this character. His relationship with the world occurs through the powerful silence, which transforms every action into transparency of intent. The conventions of words are abolished and silence thus has the possibility of revealing everything that words cannot communicate.

The text begins in the style of a Boccaccio novella from the *Decameron*:

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Racconterò la storia di come Baratto, tornando a casa una sera, sia rimasto senza pensieri, e poi le conseguenze del suo vivere da muto per un lungo periodo.⁴⁸¹

The narrator's intentions are made clear from the outset: he wants to tell a story. We are therefore placed in an explicit narratological context. Yet, the hero seems funny and strange: immediately we are told that he remains without thoughts and without words. Right from the start, the close connection between thought and language is highlighted: we cannot formulate thoughts without words that can say them. Language, in short, is contingent and necessary for thought. The philosophical aspect of this novella, in fact, is precisely its investigation of the crisis of language, now incapable of translating many thoughts or, simply, of translating reality into words.

The onset of mutism is linked to a particular episode. During a rugby match, Baratto gets angry and claims his team is incompetent, denying any other possible perspective with the phrase: “Non c'è niente da discutere”⁴⁸². To this frustration, after an initial moment of anger expressed with insults, he chooses to respond through indifference and renunciation. The gestures he makes are in fact two in particular: looking at the ground and shaking his head. Both actions seem to signify surrender. Indeed, of Baratto it is said: “Gli sembra che la partita non lo riguardi, lo dice [...]”⁴⁸³. The protagonist alienates himself from the contingency of the moment and seems to place himself on another level: he observes reality without participating in it. Furthermore, Celati writes: “Gli è passata la voglia di giocare”⁴⁸⁴. Baratto withdraws into the locker room just as he withdraws from words and common living. His surrender is stubborn and without the possibility of redemption: “Mentre l'altro parla per convincerlo, Baratto s'è spogliato nudo”⁴⁸⁵. The nudity of the body indicates not only a refusal to play and question his decision, but is also emblematic of the transparency of Baratto's actions, which no longer need words to be explained. Each gesture speaks for itself, just as a naked body has nothing to hide. Finally, after responding to the coach with a sentence that seems completely out of place in relation to the latter's request⁴⁸⁶, he announces that he no longer wants to talk to him and begins to close himself off, even on a bodily level.

⁴⁸¹ Gianni Celati, “Baratto”, in *Quattro novelle sulle apparenze*, Macerata, Quodlibet, 2016, p. 11.

⁴⁸² Ivi, p. 12.

⁴⁸³ Ivi, p. 11.

⁴⁸⁴ Ivi, p. 12.

⁴⁸⁵ Ibidem.

⁴⁸⁶ “Tu fumi e ti verrà il cancro”. Ibidem.

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Con gli occhi chiusi comincia a trattenere fiato, e dopo qualche secondo gli sembra di poter restare in apnea finché vuole, senza aspettare più niente e senza neanche il pensiero d'esser lì. Più tardi perde l'equilibrio e cade dalla piccola panca, ritrovandosi per terra.⁴⁸⁷

The closing of his eyes and the stopping of his breathing seem like two gestures of self-annulment or exclusion of the outer world from the inner one: Baratto seems to want to pull down the shutter that puts him in contact with external reality. Apnoea induces in him a loss of balance until he falls to the ground. The gesture of finding himself on the ground, passive, helpless, with nothing to think about or wait for, is the first in a long series of moments of inertia for the protagonist.

Likewise, seemingly irrelevant events are described, such as the fact that Baratto drives the motorbike without wearing a helmet and, despite being stopped by the police, continues to break the rule. As justification, instead of apologising as convention would have it, he says that he was hot in the head and his behaviour becomes even more strange: “Resta in apnea aspettando”⁴⁸⁸. Baratto's response is neither consequential nor logical in relation to the policeman's statement: the basic principles of the pragmatics of communication are completely unhinged.

Thereafter, we notice Baratto's rapid detachment from all the people in his daily life. He does not answer his neighbour⁴⁸⁹, he does not take an interest in his wife and does not ask her anything about her⁴⁹⁰, he turns on the TV but does not listen to it⁴⁹¹. The only phrases that seem to inhabit his mind are advertisements (“annunci pubblicitari che spesso sente alla televisione”⁴⁹²) which he listens to until he can't think of any more. Similarly, during his daily routine, we learn that he seems to remember something vague, perhaps a caption under a photo seen in a magazine (“uscendo dal bagno gli sembra di ricordare qualcosa, forse una didascalia sotto una foto in una rivista, ma niente di preciso”⁴⁹³). Baratto seems inhabited by the anonymity of advertising catchphrases. Finally, naked again in front of the mirror, he asks himself: “A cosa potrei pensare adesso? [...] ma nessuna frase gli viene in mente”⁴⁹⁴. Baratto seems to be inhabited by emptiness: he is a container of phrases that are not its own, of other people's thoughts, of advertising and impersonal slogans (“Baratto osserva gli scatti della lancetta dei secondi senza capire cosa vogliono indicare a lui personalmente”⁴⁹⁵). The protagonist no longer finds a subjective space to inhabit the world, so he reaches this conclusion:

⁴⁸⁷ Ivi, p. 13.

⁴⁸⁸ Ivi, p. 14.

⁴⁸⁹ “Adesso non posso rispondere”. Ibidem.

⁴⁹⁰ “Negli ultimi tempi sua moglie torna tardi alla sera e forse ha un altro uomo, ma Baratto non glielo ha chiesto perché la cosa non gli interessa”. Ibidem.

⁴⁹¹ “Ha acceso il televisore su un canale vuoto e rimane a guardarlo in piedi, ascoltandone il ronzio”. Ivi, pp. 14-15.

⁴⁹² Ivi, p. 15.

⁴⁹³ Ibidem.

⁴⁹⁴ Ibidem.

⁴⁹⁵ Ibidem.

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“Sono rimasto senza pensieri”.

Quasi subito si addormenta a faccia in giù e braccia aperte sul letto. Dopo di che non ha più parlato per molti mesi, e a poco a poco è cominciata la sua guarigione.⁴⁹⁶

Strangely, Celati uses a lexicon related to illness, with which he associates the use of speech and dialogue and social interaction, while he speaks of healing by referring to the suspension of speech and silence. The context around Baratto experiences the same asphyxiation of catchphrases. His wife Marta lives every day too many things filling her head (“troppe cose che le riempiono la testa e restano nella testa senza andar via”⁴⁹⁷) with the result that every evening she has to watch TV to forget the telephone buzzer and all those voices (“ogni sera deve guardare la televisione fino a tardi per dimenticare il cicalino telefonico e le voci che ha avuto nell’orecchio per tante ore”⁴⁹⁸). Paradoxically, Marta seeks out the voice of the television in order to erase all others. The TV in this case is emblematic of the passivity of those who stand in front of it and, without any critical filter, absorb what is projected on the screen. Marta tries to converse with Baratto, but soon realises that he does not respond and walks silently towards the bed (“si avvia in silenzio verso la scala a chiocciola”⁴⁹⁹). Marta and her friends make a number of plausible assumptions about Baratto's silence, but no explanation is given. Meanwhile, Baratto continues to go about his life as if nothing had happened, but in silence. The villagers begin to think he has gone mad because of his strange behaviour⁵⁰⁰. At work, colleagues claim: “Non è mica legale che a scuola uno non parli”⁵⁰¹. Eventually, someone starts to think he is crazy: “Uno che non parla può anche essere incapace di intendere e di volere”⁵⁰². Before long, the whole city seemed to wonder why Baratto had adopted such behaviour, until someone claimed:

«Bah, si sarà stancato di dover sempre parlare e rispondere alla gente. È una bella seccatura, se ci pensate bene, dover sempre rispondere quando ti parlano. E invece bisogna sempre rispondere. Io, per me, Baratto l'ammiro».⁵⁰³

⁴⁹⁶ Ivi, p. 16.

⁴⁹⁷ Ibidem.

⁴⁹⁸ Ivi, p. 17.

⁴⁹⁹ Ibidem.

⁵⁰⁰ “Be', vi dico, passavo col motorino e me lo vedo lì su una gamba sola e con un occhio chiuso, che guarda quello spigolo. Ah, è uno spigolo strano, lo so. Ma quando gli sono passato vicino e l'ho salutato, be', è come se non avessi detto niente. Dev'essere ancora là che guarda lo spigolo, secondo me”. Ivi, p. 19.

⁵⁰¹ Ibidem.

⁵⁰² Ivi, p. 20.

⁵⁰³ Ivi, p. 21.

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The simple, almost dialectal language reported helps the reader to enter into the average mentality: talking, all things considered, is overrated; Baratto's gesture is therefore understood as a small revolution and rebellion against the uselessness and obligations of words.

Another characteristic that emerges in Baratto's new life is the habit of keeping doors open: "Anche la porta del suo appartamento resta quasi sempre aperta, perché da quando è muto si direbbe che a Baratto le porte chiuse diano fastidio"⁵⁰⁴. This fact indicates Baratto's openness to others. He, unlike Perec's sleeping man, does not isolate himself and exile himself in his room by rejecting his friends' invitations, but rather allows the outside world to come to him and enter his homely intimacy. Quite simply, Baratto's response to the tumult of reality is passive: he waits and listens, silent. Some villager has passed by the protagonist's house to help him out of his muteness, but the house was empty with the door open ("per vedere se è possibile aiutarlo a tirarsi fuori dal suo mutismo. Ma hanno trovato la porta dell'appartamento aperta e la casa vuota"⁵⁰⁵). Multiple attempts are made by others to get in touch with him, but Baratto seems indifferent to everything, even to the courtships of women intrigued by his muteness. Interestingly, not everyone reacts in the same way to Baratto's muteness. Some even get angry and seem frustrated: "Senza preamboli gli hanno spiegato che lui non può sottrarsi ai suoi impegni così. Hanno aggiunto che rifiutarsi di parlare è una comoda scappatoia, quando ci sono tanti problemi da risolvere nella realtà"⁵⁰⁶. They also tried to explain to him the irrationality of his behaviour: "Stare zitti come fai tu non è mica tanto razionale"⁵⁰⁷. However, Baratto's reaction is always the same: silence and persistence in his stubbornly quiet life. Several people begin to visit him, whom he welcomes as indifferent presences. The theme of Baratto's nakedness before an old friend who tried to persuade him of the coming of the kingdom of God returns again: "L'uomo nudo continua a fissarlo come se non capisse le sue parole"⁵⁰⁸. Baratto assumes the attitudes of a madman: he no longer conforms to the customs of common living, he does not speak to anyone, he adopts obscene and inappropriate attitudes such as appearing naked in front of people, and above all he does not give any sign of listening or understanding. He seems completely estranged in the den of his muteness. This time, the companion even waits for Baratto's response by timing the waiting time, as if there were a reasonable time within which dialogue takes place and as if it were an appealable scientific fact. Yet, Baratto persists in his muteness:

⁵⁰⁴ Ibidem.

⁵⁰⁵ Ibidem.

⁵⁰⁶ Ivi, pp. 22-23.

⁵⁰⁷ Ivi, p. 23.

⁵⁰⁸ Ivi, p. 24.

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Come se si addormentasse, l'uomo nudo s'è lasciato crollare su una sedia, ad occhi chiusi e trattenendo il fiato. Poi rimane così seduto ad occhi chiusi, in apnea.⁵⁰⁹

Baratto's silence is puzzling, as is the fact that he goes into apnoea: it almost seems as if the hero seeks a suspension of living, a pause from words, a break from social interaction. Apnoea is in fact a moment of interruption, an interval in which one ceases to breathe. Breathing, in turn, is the pause of speech. Apnoea seems to be a long pause of speech, for Baratto. Again the sleep motif returns: Baratto seems like a sleepwalker who falls asleep and goes off.

Everyday and ritual actions continue to be performed by the protagonist, but in silence. He goes to the market and collects the money, yet silently: “Tutto avviene in tranquillo silenzio”⁵¹⁰. The sense that is most stimulated in Baratto is sight:

Però vagando in tranquillo silenzio per le strade del centro cittadino, spesso gli accade di perdersi in giro ad osservare tutto quello che viene ai suoi occhi. Si ferma ad osservare la gente, le case, gli spigoli, il cielo e le grondaie.⁵¹¹

Baratto, like the sleeping man, fixes his meticulous attention on insignificant details, that is, on what Perec had christened the *infra-ordinaire*. Baratto's sight is stimulated as well as his hearing: they are the two most passive senses. He sees without looking and hears without listening. He looks like an empty man, the bark of a hollow tree. Baratto's silence is counterpointed not only by the many noises of the outside world⁵¹², but also by his wife's desire to talk⁵¹³. Even compared to the pensioners Baratto appears helpless and indifferent: “Senza rispondere al saluto, lui comincia a seguirli con aria assorta”⁵¹⁴. Baratto answers to no one and departs absently⁵¹⁵, then, almost like Forrest Gump, he stops:

Baratto si siede. A partire da quel momento resta in casa dei due pensionati per circa sette mesi, quasi sempre seduto nella stessa poltrona a guardare la televisione assieme a loro, oppure ad ascoltarli parlare. Ossia, tranne al mattino quando va a scuola, nel pomeriggio quando va a fare le sue corse, e alla sera quando sale nel suo appartamento a sparecchiare la tavola che sua moglie continua ad apparecchiare ogni giorno.⁵¹⁶

⁵⁰⁹ Ibidem.

⁵¹⁰ Ivi, p. 25.

⁵¹¹ Ibidem.

⁵¹² “Dalla strada adesso arrivano i rumori d'autobus che passano, grida di ragazzi che litigano [...]”. Ibidem.

⁵¹³ “sua moglie lo sta aspettando a casa da molte ore, deve parlargli”. Ibidem.

⁵¹⁴ Ivi, p. 26.

⁵¹⁵ “Senza rispondere all'uomo”; “vedendolo avviarsi in silenzio”. Ibidem.

⁵¹⁶ Ivi, p. 27.

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Baratto stays a considerable number of months at the home of two pensioners leading a quiet, wordless life: he listens, sits and continues to work as usual. He appears to be an imperturbable character rather than a madman. His madness is linked to his extreme stability, rather than a search for balance. The absence of dialogue has made him untouchable and insensitive: he seems to fear and desire nothing more, in a sort of nirvana of modernity. All his actions are passive: “Adesso durante le sue ore di lezione lascia che gli allievi giochino liberamente”⁵¹⁷; “lui ascolta assorto”⁵¹⁸; “si sofferma ad osservare le ombre”⁵¹⁹; “va a sedersi”⁵²⁰; “si mette a contemplare i titoli d’un giornale”⁵²¹. Baratto seems to let himself live and it seems that no external event has the ability to disturb him or shake him out of his torpor of indifference. The climax of this attitude is represented by the episode in which Baratto, at school, falls asleep naked in a closet, arousing the headmaster's ire. Sleeping and nudity are two elements proper to childhood and carefreeness: Baratto seems to regress to a state of total passivity and disinterest in everything, together with the renunciation of all responsibility and desire. The headmaster, initially shocked by this news, finally comes to the following conclusion:

È uno che non si dà pensieri, né pensiero per i pensieri degli altri su di lui. Vuoi vedere che quell’individuo l’ha toccato la grazia?⁵²²

Baratto's indifference, so much targeted at first, now begins to be perceived as a state of grace: having no thoughts and being unconcerned about those of others would result in a kind of liberation to aspire to.

Baratto's story proceeds along with that of the two elderly people with whom he now lives: “I due hanno cominciato a raccontare a Baratto la loro vita. Ma poco a poco si sono accorti che [...] comunque provano più gusto a raccontare la loro vita all’ospite”⁵²³. The television is switched off so that the words of the two elders flow freely into the ears of the host: “Baratto ascolta in silenzio, ogni tanto chiude gli occhi e si addormenta nella poltrona”⁵²⁴. Silence is certainly the essential character trait, which allows others to tell their stories and thus we witness a proliferation of stories told by a multitude of voices, as in a polyphony. Yet, the second characteristic trait is surely that of sleep, which once again underlines the passivity of this character. This passivity consists in letting go and letting everything happen: “Tornato a casa depone la carne e le verdure nel frigorifero, dove le lascia

⁵¹⁷ Ibidem.

⁵¹⁸ Ivi, p. 28.

⁵¹⁹ Ibidem.

⁵²⁰ Ibidem.

⁵²¹ Ibidem.

⁵²² Ivi, p. 31.

⁵²³ Ibidem.

⁵²⁴ Ibidem.

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finché non sono andate a male e può finalmente buttarle via”⁵²⁵. A first hint of willpower occurs in the story when Baratto attempts to enter school twice⁵²⁶ after being expelled, but we learn that he has been put on sick leave. The lexicon used is precisely that of care and infirmity, as if a serious mental illness was taking hold of Baratto. The result is that Baratto stops trying (“smette di tentare”⁵²⁷) and returns to total passivity:

mentre l'altro (il preside) continua a chiedersi se Baratto avvia davvero avuto la grazia di restare senza pensieri, senza il ronzio delle frasi interiori, libero da questa farneticazione continua che ognuno porta dentro di sé.⁵²⁸

This reflection on language is very interesting. Thinking is perceived as an annoying buzz of phrases inhabiting our minds that we would do well to get rid of. Each of us has a constant lucubration, made up of words that wander through our heads. Language would therefore be what generates the annoying thoughts and, by remaining silent, the headmaster assumes that these also cease, as if there were a direct correlation between thought and word.

Baratto is also said to resemble a shadow:

Sembra un'ombra che passa senza darsi il pensiero d'essere un'ombra. Un apparire che è già uno scomparire. Come se niente in lui si agitasse per comprovare qualcosa.⁵²⁹

The motif of the shadow indicates the dragging behind the flow of events helplessly and as if by inertia. Not only does Jung's idea of the shadow return, but associated with it we also find Jabès's element of the desert: “L'ombra in questione sta tornando verso casa attraverso un quartiere di palazzoni nuovi, completamente deserto di gente, animali, negozi o bar”⁵³⁰. The shadow, moreover, is an appearance: the central theme of the four novellas returns. We are therefore led to wonder, along with the headmaster, the meaning of all this: “Cosa voglia dire tutto questo, e cosa vogliamo dire le frasi che ha appena pronunciato”⁵³¹. The headmaster begins to suspect the meaning of words and the usefulness of language: it too appears to be an appearance, a falsehood, just like the reflections of light.

⁵²⁵ Ivi, p. 32.

⁵²⁶ “tenta un rientro nell'edificio scolastico. Nella stessa mattina tenta un rientro più volte”. Ibidem.

⁵²⁷ Ibidem.

⁵²⁸ Ibidem.

⁵²⁹ Ibidem.

⁵³⁰ Ivi, p. 33.

⁵³¹ Ibidem.

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Baratto's story proceeds without any real plot, in fact he continues to walk in silence and observe the world passively: “lui passa osservando”⁵³², “senza una meta precisa”⁵³³. Nevertheless, the novella is studded with secondary characters who flank our silent hero. Baratto, somewhat like Percival, represents the silent centre around which gravitate a series of characters who, thanks to his muteness, tell their stories. This time it is the gymnastics teacher Berté who accompanies him on a silent motorbike ride: “Nel primo giorno di silenzio vanno alla deriva per le campagne”⁵³⁴. The landscapes frequented by the two motorcyclists are those along the river Po: places dear to Celati, whom we have already seen wandering aimlessly, like Baratto, along its banks to its mouth.

The question of the illusory nature of language returns as soon as the two meet a group of Japanese, whose language they do not know but with whom Baratto is perfectly at ease. Even, we find a hint of will and desire in the mute character: “Con aria assorta segue il pullman tutto il giorno [...]. Qui costringe Berté ad andare in cerca di una camera [...].”⁵³⁵. Baratto seems fascinated by the group of Japanese, whom he keeps an eye on and follows until the evening, always absorbed and quiet (“sempre assorto e silenzioso”⁵³⁶). In the following days, Berté and Baratto continue to follow the Japanese and Baratto begins to learn their non-verbal language, so that he makes bows all the time.

Scendono di moto e qui Baratto dà segni di sentirsi proprio bene, sia per i grandi gesti di aerazione che si mette a fare, sia per le espressioni degli occhi con cui scruta i turisti. Si direbbe che lui abbia finalmente trovato il suo popolo, e che si senta simile a quegli stranieri condotti in giro a branchi, amministrati da guide che recitano strane litanie di nomi, persi nel grande mistero turistico del mondo.⁵³⁷

From the above description, we draw a decidedly funny and ridiculous Baratto. His gestures seem to replace the words he no longer utters and express his contentment at finding himself among a group of strangers he perceives as similar. But what are the similarities between them? The first is certainly passivity: the Japanese are compared to herds of sheep being led around by someone else. They therefore do not have to choose anything: they simply follow. The other common element is incomprehension: the guides make sounds and say names that the Japanese do not understand, yet they listen. Finally, the names uttered by the tour guides are compared to litanies, i.e. meaningless repetitions that are simply mechanically reproduced by the mouth. Baratto is perfectly at ease with foreigners because, just as in Jabès, the foreigner is the other side of the coin of himself. The encounter

⁵³² Ibidem.

⁵³³ Ivi, p. 34.

⁵³⁴ Ibidem.

⁵³⁵ Ivi, p. 35.

⁵³⁶ Ibidem.

⁵³⁷ Ivi, p. 36.

with the Japanese thus marks a turning point in Baratto's passive life, as he slowly begins to express himself again, albeit without words.

Attraverso la vetrata del ristorante, Berté vede che la vedova giapponese parla in continuazione e svelta svelta nella sua lingua, probabilmente raccontando a Baratto tutta la sua vita. E Baratto a momenti spalanca gli occhi, altre volte scuote la testa, oppure allunga una mano e le dà una pacchetta sul braccio.⁵³⁸

The Japanese widow, like the two elders, begins to tell Baratto her story. Unlike the two elders, however, the widow speaks in Japanese, even fast. We would expect Baratto to be even more passive than usual in listening to her, considering that we assume he does not know the language. On the contrary, Baratto shows great interest and with his facial expressions and other gestures seems to follow the widow's speech perfectly. Celati seems to be staging the paradox of language and seems to be telling us that we often do not understand each other when we speak, because words are a continuous illusion, an appearance by which we believe we understand each other but it is never so, like Pirandello claimed. On the contrary, the only way to understand each other is not to communicate, through silence, or to communicate through a language that the other does not understand: in this way, we are certain not to understand each other, but at least there will be no dangerous misunderstandings.

Che Baratto la capisca così bene non deve stupirci. Infatti lui ormai sta guarendo, e comincia a pensare solo i pensieri degli altri.

Durante i mesi di silenzio non si creda che Baratto abbia smesso di pensare. Questo a momenti gli succede, ad esempio quando va in apnea, ma in generale ha smesso soltanto di avere dei pensieri che gli gravano nella testa. E se incontra qualcuno, lui sa che deve dargli la mano o fare un cenno di saluto, e sa che deve scuotere la testa o sorridere quando l'altro parla. Però cose del genere non richiedono pensieri che siano proprio suoi pensieri, e se la cava pensando i pensieri degli altri.⁵³⁹

Again, we find the lexicon of illness in reference to Baratto's silence. His healing would consist in thinking the thoughts of others, i.e. not having any thoughts of his own. Baratto's apnoea is an apnoea of thought and speech, that is, a liberation from useless ramblings. Now that he is healing, however, he is able to get in touch with others and in communication with the outside world through a mute but eloquent gesture. Healing is thus not in language as a means of communication, but in abstinence from it and in maintaining another channel to enter into dialogue.

⁵³⁸ Ivi, p. 38.

⁵³⁹ Ivi, pp. 38-39.

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Another encounter that intertwines with Baratto's life is the one with the doctor, towards whom our hero keeps silent:

Baratto o segue nell'appartamento senza dir niente, anche perché è il dottore che parla sempre. Gli spiega che soffre di solitudine, dunque è molto contento ogni volta che qualcuno lo viene a trovare.

Invita Baratto ad accomodarsi in una poltrona del salotto, e subito comincia a raccontargli la vita.⁵⁴⁰

Once again, it is Baratto's silence that makes the voice of another possible. Thus, together with Baratto, the reader also hears the doctor's story, which is a story of loneliness: "Dice che in quella città più si conosce gente e più ci si sente estranei, e siccome lui conosce quasi tutti si sente come se fosse un eschimese"⁵⁴¹. The binarism of familiarity-extraneity and the figure of the stranger return. The doctor, paradoxically, seems to be the stranger of all - an Eskimo, that is to say, an inhabitant at the ends of the Earth - because he is the one who knows everyone. In society, Celati seems to tell us, knowing others does not mean having formed emotional ties with them: loneliness is therefore amplified when, knowing each other, a true exchange does not take place.

Through the doctor's voice, then, the reflection on appearances returns:

Il dottore prosegue: «Ma io dico: che non sia tutta una messinscena? Ad esempio, questa città una messinscena, le donne che ci fanno soffrire una messinscena, il lavoro una messinscena, il nostro aspetto da deficienti un'altra messinscena. Che non sia tutta una grande montatura, un sogno da cui non riusciamo a svegliarci? Ma le dico di più: che non sia anche la luce una messinscena? E i suoni che sentiamo, le cose che tocchiamo, e il buio e la notte, non potrebbe essere tutta una grandissima messinscena? Tutta una commedia delle apparenze, che ci fanno credere chissà cosa e invece non è vero niente?». ⁵⁴²

The doubt that grips the doctor is that reality is all an appearance, a sham, an illusion. If so, it would be like living in a dream. Thus the motif of dreaming, of sleeping, of somnambulism already present in Perec's *Un homme qui dort* returns. And yet, if in Perec sleep was a refusal that smacked of subversion, a training in indifference and a social withdrawal from liquid modernity, in Celati it is more of a funny attitude, represented with sympathy, reminding us that words are a source of misunderstanding and that language cannot say everything. A kind of synchronicity is therefore triggered between the doctor and Baratto:

Entrambi pensano che la commedia delle apparenze continua sempre là fuori, non si ferma mai.

⁵⁴⁰ Ivi, p. 39.

⁵⁴¹ Ivi, p. 40.

⁵⁴² Ivi, p. 41.

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A questo punto però il dottore si accorge di pensare i pensieri di Baratto, anche se in effetti Baratto non ha veri e propri pensieri che siano suoi. Sono piuttosto i pensieri degli altri che gli vengono in mente [...].

Grazie a tanta gente che pensa le stesse cose, la frase “È l’alba” vuol proprio dire che è l’alba con tutte le sue apparenze. E grazie a Baratto che guarendo comincia ad avere solo pensieri di altri, adesso anche al dottore appare tutta vera questa messinscena dell’alba.⁵⁴³

The game of society seems to be to share the same thoughts, nullifying all subjectivity and criticism. If other thoughts come to each other's mind, it will necessarily be easier to understand each other. The convention of language whereby a word takes on a shared meaning is emphasised here. Baratto's recovery, like a disease, passes by contagion to the doctor as well.

The conclusion of the novella sees all the characters who have revolved around Baratto's silence come together to spend an evening, precisely *through* Baratto (“attraverso Baratto”⁵⁴⁴), who is the pivot of others' voices. During that evening, they start listening to music: “Si mettono ad ascoltare dischi, esprimendo le rispettive preferenze in fatto di musica”⁵⁴⁵. The musical moment allows the characters to talk to each other: it is music, an alternative to silence that suspends speech, that allows dialogue, to the point that they all decide to tell their lives (“decidono di raccontarsi tutti la loro vita”⁵⁴⁶). The moment of narratives is suspended when it occurs to someone to make the dead speak.

A questo punto qualcuno propone di fare una seduta spiritica per sentir parlare i morti. Tutti applaudono all'idea, e le luci vengono abbassate e il medium si siede da solo ad un tavolo in penombra. C'è un gran silenzio per molti minuti.

Il professore comincia a fare delle domande nel vuoto rivolto al muro, come se parlasse al telefono: «Non sento bene».

Nessuno infatti sente niente. Poi però tutti incominciano ad aver l'impressione che ci sia una voce nella stanza, come la voce fiavole e impastata d'un morto che non parli da secoli. Proviene dalla bocca del caminetto, dietro un divano.

Addormentatosi supino accanto al caminetto, Baratto parla nel sonno e risponde alle domande del professore. Tutti se ne accorgono e sono eccitati, sollecitano il professore perché continui a fargli delle domande. E Crone chiede: «Dimmi a cosa stai pensando».⁵⁴⁷

The idea of making the dead speak seems to recall the inner death of Baratto, who is inhabited by the emptiness of thoughts and intentions. Indeed, it is no coincidence that when the characters

⁵⁴³ Ivi, p. 42.

⁵⁴⁴ Ivi, p. 44.

⁵⁴⁵ Ivi, p. 45.

⁵⁴⁶ Ibidem.

⁵⁴⁷ Ivi, p. 47.

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attempt to communicate with the dead, it is Baratto himself who replies. He speaks in his sleep from the adjacent room, but initially the characters do not understand: the usual misunderstanding of speaking returns. The word is always a source of misunderstanding: not only in the meanings we attribute to it, but even in its utterance. Baratto's voice is compared to that of a dead man who has not spoken for a long time: his seems to be a monologue from beyond the grave, as if he had experienced the world of the afterlife and is now returning to everyday social life. Baratto is compared not only to a dead man, but also to a sleepwalker: he in fact speaks in his sleep and his is a confused speech.

Il dormiente comincia con frasi confuse e dice che non può rispondere, perché i suoi pensieri non sono lì ma da un'altra parte. Quando il professore chiede dove sono, lui risponde che il tempo va e i pensieri vanno, e chi lo sa dove vanno i pensieri?

Dopo molte altre frasi del genere, il professore gli chiede di spiegarsi un po' meglio, loro vogliono sapere cosa lui abbia nella testa. Allora Baratto, sollevandosi a sedere come un sonnambulo, si tocca una tempia e risponde che lì dentro non c'è niente, nella testa, succede tutto all'esterno.

Qualcuno del pubblico vuol sapere: «All'esterno dove?». E lui seduto immobile, ma socchiudendo gli occhi, risponde: «All'esterno nell'aria, dove vanno in giro le frasi che vengono in mente, e così uno può dire qualcosa».⁵⁴⁸

When questioned by the medium about his thoughts, Baratto admits that he has none because they have gone elsewhere. Thoughts, in Celati, seem to have a life of their own and escape from the subject. The curiosity of Baratto's friends is such that they question him about his thoughts, so he admits that his thoughts are in the air, that is, they wander in the ether without any direction. Like the footsteps of the sleeping man in Péc, Baratto's thoughts seem to wander aimlessly.

Sempre a occhi chiusi e seduto immobile, Baratto risponde alla domanda con queste parole:

«Le frasi vengono e poi vanno, e fanno venire i pensieri che poi vanno. Parlare e parlare, pensare e pensare, poi non resta niente. La testa non è niente, succede tutto all'aperto».⁵⁴⁹

Baratto, in a phrase with a philosophical flavour, ends up arguing that thoughts and words are nothing, that is, they are only appearances. Celati maintains this, even in his interviews: “Per lo scrittore la realtà non esiste. Lo scrittore realizza continue proiezioni”⁵⁵⁰. Everything that counts and has value is concrete: the mind is nothing, it is only our thoughts. The reality of action, however, takes place outside. Celati seems to call us back to the concreteness of things and argue that he who lives by thoughts is up in the air, that is, he is lost.

⁵⁴⁸ Ivi, pp. 47-48.

⁵⁴⁹ Ivi, p. 48.

⁵⁵⁰ Gianni Celati, *Traversate nel deserto*, in Riga 40, *Gianni Celati*, cit., p. 46.

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Dietro il divano Baratto sbadiglia largamente, con profondi suoni di gola. Rialzandosi si tocca il ginocchio e mormora tra sé: «Oh, mi è tornato male al menisco!». Sbadiglia di nuovo e si stira, poi si risveglia del tutto. Adesso fa un largo sorriso e chiede se ha parlato bene.

Tutti lo applaudono. Ed è così che Baratto ha ricominciato a parlare.⁵⁵¹

The conclusion of the novella sees Baratto awaken from his sleep and begin to speak again. The first sentence uttered by Baratto once he wakes up is a banality, i.e. it is a statement related to a physical ailment: once again, the reference to concrete things returns. Everything that happens in our mind is aleatory: we must, according to Celati, remain attached to the external, tangible world. Baratto finally asks his listeners if he has spoken well. He seems to ask them, that is, if they were able to understand what he said. At the affirmative nod of his companions, he goes back to speaking, continuing to enact, after a long silence, the comedy of appearances.

Italo Calvino, Celati's critic and friend, was able to capture and describe Celati's novelistic attitude in this way:

Tutto questo accompagnava (anzi aveva come nucleo) la sua pratica creativa, consistente in romanzi [...] in cui il “sottolinguaggio” d’un personaggio tra onirico e stralunato intendeva presentarsi come l’equivalente scritto d’un modello extralinguistico, cioè la comicità delle *slapsicks* del cinema muto [...].⁵⁵²

Baratto is precisely the funny character, somewhere between the dreamy and the dazed, reminiscent of silent film comedians with his silence and sweeping gestures.

Silvio Perrella also noticed something similar:

Sia nel tema che nelle tonalità di scrittura Celati sembra in questa novella sintetizzare alcune esperienze narrative, legate alla produzione precedente i *Narratori*, con la sua nuova disposizione a narrare. Il fascino per le comiche del cinema muto che ha caratterizzato i suoi esordi in Baratto diventa adesso silenzio di fronte "all'ovvietà della comunicazione" sempre più dilagante. (Non è così alluso anche il prolungato silenzio dello scrittore?). Ma il tratto comico non è del tutto scomparso: ecco infatti Baratto fermarsi ad osservare lo spigolo sinistro d'un casone grigio abbandonato: "Chiude un occhio per osservarlo meglio. Solleva una gamba, grattandosi col piede il polpaccio dell'altra gamba, e resta in bilico a vacillare con aria meditativa e un occhio chiuso". È forse a Harpo che Celati sta pensando in questo passaggio, il muto Harpo che "gli sembrava una forma d'oblio dall'asfissiante voglia di fare discorso", cui voleva dedicare il libro progettato ma mai scritto, Harpo's Bazaar? [...].

Certo, il linguaggio d'allora, usato da Celati per dar vita a personaggi come Danci o Garibaldi, è molto lontano: lì c'era il tentativo di seguire i loro pensieri ingarbugliati e le conseguenti sgrammaticature con narrazioni sempre

⁵⁵¹ Gianni Celati, *Quattro novelle sulle apparenze*, cit., p. 49.

⁵⁵² Italo Calvino, *Da Buster Keaton a Peter Kandke*, in “L’Espresso”, 30 giugno 1985, in *Gianni Celati, Traversate nel deserto*, in Riga 40, *Gianni Celati*, cit., p. 316.

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in prima persona: qui c'è invece la voglia di far trasparire l'oralità del racconto ("Racconterò la storia di come Baratto..") con un conseguente allentamento della tensione cui era sottoposta la lingua. Come si è visto però nulla va perduto in scrittori - rari come Gianni Celati.⁵⁵³

Baratto's silence is thus not only a pause in the face of the obviousness of speaking, but also has a comic trait, just as in silent cinema. Baratto's awkward and crooked gestures make this character sympathetic and ridiculous, and not a figure of subversion, rejection or social withdrawal like Perec's sleeping man. The orality of the tale emerges on multiple occasions: in the opening, which reads like a fable from the *Decameron*, and in all the minor narrations of the marginal voices of the characters who meet Baratto and tell him their story. The voices of others, then, are a consequence of the silence of the one.

Returning to the theme of appearances, however, it is interesting to quote Giuliano Gramigna's observations:

Sono "le apparenze" che unificano le quattro novelle o i quattro racconti in una narrazione globale che riporta, più o meno esplicitamente, allo stesso oggetto - sebbene Celati si rifiuti di fornire direzioni al lettore. Apparente, mi pare di capire, non è ciò che si manifesta sensibilmente come maschera o schermo di qualcos'altro; ma ciò di cui si può dire *compare* e basta. La commedia delle apparenze, come la chiama un personaggio del primo racconto, Baratto, è fine a se stessa. Semmai si potrà sostenere parafrasando una formula famosa, che "c'è dell'apparire": la pressione di un "muto apparire", contro il quale cercano di fare argine le parole scritte, i discorsi della gente, i cartelli stradali eccetera. L'apparenza è l'essenza della "grande nullità".⁵⁵⁴

Baratto would therefore be apparent because he simply appears: he does not need language to reveal himself; his mute gestures say everything about him. He is pure presence. According to Gramigna, Celati destroys appearances through the grotesque, that is, through the absurdity of a character like Baratto, who refuses to continue living the comedy of appearances.

Si badi a come è articolata la vicenda del giovane Baratto che, da un certo momento in poi, smette di parlare, pur senza disertare la meccanica della vita. Il mutismo elettivo di Baratto è simmetrico alla nudità: dimissione degli abiti quanto della parola: e una simmetria più oscura ma operante si stabilisce fra mutismo e fobia specifica: "perché da quando è muto si direbbe che a Baratto le porte chiuse diano fastidio". Il racconto non indica il senso di questi collegamenti, ma su di essi si appoggia per mostrarsi, e svolgersi. È all'uscita dal sonno che Baratto ricomincia, senza spiegazioni, a parlare: ed è ancora facendo perno sul valore del sogno che il protagonista dell'ultima novella abbozza una teoria interpretativa delle apparenze: "è come essere nel sogno di un altro".⁵⁵⁵

⁵⁵³ Silvio Perrella, *Tecnica del Baratto*, "Il Mattino", 17 novembre 1987, in Riga 40, *Gianni Celati*, cit., p. 324.

⁵⁵⁴ Giuliano Gramigna, *Se la vita è apparenza*, "Corriere della sera", 22 novembre 1987, in Riga 40, *Gianni Celati*, cit., p. 325.

⁵⁵⁵ Ivi, pp. 325-326.

As we noted earlier, Baratto's muteness and nakedness are two sides of the same coin: he strips himself of speech, he strips himself of clothes. Baratto remains pure appearance, that is, he is transparent, naked, without thoughts. Yet Gramigna emphasises that not only Baratto is transparent, but also the whole novella. Indeed, Celati provides no explanation and writes no words to clarify the meaning of the tale: the novella remains as it shows itself.

Giorgio Manganelli, in describing the novella, wrote: “È un libro mosso da una dinamica comica e tetra, un sogno che oscilla tra ilarità ed incubo; e il linguaggio tien dietro a questa continua oscillazione”⁵⁵⁶. Indeed, Baratto's character is also full of these ambivalences and oscillates between sleep and wakefulness, between communication and silence. Manganelli adds:

i personaggi [...] hanno in comune un mite, forse idilliaco disorientamento, un disagio totale, che rende il loro gestire intenso quanto inane, sconclusionato, in accordo con sporadiche intuizioni, o piuttosto sospetti; come se l'orma di un significato, l'ipotesi di una connessione necessaria e illuminante fosse continuamente imminente, e continuamente perduta. Il linguaggio di Celati è il linguaggio dello smarrimento.⁵⁵⁷

Baratto, in his awkward silence, seems to perfectly echo Manganelli's description, who defines his as: “Il silenzio di chi non tollera più di avere a che fare con l'apparenza delle parole”⁵⁵⁸. Baratto too then, in the same way as the sleeping man, is a kind of heir to *Bartleby the scrivener*, the employee who chooses inaction and abstention. In fact, Manganelli writes about *Bartleby*: “È l'emblema, il modello mentale di questa sconfitta delicata, sapiente, onesta, cui obbediscono Baratto e il dipintore paesano”⁵⁵⁹. Baratto's proximity to *Bartleby*, and thus Celati to Melville to *Perec*, is also supported by Belpoliti, who writes:

Nel compiere questa scelta interpretativa lo scrittore bolognese prosegue e rende ancora più incisiva la linea tracciata da altri due scrittori, a lui assai vicini: Georges Perec e Italo Calvino. [...] Italo Calvino [...] sottolinea come *Bartleby* rappresentasse per Perec “l'uomo che vorrebbe identificarsi col nulla”. E su questo *nulla*, insiste anche Celati, quando ci presenta *Bartleby* come “la figura della divina povertà, del poco, del nulla, su cui si può sempre sopravvivere”.⁵⁶⁰

⁵⁵⁶ Giorgio Manganelli, *Frammenti del mondo fra incubi e ilarità*, “Il Messaggero”, 11 marzo 1988, in Riga 40, *Gianni Celati*, cit., p. 326.

⁵⁵⁷ Ivi, p. 327.

⁵⁵⁸ Ibidem.

⁵⁵⁹ Ibidem.

⁵⁶⁰ Marco Belpoliti, *Terribile mitezza di Bartleby, lo scrivano che sa dire di “no”*, in “La talpa libri – il manifesto”, 28 giugno 1991, in Riga 40, *Gianni Celati*, cit., p. 337.

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The word “nothingness” echoes not only when thinking of Baratto or the sleeping man, but also Lol V. Stein, for whom “rien” was a recurring term to describe her inner emptiness. These characters are therefore united by a hole, a chasm, which translates into silence. Italo Calvino thus seems to be the keystone, the junction, between Celati and Perec.

La grazia dello scrittore è perciò quella del “grafomane e del manierista” e il manierismo di Bartleby è lo “stato di una presenza”, una esteriorità che ci consegna la rappresentazione dell’umano. Celati ritorna con insistenza su questa esteriorità come “verità visibile” delle cose presenti, sulla singolarità di quelle figure in cui, come nello scrivano di Melville, “l’affidamento alle proprie preferenze è uno stato di devozione come nei santi – devozione ai limiti in cui qualsiasi uomo si ritrova”.⁵⁶¹

Baratto was as much of a presence as Bartleby, as he is pure exteriority, echoing his last words in Celati's novella. This exteriority is visible: it is no coincidence that Baratto's keenest sense is sight. He is often caught by the narrator observing what is happening in external reality. Visibility is, in fact, one of Calvino's key words in *Lezioni americane*:

Se ho incluso la Visibilità nel mio elenco di valori da salvare è per avvertire del pericolo che stiamo correndo di perdere una facoltà umana fondamentale: il potere di mettere a fuoco visioni a occhi chiusi, di far scaturire colori e forme dall’allineamento di caratteri alfabetici neri su una pagina bianca, di *pensare* per immagini.⁵⁶²

Celati certainly has the ability to focus visions with his eyes closed, just as he possesses what Calvino calls *imagination as repertoire of potential* (“l’immaginazione come repertorio del potenziale, dell’ipotetico”⁵⁶³). This hypothetical writing is reminiscent of what Belpoliti writes with respect to Celati, namely: “La potenza della scrittura sta nell’essere senza aspettative, nell’essere rassegnazione e rinuncia al dovere di scrivere, possibilità di rimanere sospesa soltanto come *preferenza*”⁵⁶⁴. In this, Celati resembles Bartleby the scrivener and Baratto, two figures of renunciation and the hypothetical. Returning to Calvino, with respect to visibility in the writing process, he adds:

Diciamo che diversi elementi concorrono a formare la parte visuale dell’immaginazione letteraria: l’osservazione diretta del mondo reale, la trasfigurazione fantasmatica e onirica, il mondo figurativo trasmesso dalla cultura ai suoi vari livelli, e un processo d’astrazione, condensazione e interiorizzazione dell’esperienza sensibile, d’importanza decisiva tanto nella visualizzazione quanto nella verbalizzazione del pensiero.⁵⁶⁵

⁵⁶¹ Ivi, pp. 337-338.

⁵⁶² Italo Calvino, *Lezioni americane. Sei proposte per il prossimo millennio*, cit., p. 94.

⁵⁶³ Ivi, p. 92.

⁵⁶⁴ Marco Belpoliti, *Terribile mitezza di Bartleby, lo scrivano che sa dire di “no”*, cit., p. 338.

⁵⁶⁵ Italo Calvino, *Lezioni americane. Sei proposte per il prossimo millennio*, cit., p. 96.

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The Celati of *Verso la foce* is the observer of the real world as Baratto is: a solitary man who walks, moves and observes the world by recording it within himself. The process of abstraction of the image that then becomes a verb is what Baratto ceases to do: he is pure exteriority, without any preference, just like Bartleby.

Leggendo queste conclusioni non si può fare a meno di notare come questo paradosso della preferenza sia anche il centro della scrittura dell'ultimo Calvino [...], e come proprio una delle ultime *Cosmicomiche* pubblicate dallo scrittore ligure s'intitoli: "il niente e il poco". Vista da Calvino la scrittura ha lo stesso statuto qui sottolineato da Celati, e non si tratta, come qualcuno potrebbe credere, di uno statuto di dissoluzione – la rinuncia alla scrittura –, quanto invece di una *consistenza*; come è scritto nella nota di presentazione delle *Lezioni americane*, Calvino aveva pensato a una sesta conferenza, intitolata *Consistency* e che sarebbe stata riferita a Bartleby.⁵⁶⁶

Unlike Baratto's character, therefore, Celati does not stop talking or writing. However, his writing takes on a status of dissolution, which resembles that described by Calvino at the end of his lecture on Visibility:

Comunque, tutte le «realtà» e le «fantasie» possono prendere forma solo attraverso la scrittura, nella quale esteriorità e interiorità, mondo e io, esperienza e fantasia appaiono composte della stessa materia verbale; le visioni polimorfe degli occhi e dell'anima si trovano contenute in righe uniformi di caratteri minuscoli o maiuscoli, di punti, di virgole, di parentesi; pagine di segni allineati fitti fitti come granelli di sabbia rappresentano lo spettacolo variopinto del mondo in una superficie sempre uguale e sempre diversa, come le dune spinte dal vento del deserto.⁵⁶⁷

In this quotation, it is possible to draw a line of continuity among Celati, Calvino, Perec, Melville and among Baratto, Bartleby, the sleeping man and Palomar. Baratto's exteriority, which is all silent, is the mirror of his interiority. The world and the self are translated into writing, but in the silence of its characters. Finally, with the metaphor of the desert, the echo of Jabès returns, reminding us that Baratto's silence is the same as that of the foreigner: he who is silent because, faced with the unknown language of a Japanese widow, he knows that words are only appearances.

⁵⁶⁶ Marco Belpoliti, *Terribile mitezza di Bartleby, lo scrivano che sa dire di "no"*, cit., p. 338.

⁵⁶⁷ Italo Calvino, *Lezioni americane. Sei proposte per il prossimo millennio*, cit., p. 100.

Interlude 2. In Dialogue with Theory

Having reached the conclusion of this chapter on the theme of silence, let us return to the theoretical connections and critical tools that have served as guidelines for examining the four selected texts. Indeed, given that silence is a thematic core of the 20th century, let us recall that it takes on different declinations, from modesty to renunciation, subversion and the death of dialogue.

The strong presence of silent characters refers, in the first instance, to the *quête* as a narrative tool, as well as a thematic core. Indeed, on many occasions the protagonist's silence becomes the mystery, the enigma, around which the narrative takes shape. Suffice it to think of Lol, Percival, Baratto and the sleeping man: all characters with enigmatic traits, who question the reader, or the other characters, about the identity of the protagonist. Among the first to emphasise the close connection between silence and secrecy is Blanchot, who writes:

C'est que le récit ne se traduit pas. S'il est la tension d'un secret autour duquel il semble s'élaborer et qui se déclare aussitôt sans s'élucider, il annonce seulement son propre mouvement qui peut donner lieu au jeu d'un déchiffrement ou d'une interprétation, mais il y demeure lui-même et à son tour étranger.⁵⁶⁸

As Boué argues, indeed, silence becomes an enigma and a matter of intrigue, and demands to be interrogated: “Le silence est, en effet, non seulement constitutif de l'étrangeté psychique des personnages mais en se posant comme *énigme*, il est aussi *matière à intrigue*”⁵⁶⁹. In *The Waves*, Percival is the silent character and enigmatic centre whose absence emphasises his presence: his silence - which once again is linked to death, as Jankélévitch reminds us - is the voice of the others: the silence of the one allows the other characters to show who they are, to make themselves known and to access new truths and awarenesses. In *Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein*, the narrator Hold spends the entire novel attempting to access the mystery revolving around the inaccessible character of Lol, whose psyche, madness and, above all, silences are investigated. In *Un homme qui dort*, we are confronted with a silent character, as mute as a ghost and as indifferent as a shadow, who tries to be pure appearance and thus seems a flat being, yet we discover that his muteness and immobility are inhabited by a will that tenaciously resists and becomes the object of the reader's investigation. In *Baratto*, the eponymous protagonist stops speaking apparently without a good cause that justifies such subversive and stubborn muteness, which is why all the secondary characters - along with the reader - wonder whether his is a state of grace, madness or something else: hence the mystery that

⁵⁶⁸ Maurice Blanchot, *Après coup*, précédé par *Le Ressassement éternel* [1983], Paris, Minuit, 2008, p. 96 [my emphasis].

⁵⁶⁹ Rachel Boué, *L'éloquence du silence. Celan, Sarraute, Duras et Quignard*, cit., p. 78 [my emphasis].

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surrounds Baratto and that runs through the entire novella, which not only investigates the protagonist's strangeness, but is also a philosophical investigation into the crisis of language.

Given the phenomenon of the muteness of literary characters, it is evident that its counterpoint, the voice, is a trait that, by opposition, stands out. But which voice are we talking about? Jankélévitch argues that silence allows us to hear another voice, a voice that comes from elsewhere and hides behind silence. We need only think of *The Waves*, in which Woolf makes us hear the voice of the sea, or the episode of the voice of opera singing that becomes an epiphany for Rhoda. Again, the theme of the voice from elsewhere is present in *Baratto*, when in the conclusion of the novella the characters think it is a voice from beyond - from the realm of the dead - speaking. Jankélévitch writes:

Le silence est ce qui nous permet d'entendre *une autre voix*, une voix parlant *une autre langue*, une voix venue *d'ailleurs*... Cette langue inconnue d'une voix inconnue, cette *vox ignota*, elle se cache derrière le silence comme le silence se cache derrière les bruits superficiels de la quotidienneté [...]; le silence est au-delà du bruit, mais l' "harmonie invisible", l'harmonie cryptique ou ésotérique, est au-delà du silence lui-même.⁵⁷⁰

Such a voice coming from elsewhere, another voice, speaking another language, closely recalls Jabès' stranger, mentioned on several occasions in the analysis of the four texts under examination: in fact, silence allows us to listen to an unknown voice that, in the first instance, hides behind silence. This voice is not only that of someone who communicates with another language, like the Japanese lady Baratto meets, but, even more importantly, it is the voice of the foreigner who inhabits us. The theme of identity is fundamental in *The Waves*, where the other becomes the founder of the self's identity; in *Le Ravissement*, where Lol feels anger at her own name, truncated and broken like her identity, and finds herself living her own foreignness in the desert of the city she inhabits; in *Un homme qui dort*, who becomes a stranger to himself and to others and lives in the desert of Paris without any oasis of hope; in *Baratto*, when he discovers his own closeness and ability to communicate with those who are seemingly more distant and different from him than ever: a foreigner.

That silence allows us to hear other voices is definitely true if we think of the hubbub of characters around Percival or Baratto's muteness, who by their silence allow others to speak, but also to listen to silence. Indeed, the theme of listening is also fundamental. First of all, listening is strongly linked to the unravelling of the enigma. Sylvie Germain writes in fact: "Le silence est comme une im-matière fissible, *il faut la briser à force d'écoute et d'interrogation* jusqu'à provoquer l'émanation et l'épanchement de *l'immense réserve d'énergie* contenue en elle"⁵⁷¹. Listening is therefore no

⁵⁷⁰ Vladimir Jankélévitch, *La musique et l'ineffable*, cit., pp. 166-167.

⁵⁷¹ Sylvie Germain, *Les échos du silence*, Paris, Espaces libres, 2006, p. 107 [my emphasis].

longer a passive action, but an active and at times inquisitorial one, because it allows the communicative energy of the unspoken to emerge forcefully: just think of the silent and at times police-like investigation initiated by Hold into Lol. Moreover, as Rovatti recalls: “Lo spazio vuoto che si ha bisogno di produrre è il modo con cui si cerca un avvicinamento, un’intensificazione dell’ascolto”⁵⁷². Listening is in fact an opening of the subject, who consents to be filled. As Fink argues, silence is a space that is not simply devoid of sound, but is primarily a space of openness: “Silence [...] as the conditioning and releasing space for sound-objects is not simply soundless in the sense of absence of tones, sounds and noise. Silence is the *open*, the worldly primary heard in every *hearing*”⁵⁷³. The characters we have just read about are in fact apparently empty characters: the sleeping man, Baratto and Lol are characters who listen a lot and speak very little. This peculiarity of theirs makes them particularly porous, available, open. Yet what they listen to is not only the voices of others, but also their *own* silence. It is no coincidence, in fact, that the sleeping man is afraid of himself and of his own loneliness and unhappiness: he has listened to his own silence to the point of finding it unbearable. As Fink reminds us, silence is in fact the last outpost, the most hidden of inner spaces, it is the original void that inhabits us:

They listen and hear – nothing. This hearing-nothing hardly means not hearing anything; it is an extreme form of *openness*, they hear the silence. And silence is *the most hidden, occupied and filled world-space of hearing* [...]. It is the void that precedes any filling.⁵⁷⁴

Another interesting aspect to note is how, in these novels constellated with silent protagonists, music plays a fundamental role: acting as counterpoint to silence in moments of revelation and epiphany. Indeed, as Jankélévitch reminds us, the muteness that suppresses gibberish - that of Celati's experts or catchphrases, for example - is a privileged type of silence, but even more privileged is the manner of creating silence that coincides with music:

S’il est vrai que la *loquela*, comme disent les prédicateurs, est le bruit humain par excellence, *le mutisme qui supprime ce bruit sera un silence privilégié*. La musique est le silence des paroles [...]. La musique, présence sonore, remplit le silence, et pourtant la musique *est elle-même une manière de silence*.⁵⁷⁵

If we look carefully, we can see that music plays the fundamental role of being the background against which the characters' epiphanies occur: this is true for Rhoda in *The Waves*, for Lol during

⁵⁷² Pier Aldo Rovatti, *L’esercizio del silenzio*, cit., p. 88.

⁵⁷³ Eugen Fink, “Orphische Wandlung”, in *Philosophische Perspektiven 4*, Frankfurt a/M, Suhrkamp, 1972, p. 81 [my emphasis].

⁵⁷⁴ *Ibidem* [my emphasis].

⁵⁷⁵ Vladimir Jankélévitch, *La musique et l’ineffable*, cit., pp. 154-155 [my emphasis].

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the T. Beach ball, for Baratto's friends when, having finished dinner, they listen to music to suspend the *bavardage* and allow an authentic dialogue.

Again, Jankélévitch points out how silence has to do with music as the language of memories, that is, the language of revelation. This is because music whispers to what Jankélévitch, and later Celati, calls the “mental ear of human beings”:

Le silence fait apparaître le contrepoint latent des voix passées et à venir, que brouille le tumulte du présent ; et d'autre part il révèle la voix inaudible de l'absence, que recouvre le vacarme assourdissant des présences. Et d'abord la musique, silence audible, recherche tout naturellement le pianissimo du souvenir qui chuchote, comme un ami lointain, à *l'oreille mentale de l'homme*. On a montré ici comment la musique, langue du devenir, était aussi la *langue des souvenirs*, et comment la mémoire servait à rendre l'expression évasive.⁵⁷⁶

Celati repeatedly emphasises how it is necessary to have a tuned ear, which allows us to be sensitive to the subtlety of words, to the value of pauses and silences, to the emotional variations of characters. Perceiving silence is only possible if one is not deaf in the profound sense understood by Celati and Jankélévitch, that is, if one reopens one's ear to the possibility of hearing the variations in timbre and tone of others. In order to notice such variations, it is probably not only necessary for the reader to have a tuned ear, but also for the narrator to make the score-book come alive as conductor Barenboim means it. Indeed, to make that which has no speech - Woolf's voice of the sea or Celati's dead - speak, one must write a work conceived out of the self, as Calvino argues:

magari fosse possibile un'opera concepita *al di fuori del self*, un'opera che ci permettesse d'uscire dalla prospettiva limitata d'un io individuale, non solo per entrare in altri io simili al nostro, ma *per far parlare ciò che non ha parola* [...].⁵⁷⁷

Woolf's *The Waves* is precisely the work conceived “without a self” par excellence: the soliloquies of the characters, although they are evident expressions of different and heterogeneous subjectivities, manage to find a unity, i.e. they become a symphony, a key metaphor for the entire novel. This generates a potentially infinite structure, like the undertow of the sea that resonates with each interlude, until the end of the novel. The work outside the self is that which allows what has no word to speak, as Calvino argues. This, in a way, recalls that 'nothing that demands to speak' that Blanchot wrote about.

⁵⁷⁶ Vladimir Jankélévitch, *La musique et l'ineffable*, cit., p. 167 [my emphasis].

⁵⁷⁷ Italo Calvino, *Lezioni americane. Sei proposte per il prossimo millennio*, cit., p. 122 [my emphasis].

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Le langage ne commence qu'avec le vide ; nulle plénitude, nulle certitude ne parle ; *à qui s'exprime, quelque chose d'essentiel fait défaut*. La *négation* est liée au langage. Au point de départ, je ne parle pas pour dire quelque chose, mais *c'est un rien qui demande à parler*, rien ne parle, rien trouve son être dans la parole et l'être de la parole n'est rien. Cette formule explique pourquoi l'idéal de la littérature a pu être celui-ci : ne rien dire, parler pour ne rien dire. [...] Si des choses on ne parle qu'en disant d'elles ce par quoi elles ne sont rien, eh bien ne rien dire, voilà le seul espoir d'en tout dire.⁵⁷⁸

Indeed, as we have experienced in the four texts examined, the word “rien”, “niente”, “nothing”, returns frequently. Literature seeks to say a nothing, that is, it seeks the words through which to be silent and thus express that totality, that openness of which Fink spoke, or even that voice from elsewhere of which Jankélévitch wrote.

A final consideration should be reserved for the question of the shadow, a recurring motif in these four texts. In fact, according to Jung: “The meeting with oneself is, at first, the meeting with one's own shadow”⁵⁷⁹. Such an encounter is difficult, it is painful, it forces us to see the most monstrous and vulnerable parts of ourselves. This is the experience described by Duras when Lol goes mad with grief; this is the experience narrated by Woolf when she speaks of the shadow that Percival casts over the lives of the other characters; this is the experience recounted by Perec when he describes the sleeping man as a shadow wandering aimlessly through the Parisian streets; this is the experience described by Celati when Baratto becomes a sleepwalker, a shadow following other shadows disoriented in a meaningless modernity. And yet, if at first glance the shadow only seems to have negative or neutral connotations, it is worth remembering, as Jung explains, that the shadow is exactly what provides humans with a three-dimensionality, or depth:

A dim premonition tells us that we cannot be whole without this negative side, that we have a body which, like all bodies, casts a shadow, and that if we deny this body we cease to be three-dimensional and become flat and without substance.⁵⁸⁰

Ultimately, if the muteness of the four protagonists is so significant, it is undoubtedly because it contains traces of that other voice, that shadow, that nothingness, that openness that only silence is capable of rendering. Silence, in a peculiar way, founds the authenticity of modern literature. As Rovatti argues, the authentic word is a word surrounded by silence, and an authentic language is a language imbued with silence. Among others, it is worth mentioning here Blanchot, who seems in perfect agreement with the poetics of the four texts just analysed: “Si [...] toute littérature venait à

⁵⁷⁸ Maurice Blanchot, « La littérature et le droit à la mort », in *La part du feu*, cit., p. 312 [my emphasis].

⁵⁷⁹ Carl Gustav Jung, *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious, Collected Works*, Volume 9, cit., p. 21.

⁵⁸⁰ Carl Gustav Jung, *Two Essays on Analytical Psychology*, Princeton University Press, 1953, p. 35.

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cesser de parler, ce qui ferait défaut, c'est le silence, et *c'est ce défaut de silence qui révélerait peut-être la disparition de la parole littéraire*"⁵⁸¹.

⁵⁸¹ Maurice Blanchot, *Le Livre à venir* [1959], Paris, Gallimard, 1986, coll. « Folio Essais », p. 298 [my emphasis].

Chapter 3. Aesthetics and Poetics of Silence

Every language has its own silence.

Elias Canetti

What Does an Aesthetics of Silence Mean?

In this chapter, we will analyse the formal aspects of the texts examined in order to highlight what we have called an aesthetic of silence, i.e. a set of forms and structures that emphasise silence.

For each of the four authors, examples will be chosen from the texts previously analysed. This study will examine five aspects: syntax, macrostructure, vocabulary, punctuation and rhetorical figures.

Analysing the aesthetics of silence in these texts is crucial to understanding what we mean by *silent writing*. Indeed, if it is true that there is demure, moderate, silent writing, it is precisely because there are formal elements that make it appear, even visually, in the text. Firstly, as far as syntax is concerned, we will see that there are often examples of parataxis, nominal sentences, very short, fragmentary sentences, and in general great conciseness. Secondly, the structures of the novels are often cadenced by contrapuntal rhythms whereby the music of the words is often counterpointed by moments of pause and silence, as in a symphony with interludes, which are also graphically visible thanks to blanks, blank pages, significant spacing between paragraphs and typographical gaps. Thirdly, the lexicon of these texts, which very often proposes words such as neutral, blank, hole, absence, indifference, brings into play a real vocabulary of silence. Punctuation also has much to say on the aesthetics of silence: the texts are in fact full of suspension points, dashes, commas, and dots that punctuate the characters' short and often unfinished sentences. Finally, rhetorical figures speak of silence and represent it in the text through metaphors, anacoluthons and ellipses.

All this allows us to affirm that silence has its own space in the text, that it is visible in the writing and that it takes on different functions: from pausing or intermittence between words to 'being silent'. Silent writing is writing that allows for self-suspense, to be demure, to let the gaps and faults in the text hint at what is not being said. The common idea in these authors is to say less in order to communicate more. Silent writing is writing that takes something out of the text in a narrative attitude that tends towards suspension rather than *bavardage*.

There are several studies dedicated to the aesthetics of silence, among the most interesting of which are worth mentioning: *The Aesthetics of Silence*¹, *Latenza. Preterizioni, reticenze e silenzi del testo*², *Meaningful Absence Across Arts and Media. The Significance of Missing Signifiers*³, *Spazi bianchi. Le espressioni letterarie, linguistiche e visive dell'assenza*⁴, *Semantics of Silences in Linguistics and Literature*⁵, *Lacuna. Saggio sul non detto*⁶, *Silence and the Silenced. Interdisciplinary Perspectives*⁷, *Langage et silence*⁸, *Perspectives on Silence*⁹.

The starting point is the common focus on all that does not rise to the surface in the text and thus remains hidden, that which does not lie on the enunciative surface and remains implicit, that which lies before verbal extrinsication and remains potentially unexpressed. Indeed, as we have seen at length in the previous chapters, much is concealed and remains hidden. The focus is on the submerged parts of literary discourse, that is, on what remains latent. Alvaro Barbieri and Elisa Gregori, in their analysis of textual latencies, have drawn the following conclusions:

Entro un quadro così delineato si profila una polarizzazione piuttosto netta tra il positivo e il negativo della latenza: da un lato abbiamo, infatti, il silenzio come privazione, insufficienza, sottrazione, rinuncia, ossia la resa della parola che ammutolisce riconoscendosi inadeguata a dire l'arcano o a cogliere l'essenza della vita nella sua densità esperienziale; ma dall'altro lato ci sono, al rovescio, l'energia comunicativa del "non detto" e la valorizzazione dell'implicito, cioè l'arte di mettere l'enfasi proprio su ciò di cui si tace, ricavando il massimo profitto dalle attrattive del sottinteso. Alla grande topica dell'indicibile, del linguaggio che collassa di fronte all'eccesso di senso o all'enormità di *res* troppo elevate o troppo "piene" per essere traducibili in *verba*, fa da contraltare una retorica del silenzio eloquente, fondata sulla consapevolezza che il tacere, a volte, può dire assai più e molto meglio di qualunque parola.¹⁰

Evidently, in all the texts analysed so far, we have found the positive and negative aspects described in the above quotation. If the unspeakable is the negative pole of silence considered especially in the chapter on autobiography and trauma studies, the valorisation of the implicit and

¹ Susan Sontag, *The Aesthetics of Silence*, cit.

² *Latenza. Preterizioni, reticenze e silenzi del testo. Quaderni del circolo filologico linguistico padovano -31-*, Padova, Esedra editrice, 2016.

³ *Meaningful Absence Across Arts and Media. The Significance of Missing Signifiers*, Edited by Werner Wolf, Nassim Balestrini and Walter Bernhart, *Studies in Intermediality*, volume 11, Leiden | Boston, Brill Rodopi, 2019.

⁴ *Spazi bianchi. Le espressioni letterarie, linguistiche e visive dell'assenza*, a cura di Alfonsina Buoniconto, Raffaele Cesaro, Gerardo Salvati, con la collaborazione di Eriberto Russo, Rubbettino, 2019.

⁵ *Semantics of Silences in Linguistics and Literature*, Edited by Gudrun M. Grabher and Ulrike Jessner, Universitätsverlag C. Winter Heidelberg, 1996.

⁶ Nicola Gardini, *Lacuna. Saggio sul non detto*, Torino, Piccola Biblioteca Einaudi, 2014.

⁷ *Silence and the Silenced. Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, edited by Leslie Boldt, Corrado Federici, and Ernesto Virgulti, *Studies on Themes and Motifs in Literature*, New York, Peter Lang, 2013.

⁸ George Steiner, *Langage et silence*, tr. Lucienne Lotringer, Paris, Aux Editions du Seuil, 1969.

⁹ Deborah Tannen, and Muriel Saville-Troike, eds., *Perspectives on Silence*, Norwood, NJ, Ablex, 1985.

¹⁰ *Latenza. Preterizioni, reticenze e silenzi del testo. Quaderni del circolo filologico linguistico padovano -31-*, cit., premessa, X.

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the energy of the unspoken were emphasised in the novelistic texts that analysed the theme of silence related to mute characters. However, it would be wrong to consider the former as negative examples of silence and the latter as positive examples. In fact, in what we can call an aesthetics of silence, both aspects permeate both types of literary texts. The common point we have highlighted is this:

Il non espresso attira irresistibilmente: è il punto d'inciampo su cui si fissa l'attenzione. L'ellissi attrae e seduce perché richiama l'interesse sul mancante e in pari tempo perché preserva la densità e la ricchezza di significati di ciò che rimane in ombra, non ancora abbagliato dal chiarore dell'esplicitezza. La lacunosità carica di tensione il discorso, gli conferisce profondità e ne dilata il senso, rifiutando di farvi dilagare la luce dell'evidenza. Omettendo e tacendo l'autore lascia al testo le sue zone di tenebra e i suoi segreti, predispone ampi vuoti dove si raddensa l'energia del potenziale. Non dire tutto, in letteratura, significa riservarsi un tesoro di possibili latenti, cioè serbare al testo un semenzaio di virtualità inesprese, disponibili a un vastissimo orizzonte di aperture e sviluppi. In questo senso è lecito affermare che le forze più vive dell'immaginario possono annidarsi proprio nelle falle del racconto: l'imperfetto e il non manifestato traboccano di potenza inespressa.¹¹

Assuming, then, that the unexpressed is an attractive element of the text and that it stimulates the reader's attention and imagination, we can draw the conclusion that silences are places charged with often the most interesting meanings. These faults in texts can be grasped both as narrative procedures and as stylistic means of reticence. This chapter, of a more analytical nature, aims to decipher the latter. In fact, if the former are diegetic mechanisms aimed at skilfully using holes in the text to wink at the reader and allude to the unspoken - as we have already seen in the previous chapters -, the latter are styles and forms that create the economy of the text by subtraction and that, through various linguistic and expressive means, suppress parts of the text, announce omissions, say not to say.

In short, we deduce that silence in the text is the result of two factors: an attitude of the author or character - who tend to keep silent by free choice, by imposition by a third party, by a natural disposition of spirit, by reactions to life events, by psychological impediments or in deference - and a stylistic procedure. Therefore, with regard to the analysis of the aesthetics of silence, it is appropriate to bear in mind Calvino's lesson that poetically reminds us that silence, as emptiness, is as much the reader's experience as it is the writer's, and that to confront a written page is always to be faced with a gap, because there is something more that escapes:

Leggere [...] è sempre stato questo: c'è una cosa che è lì, una cosa fatta di scrittura, un oggetto solido, materiale, che non si può cambiare, e attraverso questa cosa ci si confronta con qualcos'altro che non è presente,

¹¹ Ibidem.

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qualcos'altro che fa parte del mondo immateriale, invisibile, perché è solo pensabile, immaginabile, o perché c'è stato e non c'è più, passato, perduto, irraggiungibile, nel paese dei morti...¹²

Literary texts are thus objects imbued with whitespace, shadowy areas, erasures and omissions; they are places where discursiveness is often lost in favour of language that is also graphic and visual. When the reader notices that something is subtracted from the text, he is inevitably intrigued and tries to identify what is missing. This means that to have control over silence is to hold power, because it allows one to intentionally define its value and stimulate the reader's imagination.

Before moving on to a specific analysis of each of the four authors, it is worth pointing out, generically, that as far as stylistic procedures are concerned, certain common elements emerge in the texts analysed:

- a. in the structure: laconism, interruptions, typographical blanks, spacing loaded with meaning;
- b. in the syntax: parataxis, nominal sentences, conciseness, reticence, *brevitas*, fragmentation;
- c. in the lexicon: words such as “absence”, “lack”, “emptiness”, “nothingness”, “hole”, “indifference”, “silence”;
- d. in punctuation: suspension points, dashes, semicolons, significant commas;
- e. in rhetorical figures: ellipses, preteritions, anacoluthons, metaphors.

Let us now see in detail how the aesthetics of silence is configured in the four writers examined.

¹² Italo Calvino, *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore*, Milano, Oscar Mondadori, 1979, p. 70.

I. Woolf: “fluent and fluid” writing, or the Aesthetics of Suspension

Woolf's writing is defined by herself, in her diary, as “fluent and fluid”¹³. From this we deduce that such writing flows like a river, in a loose and spontaneous manner, and that it somehow recalls “the voice of the sea”¹⁴. Woolf uses another water-related image when she says: “They might be islands of light – islands in the stream that I am trying to convey”¹⁵. If the sea gives the idea of a homogeneous unity, the islands are instead fragments. Indeed, it is fair to say that Woolf's writing keeps these two opposite poles together: on the one hand, there is the effect of a perfect symphony, of a unity between the parts that fit together and form a *unicum*; on the other hand, there are voices outside the chorus, dissonant elements, fragments that are alone. The way *The Waves* was written again recalls an image of water: “what I want is not to write it, but [...] to get into the same current of thought and let that submerge everything”¹⁶. Woolf's writing is therefore similar to a flowing, swift, unhindered current: “In old days books were so many sentences absolutely struck with an axe out of crystal: and now my mind is so impatient, so quick, in some ways so desperate”¹⁷; “ideas rush in me; often though this is before I can control my mind or pen”¹⁸. We thus notice a difference from the writing of the other novels: there is an urgency in the writing of *The Waves* that is reflected in the style, which takes on a dramatic tone. Moreover, Woolf herself speaks of *The Waves* as a work that, from its conception, is fragmented: “I feel that I am only accumulating notes for a book”¹⁹; “It is a litter of fragments so far!”²⁰. This sense of fragmentation is reiterated a little further on:

I write two pages of arrant nonsense, after straining; I write variations of every sentence; compromises; bad shots; possibilities; till my writing book is like a lunatic's dream. [...] Still I am not satisfied. I think there is something lacking.²¹

Woolf's feeling is of something missing: there is thus a subtraction, an absence, at the basis of the novel. If the drafting of the novel is difficult and arduous because it is interspersed with constant second thoughts and a perfectionism that obliged Woolf to revise individual sentences many times, undoubtedly these intervals are also part of the structure of *The Waves*, which is cadenced by the famous interludes:

¹³ Virginia Woolf, *A Writer's Diary, Being Extracts from the Diary of Virginia Woolf*, cit., p. 134.

¹⁴ Ivi, p. 136.

¹⁵ Ivi, p. 140.

¹⁶ Ivi, p. 142.

¹⁷ Ivi, p. 139.

¹⁸ Ivi, p. 151.

¹⁹ Ivi, p. 146.

²⁰ Ivi, p. 151.

²¹ Ivi, pp. 147-148.

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The interludes are very difficult, yet I think essential; so as to bridge and also to give a background – the sea; insensitive nature – I don't know.²²

Evidently, the interludes are designed as pauses of silence within the musical rhythm of *The Waves*. Indeed, if music is the element that shapes Woolf's fluid style and is at the basis of the novel's conception, the interludes are the breaths between one act and the next and cadence the rhythm, giving a precise structure to the symphony of the text. Yet while there is a principle of unity in the novel, it should also be emphasised that this does not prevent it from being severely lacunar:

But I have never written a book so full of holes and patches; that will need re-building, yes, not only re-modelling. I suspect the structure is wrong. Never mind. I might have done something easy and fluent [...].²³

Unlike all my other books in every way, it is unlike them in this, that I begin to re-write it, or conceive it again with ardour, directly I have done. I begin to see what I had in my mind; and want to begin cutting out masses of irrelevance and clearing, sharpening and making the good phrases shine. One wave after another. No room.²⁴

It is evident here how the novel was created by subtraction: Woolf revises the entire draft and cuts out what is irrelevant, subtracts excess material, leaves holes in the text. At the same time, however, the holes in the text do not prevent a smooth reading, because Woolf's invented prose is fluent:

You see, I could perhaps do B.'s soliloquy in such a way as to break up, dig deep, make prose move – yes I swear – as prose has never moved before; from the chuckle, the babble to the rhapsody.²⁵

The reference to the musical term “rhapsody” is significant because, as we already know, the novel was born under the influence of listening to music and the latter is a fundamental element for Woolf, who follows notes rather than concepts: “I am writing to a rhythm and not to a plot”²⁶. This prose as flowing as running water finally seems to be the culmination of an arduous journey that led Woolf to the achievement of her personal style: “What a long toil to reach this beginning – if *The Waves* is my first work in my own style!”²⁷.

²² Ivi, p. 150.

²³ Ivi, p. 155.

²⁴ Ivi, pp. 155-156.

²⁵ Ivi, p. 161.

²⁶ *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*. 6 vols. Edited by Nigel Nicolson and Joanne Trautmann, New York, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975-80, *Letters 4*, p. 204.

²⁷ Virginia Woolf, *A Writer's Diary, Being Extracts from the Diary of Virginia Woolf*, cit., p. 172.

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Of all of them, the formal element that is certainly most singular in Woolf is that of rhythm. Indeed, if words can be compared to notes, silence is to pauses. Woolf's prose style is almost poetic precisely because of its rhythm, composed of sounds, silences, tempos, thematic and technical variations. Indeed, as Woolf wrote to Vita Sackville-West in a letter:

Style is a very simple matter; it is all rhythm. Once you get that, you can't use the wrong words. But on the other hand here am I sitting after half the morning, crammed with ideas, and visions, and so on, and can't dislodge them, for lack of the right rhythm. Now this is very profound, what rhythm is, and goes far deeper than words.²⁸

Rhythm reaches deeper meanings than words because it is through it that Woolf brings her prose alive, moving and advancing along the thread of the narrative. Rhythm is what allows us to hear the noises, sounds and silences in the text; it is a metalanguage that communicates emotional as well as aesthetic meanings. Within rhythm, blank spaces have a fundamental importance, as they are synonymous with silence: "Between the sentences... a little shape of some kind builds itself up"²⁹. Patricia Ondek Laurence points out that:

In her diary and novels, Woolf often refers to the "white space" of the mind as a page or an artistic canvas waiting to be filled. This white space represents the writer's mind as well as the reader's – the reader who is provided with white space in the text (various kinds of silences) by the writer for the play of his emotion and thought.³⁰

These white spaces intentionally left by Woolf therefore represent interruptions, suspensions of the narrative - as in the case of the interludes in *The Waves* - and are part of the structure of the text, which is enriched by silences on the page. Of course, metaphors, punctuation and lexicon also contribute to this, but in Woolf it is rhythm that has the upper hand over the other elements. The white space in Woolf is suggestive, as it contains the unspoken creative potential of the story. This mental white space also belongs to the character of Rhoda, whose 'whiteness' has to do with loneliness, isolation and silence: "And as she stares at the chalk figures, her mind lodges in those white circles; it steps through those white loops into emptiness, alone. They have no meaning for her. She has no answer for them."³¹; "But here I am nobody. I have no face"³². Thus, white space takes on multiple meanings: from the emptiness in the characters' minds, to the pause in the rhythm of the text, to the silence of the unspoken.

²⁸ *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, cit., *Letters 3*, p. 247.

²⁹ Virginia Woolf, "The Anatomy of Fiction", in *Collected Essays*, 4 vols., New York, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1967, Vol. 2, p. 132.

³⁰ Patricia Ondek Laurence, *The Reading of Silence. Virginia Woolf in the English Tradition*, cit., p. 172.

³¹ Virginia Woolf, *The Waves*, cit., p. 14.

³² Ivi, p. 22.

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As far as the macrostructure is concerned, in the architecture of *The Waves* white space plays a structural role especially in the interludes, which are accompanied, before and after, by large typographic spaces left empty: “I think I see how I can bring in interludes – I mean spaces of silence and poetry and contrast”³³. If the rhythm of writing, for Woolf, can be compared to music, then we must learn to listen to the pauses that the writer offers us:

Learning to hear Woolf’s sounding of the elements of “stroke” and “pause”, a rhythm of marking and pausing in different domains, is the beginning of an appreciation of her style. More than other modern writers, she reshapes sentences into varied, energetic, elastic, and rhythmic forms.³⁴

The same elements can be found, not surprisingly, in Bernard's writing:

It is the speed, the hot, molten effect, the laval flow of sentence into sentence that I need. [...] Now I am getting his beat into my brain (the rhythm is the main thing in writing). Now, without pausing I will begin, on the very lilt of the stroke³⁵.

Emotional patterns are thus the organising principle of the structure of *The Waves*, which is musical.

On the structural level, beyond a sight or an emotion expressed in a sentence, there is the flux and flow of certain emotional patterns that are captured in the form of the novel. Woolf [...] is concerned with the idea of mental and emotional strata of differing depths, a characteristic of phenomenological inquiry, and in her novels every stratum makes its contribution to the rhythm and polyphony of the whole: words, sentences, paragraphs, chapters, divisions, and overall structure. Division, repetition, and variation help to create the rhythm at every level.³⁶

The structure of *The Waves* has already been described; here it will suffice to recall that it is a novel divided into nine sections, each preceded by an interlude or pause of silence of a descriptive order, featuring seven characters, one of whom remains silent and the others report their soliloquies. Yet, in a study that focuses on silence, it is the interludes that are the protagonists:

These interludes function in the novel like expanded parentheses in a sentence, and they enable Woolf to do two things: to capture two orders of time and reality, and to give us, as she says in her diary, “the sense of reading the two things at the same time”: life and nature. In the interludes we have a sense of the eternal renewal of time. Life and nature, even though there is death (Percival’s and Rhoda’s), are in harmony. And through words and

³³ *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, cit., Diary 4, p. 332.

³⁴ Patricia Ondek Laurence, *The Reading of Silence. Virginia Woolf in the English Tradition*, cit., p. 176.

³⁵ Virginia Woolf, *The Waves*, cit., p. 55.

³⁶ Patricia Ondek Laurence, *The Reading of Silence. Virginia Woolf in the English Tradition*, cit., p. 178.

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narrative events proceed in time, Woolf arrests the linear sequence of writing by using the techniques of simultaneity through the use of spaces of silence like the interludes of nature or parentheses in a sentence.³⁷

Clearly, rhythm is fundamental to Woolf's writing, and silence, as a dimension of rhythm, is a part of her style. The reader is asked to complete the text with the silent parts: "the reader must add to what is not said, in order to read it and frame it"³⁸. Moreover, the interruptions in Woolf's novels have a double meaning, as George Poulet argues: "On the one hand, everything becomes suspense, fragmentary arrangement, with alternation and opposite terms; on the other hand, everything contributes to the total rhythm"³⁹. From the point of view of meaning, however, silence in Woolf represents the unconscious aspects of the mind and is therefore psychological: it is a presence that indicates the limits of language. Woolf is also famous for her scenes of silence, within which Patricia Oudek Laurence distinguished three types of silence:

The first type of scene involves various forms of self-address ranging from the flotsam of word or sentence to defined, focused inner monologue. The second, communicative silences between characters that structure communication (pauses, lulls, interruptions, repetitions) but do not convey propositional content (false starts, deviation from rules, changes of plan, pauses, afterthoughts, repetitions); communicative silences that do carry propositional content, and analysis of a communicative event, such as genre, topic, function, setting, participants' status, and role relationship. The third type of scene contains moments of being, fixed philosophical moments, marked by silence in arrested conversation.⁴⁰

If in *The Waves* it is easy to find examples of all three types of silence, in "A Sketch of the Past", however, it is the third category that excels. Indeed, "silence in narration is, of course, verbal and unvoiced. What is left obscure, open-ended, and incomplete - Woolf's sense of what life is - is reflected then in her use of a lexicon of silence, punctuation, tense shifts, repetition, and a rhythm [...]"⁴¹.

Silence, in Woolf, must also be sought in syntax and lexicon: "pauses, gaps, blanks, trances, abysses, crevices, cracks, emptiness, nothingness, interruptions, gulfs, and absences. These are the formal devices of 'silence' that mark changes in narrative gear and emotional tone and scene in Woolf's novels. They generally mark a suspension of narrative movement by arresting all human speech and, with vocabulary and sensation of 'sinking', move the character and the reader from

³⁷ Ivi, pp. 179-180.

³⁸ Mary Ann Caws, *Reading Frames in Modern Fiction*, Princeton, Princeton Univ. Press, 1985, p. 243.

³⁹ George Poulet, *The Interior Distance*, tr. E. Coleman, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1959, p. 274.

⁴⁰ Patricia Oudek Laurence, *The Reading of Silence. Virginia Woolf in the English Tradition*, cit., p. 99.

⁴¹ Ibidem.

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external reality to internal thoughts”⁴². This suspension and sense of sinking are felt by the reader through ellipses, which are a medium frequently used by Woolf and which allow the reader to actively participate in the discovery of the unspoken, as claimed by the writer herself: “one can read what is on the page, or, drawing aside read what is not written”⁴³. In fact, suspension points are used very often by Woolf and represent doubts, hesitations, fears, abysses between characters. Moreover, dashes are another device regularly used by the writer: as Laurence writes, who particularly notices them in Neville's sentences in *The Waves*, “the dashes contain the gallop of words, their racing ahead of Neville, yet their inadequacy, their hesitancy, Neville’s hesitancy. The dash also contains a haste, a theme about lack of time, which is a favourite in the twentieth century”⁴⁴. Parentheses are also significant in Woolf, who brackets external events and places the inner life of the characters at the centre of the narrative.

Finally, punctuation is very expressive in Woolf:

Woolf’s punctuation reveals a layer of consciousness represented by black dots - ... () [] on a page. The dash has its haste; the ellipses, a sense of possibility and suspension; the parentheses and brackets, a sense of simultaneity with the other action in the sentence. These marks of punctuation (ellipses, dashes, dot-dashes, parentheses, brackets) correlate with Woolf’s lexicon of silence, words like “gaps, gulf, silence, pause, abyss,” to express her sense of the indeterminacies, the irresoluteness of life and language.

Her punctuation, then, separates “facts” from “the inner life” and the flow of words in time from the suspension of the silences.⁴⁵

It is not only these elements, however, that lead us to an aesthetics of silence. Indeed, on the subject of lexicon, Woolf openly mentions words such as “silence”, “silences” or “silent”. In *The Waves* these are repeated 48 times. Moreover, the metaphors used by the writer often suggest images related to silence, thoughtfulness, and the unconscious. Multiple examples can be found in *Moments of Being*, where we find images related to the current, the colour blue - linked to depression -, fish, the underwater world, the sea, just like in *The Waves*. The two texts are in fact strongly related, as seen above.

She uses the metaphor of a “fish world” or “the pool” to represent the fluidity of sensation, feeling, thought – consciousness – and imagination; “light” or “light beams” represent the searching, creative mind; “strokes” or “marks” or “notes” are the metaphors for art – painting or writing; and “pauses” are the silence that is part of her

⁴² Ivi, p. 100.

⁴³ Virginia Woolf, *The Common Reader*, New York, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1925, p. 429.

⁴⁴ Patricia Ondek Laurence, *The Reading of Silence. Virginia Woolf in the English Tradition*, cit., p. 109.

⁴⁵ Ivi, pp. 110-111.

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sense of mind, language, and life. Thoughts, words, and silence are thus part of the pattern she is creating in her novels in order to capture the moment “whole”.⁴⁶

Metaphors, in particular, are what give access to the unconscious, as Lacan and Freud point out. In fact, if we accept Lacan's hypothesis that the unconscious is a form of writing, we can discern its meanings precisely in the dreams, fantasies, and images used by Woolf, especially those related to the underwater world. Indeed, it is well known that “through writing, she overcomes the ‘emptiness’ of Being and depression that she sometimes refers to in her diary”⁴⁷. Writing thus becomes a filler: “nothing makes a whole unless... I am writing”⁴⁸. The feeling of emptiness is difficult to express directly, which is why Woolf uses spatial metaphors, such as empty places, to narrate it.

Thus, summarising the points discussed above, we note that Woolf favours a fluid, but at the same time fragmented syntax, in which nominal and very short sentences often appear; the structure is based on the musical model and thus proposes a precise rhythm of words and silences, also thanks to the use of interludes in the case of *The Waves*; the lexicon repeatedly recalls the word “silence” and is enriched by numerous repetitions, echoing the inner life of the characters; the metaphors used, in turn, often recall images of water and the underwater world, thus emphasising everything that does not appear on the surface of the enunciative level, but which exists nonetheless; punctuation cadences the syntax and breaks up the paragraphs thanks to the use of dashes, suspension points and significant typographic blanks.

Since music is a central element in *The Waves*, the soliloquies of the characters become the murmur of silent thoughts, like an echo heard through a seashell. It is not only the human elements that emit sounds, but also nature: everything contributes to the novel's symphony. Yet, if the characters' thoughts can be considered the notes, the natural elements - especially present in the interludes - are the silences. This is reminiscent of John Cage's theory:

In this new music nothing takes place but sounds: those that are notated and those that are not. Those that are not notated appear in the written music as silence, opening the doors of music to the sounds that happen to be in the environment... It is realized that sounds occur whether intended or not.⁴⁹

It follows from this that the distinction between sound and silence, in music, is psychological: silence is only called such because it is not part of the intentions of the piece of music, but it is never

⁴⁶ Ivi, pp. 114-115.

⁴⁷ Ivi, p. 118.

⁴⁸ *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, cit., Diary 4, p. 161.

⁴⁹ John Cage, *Silence*, Middleton, Wesleyan Univ. Press, 1961, p. 7.

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absolute. Similarly, in Woolf's writing, nature serves as the background-silence against which the characters' words-notes unfold, and we as readers can learn to listen to the interruptions, pauses, and suspensions of words as silences in a new musical aesthetic. Nature has its own voice and its own silence. Indeed, in Woolf, every voice - human or natural - contributes to the totality of rhythm. Indeed, Woolf, just like Calvino, aimed to narrate "the world seen without a self"⁵⁰. The voice of nature is also expressed by the passage of time, narrated by Bernard with the sound "tick, tick":

In addition to the "tick" of time, we experience gaps in *The Waves* that represent the pulses of the unconscious. By introducing the unconscious into the text through the structure of a gap - to use Woolf's refined vocabulary, the crevices, gashes, fissures, rents, cracks, abysses, and gulfs (all spatial terms and suggestively "feminine") - Woolf introduces the pain of the mind into *The Waves*. These "gaps" allow unknown aspects of mind into the text: the repressed fears, shocks, and disasters of life seep in through the psychological and lexical spaces that punctuate her text.⁵¹

Jacques Lacan, speaking of Freud, writes: "Impediment, failure, split. In a spoken or written sentence something stumbles... It is there that he seeks the unconscious... It is the function of the unconscious to be in relation with the concept of the cut"⁵². Death as well as the unconscious are central themes in Woolf's life and writing, and it is not unfounded to believe that these lexical, syntactic, thematic 'cuts' in her novels are linked to the episode of her mother's death narrated in "A Sketch of the Past".

Rhoda in *The Waves* is finely attuned to shocks "sudden as the springs of a tiger," and she speaks of the devices invented "for filling up the crevices and disguising these fissures" that open up the unexpected in life. She describes an experience of coming to a "grey, cadaverous space" of a puddle, a physical and psychological "gap." and being unable to cross it. The psychological impediment is mirrored in Woolf's similar experience described in both "A Sketch of the Past" and her diary: "Life is, soberly and accurately the oddest affair; has in it the essence of reality. I used to feel this as a child-couldn't step across a puddle once, I remember, for thinking how strange - what am I? etc. But by writing I don't reach anything. All I mean to make is a note of a curious state of mind" (*Diary 3*, p. 113). This impulse to record strange states of mind, inchoate, swelling into image and sound, leads Woolf to sometimes find a rhythm - a gap - rather than a word for an emotion.

This physical and psychological inability to cross puddles interests Woolf and Freud. He, through psychoanalysis, and Woolf, through her writing, set out to admit the presence of and then to explain such gaps and suspensions.⁵³

⁵⁰ Virginia Woolf, *The Waves*, cit., p. 207.

⁵¹ Patricia Ondek Laurence, *The Reading of Silence. Virginia Woolf in the English Tradition*, cit., p. 198.

⁵² Jacques Lacan, *The Language of the Self*, tr. Anthony Wilden, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1968, pp. 25, 43.

⁵³ Patricia Ondek Laurence, *The Reading of Silence. Virginia Woolf in the English Tradition*, cit., pp. 198-199.

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Woolf's whole aesthetics of silence thus aims at expressing a sense of suspension: interludes suspend the linear narrative of the text, inserting natural elements; suspension points create anticipation and expectation; parentheses suspend the main discourse and fragment it; dashes break up characters' sentences by creating anacoluthons and preteritions, suspending speech in favour of silence; the metaphors of the underwater world suspend the reader's breath and immerse him or her in the writer's mind and sensations; the images relating to the unconscious suspend awareness and cause one to enter the regime of the dark and unknown. Woolf's aesthetics of suspension is first and foremost a stopping in front of all that flow that is her writing, to find not only *moments of being*, but also moments of emptiness and silence.

II. Duras: “écriture courante”, or the Aesthetics of Emptiness

Duras calls her writing style an “écriture courante” and does so in an interview:

L’écriture courante c’est ça, celle qui ne montre pas, qui court sur la crête des mots, celle qui n’existe pas, qui a à peine le temps d’exister.⁵⁴

This adjective is also used on another occasion, namely within *L'Amant*, after the account of her brother's death:

C'est pourquoi j'en écris si facile d'elle maintenant, si long, si étiré, elle est devenue écriture courante.⁵⁵

This adjective seems to refer to a fluency, rapidity, fluidity of writing that is so fast that it is immediately transient and therefore short-lived. However, the writer uses another set of epithets to describe her writing. In fact, within *La douleur*, she speaks of a “petite écriture extraordinairement régulière et calme”⁵⁶ despite the disorder of thought and feeling. Again, in *Écrire*, she describes her own style in the following words:

Il y aurait une écriture du non-écrit. Un jour ça arrivera. Une écriture brève, sans grammaire, une écriture de mots seuls. Des mots sans grammaire de soutien. Égarés. Là, écrits. Et quittés aussitôt.⁵⁷

The appellations used by Duras indicate a brevity, a conciseness, a fragmentariness, an essential style and above all a writing that, paradoxically, is not written. Again, Duras writes:

Une immensité vide. Un livre éventuel. Devant rien. Devant comme une écriture vivante et nue, comme terrible, terrible à surmonter. Je crois que la personne qui écrit est sans idée de livre, qu'elle a les mains vides, la tête vide, et qu'elle ne connaît de cette aventure du livre que l'écriture sèche et nue, sans avenir, sans écho, lointaine, avec ses règles d'or, élémentaires : l'orthographe, le sens.⁵⁸

Duras’s style seems elementary, without frills: it is a raw, bare writing that reveals a nakedness and is therefore alive.

⁵⁴ Entretien de M. Duras avec Hervé Le Masson, in *Le Nouvel Observateur*, 28 sept-5 oct 1984, p. 93.

⁵⁵ Marguerite Duras, *L'amant*, cit., p. 37.

⁵⁶ Marguerite Duras, *La douleur*, cit., p. 12.

⁵⁷ Marguerite Duras, “La mort du jeune aviateur anglais”, in *Écrire*, cit., p. 71.

⁵⁸ Marguerite Duras, *Écrire*, cit., p. 20.

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L'écrit ça arrive comme le vent, c'est nu, c'est de l'encre, c'est l'écrit, et ça passe comme rien d'autre ne passe dans la vie, rien de plus, sauf elle, la vie.⁵⁹

Indeed, Duras makes explicit the connection of her writing with silence multiple times. In *L'Amant*, when she writes: "Ce qui se passe c'est justement le silence, ce long travail pour toute ma vie"⁶⁰; in an interview when she states:

J'écris des livres dans une place difficile, c'est-à-dire entre la musique et le silence. Je crois que c'est quelque chose comme ça.⁶¹

At the same time, critics have used different terms in reference to Duras's style: "écriture blanche"⁶², "écriture maigre"⁶³, "écriture de plains et déliés"⁶⁴, "écriture de ressassement"⁶⁵, "écriture dépouillé jusqu'au dénuement"⁶⁶. Michelucci, on this subject, spoke of "un art d'écrire autrement"⁶⁷, while Kristeva argues that Duras rejects "la rhétorique apprêtée de la littérature"⁶⁸. However, although critics have focused on novels in which silence plays an explicit role, such as *Le Ravissement* or *L'Amour*, it should be emphasised that silence progressively imposed itself in Duras's writing. The common element of this aesthetic of silence in Duras is a rejection of the code of fine letters, as noted by Anna Ledwina: "L'écriture du non-écrit échappe au code des belles lettres, en dévoilant toutes sortes d'excès, véhiculés par des ellipses, des blancs, des creux, des syntagmes minimaux, des mots uniques"⁶⁹. In Duras, the element that stands out is certainly that of emptiness: there is in fact a psychological emptiness, as highlighted in *La Douleur*, a narrative emptiness and on the level of enunciation, as highlighted in *Le Ravissement*, and finally a formal emptiness. By this last expression, we intend to refer to all the stylistic procedures through which Duras makes silence through writing.

In particular, we note that: the syntax is paratactic, short, concise, characterised by very short sentences; the structure of the novels proceeds with flashbacks and suspends the narrative rhythm, only to find the link to the present of the enunciation again pages later; the rhetorical figures most in

⁵⁹ Ivi, pp. 51-52-53.

⁶⁰ Marguerite Duras, *L'amant*, cit., p. 34.

⁶¹ Marguerite Duras, Entretien avec Michel Field, in *Le Cercle de Minuit*. 14 octobre 2003, France 2.

⁶² Christiane Kègle, *Écrire la douleur de la disparition. Marguerite Duras à propos de Robert Antelme*, cit., p. 10.

⁶³ Cf. Anna Ledwina, « Écrire, [...] c'est se taire » : du silence durassien, Thélème. *Revista Complutense de Estudios Franceses* ISSN-e: 1989-8193, <http://dx.doi.org/10.5209/THEL.55397>.

⁶⁴ Marguerite Duras, *L'amant*, cit., p. 34.

⁶⁵ Madeleine Borgomano, « Marguerite Duras : écriture du silence ou vertige de l'indicible ? », in Mura-Brunel, A. & K. Cogart (dir.), *Limites du langage : indicible ou silence*. Paris, L'Harmattan, 2002, pp. 333-338, p. 334.

⁶⁶ Monique Pinthon, *L'émergence du silence dans l'oeuvre de Marguerite Duras*, *Écritures du silence*, 5, 2009, pp. 77-87, p. 79.

⁶⁷ Pascal Michelucci, « La motivation des styles chez Marguerite Duras : cris et silence dans *Moderato cantabile* et *La Douleur* », in *Études françaises*. Vol. 39, n°2, 2003, pp. 95-107, p. 97.

⁶⁸ Julia Kristeva, *Soleil noir. Dépression et mélancolie*. Paris, Gallimard, coll. Folio Essais, 1987, p. 233.

⁶⁹ Anna Ledwina, « Écrire, [...] c'est se taire » : du silence durassien, cit. p. 198.

use are anacoluthons and preteritions - as evidenced in the character of Lol V. Stein and in many other characters of various novels already mentioned -; punctuation intersperses the text by means of numerous dots, suspension points and typographical whites marking a pause of silence; the lexicon recalls the words “absence”, “emptiness”, “death”, “hole” many times, and the emblem is surely represented by the “mot-trou” of *Le Ravissement*, an absent word, non-existent writing, silence made explicit by means of a non-word.

The absence and emptiness that underpin Duras's writing, however, do not prevent her from saying a totality, just like Woolf: Duras's attempt is to get rid of language in order to arrive at silence, in the knowledge that “l’attraction par le vide est au fond de la séduction, jamais l’accumulation des signes, ni les messages du désir, mais la complicité ésotérique dans l’absorption des signes”⁷⁰. Duras's predilection for the silence that best describes absence, loneliness, madness and loss is extremely linked to her need to express herself openly, freed from the codes of fine letters as well as from a long and composed syntax or rigid grammar. As Ledwina argues, Duras's is “l’esthétique de l’absence qui présente une image d’une époque soumise aux transformations profondes des valeurs sociales et morales, s’expliquant par le renversement de la raison et par le malaise de la langue”⁷¹. The need to say and the inadequacy of language convey the writer's efforts towards the only possibility: that of a writing that is stripped bare, where writing is equivalent to “hurler sans bruit”⁷². The metaphor of a literature that remains naked is also taken up in *Hôpital silence*, where we read:

La littérature, tout lui appartient. Elle prend et refait. Ou bien elle refait le monde ou bien elle n’existe pas. Si elle ne refait pas le monde, qu’elle aille se rhabiller.⁷³

The opposition between silence and shouting and between creation with words and deconstruction with silence is also made explicit by Roland Barthes, who speaks of destruction:

La littérature a pour matière la catégorie générale du langage ; pour se faire, non seulement elle doit tuer ce qui l’a engendrée, mais encore, pour ce meurtre, elle n’a à sa disposition d’autre instrument que ce même langage qu’elle doit détruire.⁷⁴

The operation carried out by Duras is precisely that of destruction. It is in fact through the muteness of the characters, the unspoken, the anacoluthons, the hesitations, the unspoken allusions

⁷⁰ Jean Baudrillard, *De la séduction*, Paris, Galilée, 1979, p. 109.

⁷¹ Anna Ledwina, « *Écrire, [...] c’est se taire* » : *du silence durassien*, cit., p. 200.

⁷² Marguerite Duras, *Écrire*, cit., p. 28.

⁷³ Marguerite Duras, *Hôpital silence*, in *Outside*, cit., p. 520.

⁷⁴ Roland Barthes, *Le bruissement de la langue*, Paris, Seuil, 1984, p. 279.

that the writer expresses herself. In Duras there are many types of silence, which often gravitate around the psychological issues of the characters - the impossibility of saying, power roles, interruption of social interactions, absence of words in conversation -, and these find a translation through certain graphic procedures analysed by Borgomano as follows:

Le silence pénètre l'écriture de toutes parts : il saute déjà aux yeux du lecteur, marqué par l'utilisation graphique des blancs, beaucoup plus envahissants qu'ils ne le sont généralement dans les textes en prose. [...] La ponctuation, autre marque visuelle des silences, des arrêts du discours abondent : des points séparent des phrases un peu longues. Des tirets s'intercalent, arrêtent les paroles, de toute leur longueur, et le dialogue est sans cesse interrompu de points de suspension : brisure, attente, silence. Le vocabulaire lui-même participe au silence général : les mots choisis sont d'une telle transparence, d'une banalité si grande qu'ils troublent à peine le vide.⁷⁵

As usual, the elements of the aesthetics of silence that are highlighted are punctuation, blanks, dashes and the lexicon, which in Duras's case is characterised by great elementariness. Verbs, moreover, are often placed in the negative. Ledwina states: "Les silences et les vides sont plus éloquents que ce qui est dit. Ainsi l'écriture de Duras restitue-t-elle des états fluctuants et extrêmes. Le discours elliptique des protagonistes désigne un naufrage des mots face à l'affect innommable"⁷⁶. This writing of fluctuating states is very reminiscent of Woolf's fluid writing: it is no coincidence that both women writers were interested in the psychic and inner representation of characters, where silence plays an ambiguous but fundamental role. The stylistic minimalism of Duras, who writes in ellipses, is described by Hélène Cixous as laying herself bare:

Ce que Marguerite Duras invente, c'est ce que j'appellerai : l'art de la pauvreté. Petit à petit, il y a un tel travail d'abandon des richesses [...], au fur et à mesure qu'on avance dans son œuvre [...] [la romancière] dépouille de plus en plus, elle met de moins en moins de décor [...], d'objets, et alors c'est tellement pauvre qu'à la fin quelque chose s'inscrit, reste, et puis ramasse, rassemble tout ce qui ne veut pas mourir.⁷⁷

This writing of subtraction becomes a "langage de l'absent"⁷⁸, as Freud called it, and communicates everything that is concealed, alluded to, suggested, evoked but not explicit. Speaking of which, Nyssen describes Duras's style as composed "des propositions, des structures dans lesquelles le lecteur 'coule' son livre à lui [...], en ne disant pas"⁷⁹. Duras's language is such because

⁷⁵ Madeleine Borgomano, « Une écriture féminine ? A propos de Marguerite Duras », in *Littérature*. Vol. 53, n°1, 1984, pp. 59-68, pp. 61-63.

⁷⁶ Anna Ledwina, « *Écrire, [...] c'est se taire* » : *du silence durassien*, cit., p. 204.

⁷⁷ Hélène Cixous and Michel Foucault, « À propos de Marguerite Duras », in *Cahiers Renaud-Barrault*. N°89, 1975, pp. 9-10.

⁷⁸ Sigmund Freud, *Malaise dans la civilisation*, Paris, PUF, 1971, p. 39.

⁷⁹ Hubert Nyssen, « Marguerite Duras, un silence peuplé de phrases », in *Synthèses*. N°254- 255, 1967, pp. 42-50, p. 44.

it takes on the affective tones of the characters: it is an emotional language, which often manifests itself in the form of shouting, but much more often becomes aphasia or interrupted and lacunar speech, as in the case of Lol V. Stein, characterised by continuous interruptions and anacoluthons. Lol's sentences are often not finished and are not even followed by punctuation to help the reader decipher the boundaries of the utterance. This is because emotional language escapes from the canon of logic and rationality and it is the word that comes out of the silence Rovatti spoke of, or rather, it is the language “de tout ce que les êtres enfouissent et ramènent en mots rares, elliptiques, tendus au niveau du langage audible”⁸⁰.

On the subject of syntax, Pinthon writes:

Au refus du langage rationnel de ses personnages répond le refus des syntagmes figés ; Marguerite Duras va, au fur et à mesure qu'elle avance dans sa création, de plus en plus récuser les contraintes de la gangue syntaxique. [...] La phrase est un espace clos qui fragmente la réalité, la réduit, la mutile. C'est pourquoi sa désintégration s'impose ; la phrase éclate [...].⁸¹

Similarly, dialogues between characters abound with single words, minimal syntagmas, nominal phrases, reflecting their desires, fears and voids:

Chez elle, la parole cerne au plus près les mouvements du désir : les hésitations, les silences qui souvent se glissent dans le dialogue, le suspendent, sont comme autant de signes du désir, de son affleurement, de sa bouleversante fulgurance. Dialogues troués, dépouillés à l'extrême, ils débordent de la force obscure du désir.⁸²

Duras's aesthetics of silence is, in short, a free aesthetics of words in a void because her language, which tends towards silence, represents the emotionality of the characters as well as that of the writer. The gaps, ellipses, preteritions, hesitations, suspension points, dashes, and blanks in the text tell of that emptiness that the writer filled with her words drenched in silence, as Rovatti puts it.

The crisis of knowledge, reflected in a crisis of language, is rendered through the rejection of certainties and the tension towards the unknown and ambiguous:

Dialogues qui taisent l'objet du discours, [des] effets de parataxe qui empêchent la sédimentation du sens, et [des] phrases nominales qui suspendent l'action produisent une rhétorique négative qui bloque le procès du sens entre deux mouvements contradictoires : appel au déchiffrement et dissolution de ses effets.⁸³

⁸⁰ Alain Vircondelet, *Marguerite Duras et l'émergence du chant*, Paris, La Renaissance du livre, 2000, p. 13.

⁸¹ Monique Pinthon, *L'émergence du silence dans l'oeuvre de Marguerite Duras*, cit., p. 84.

⁸² Ibidem.

⁸³ Rachel Boué, *L'éloquence du silence : Celan, Sarraute, Duras et Quignard*, cit., p. 79.

The negative rhetoric Boué speaks of is a rhetoric of the fragment, reflecting the crisis of representation, that is, of what cannot be told: “C'est comme des pages, voyez, des pages pleines, vides à force d'être pleines, illisibles à force d'être écrites, d'être pleines d'écriture”⁸⁴. Corentin Lahouste argues that typographic blanks play a key role in this combination of fullness and emptiness:

Par là-même, le blanc graphique chez Duras constituerait le moment de l'absolu, indicible, lui qui passe entre les mailles de la parole. Il n'y a pas de mot(s) pour le dire ; il s'exprime dans l'étendue d'un silence et d'un blanc scriptural. C'est alors un silence étale, et pourtant similaire à une puissante vague, qui s'abat autant sur les personnages que sur le lecteur, à l'instar de la mer qui concentre, assimile, fusionne et finalement subsume tout chez Duras.⁸⁵

The absolute in question is the same absolute that Lol V. Stein was searching for, and the sea, as a metaphor for silence, is an image that has been returning since Virginia Woolf. The emblem of this absolute that remains white is Lol V. Stein's “mot-trou”, into which all unresolved attempts at saying converge and which functions as an abyss in which the only possibility of expression is silence. Language, in Duras, is surpassed; there is no suitable word to communicate what is so perturbing that it cannot be put on the page: “L'utilisation des blancs graphiques à l'intérieur du texte, qui représentent un au-delà de la parole, signifie dès lors la part d'illimité que contient le silence et qui contamine le personnage principal du récit”⁸⁶. The insufficiency of language means that characters like Lol can only speak through fragments surrounded by gaps, or blanks, because as Sasso writes “on se trouve devant le vide sans fin de l'impensable”⁸⁷. This is why Lahouste defines Duras's silence as a “silence structurel”, or an aporia of language, since it is only in silence that experience finds its fullness and fulfilment.

This sense of the emptiness of language, with the consequent necessity of silence, is expressed most clearly by Kristeva, who speaks of an “esthétique de la maladresse”⁸⁸ and, analysing Duras's work, writes:

L'écriture de Duras ne s'auto-analyse pas en cherchant ses sources dans la musique sous les lettres ou dans la défaite de la logique du récit. Si recherche formelle il y a, elle est subordonnée à l'affrontement au silence de

⁸⁴ Ivi, p. 91.

⁸⁵ Corentin Lahouste, « Silence absolu. Du *Ravissement de Lol V. Stein* de Marguerite Duras ». *Postures*, no. 28 (Automne), 2018, Dossier « Paroles et silences: réflexions sur le pouvoir de dire ». <http://revuepostures.com/fr/articles/lahouste-28>.

⁸⁶ Ibidem.

⁸⁷ Robert Sasso, *Georges Bataille: le système du non-savoir. Une ontologie du jeu*, Paris, Minuit, coll « Arguments », 1978, p. 107.

⁸⁸ Julia Kristeva, *Soleil noir. Dépression et mélancolie*, cit., p. 233.

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l'horreur en soi et dans le monde. Cette confrontation la conduit à une esthétique de la maladresse d'une part, à une littérature non cathartique d'autre part.

La rhétorique apprêtée de la littérature et même la rhétorique usuelle du parler quotidien semblent toujours quelque peu en fête. Comment dire la vérité de la douleur, sinon en mettant en échec cette fête rhétorique, en la gauchissant, en la faisant grincer, en la rendant contrainte et boiteuse ?

Il y a cependant du charme dans ces phrases étirées, sans grâce sonore et dont le verbe semble oublier le sujet [...] ou qui tournent court, à bout de souffle, à bout de complément d'objet ou d'adjectif [...].⁸⁹

Since therefore “la mort et la douleur sont la toile d’araignée du texte”⁹⁰, Duras's writing appears to be an attempt to fill the void that belongs to her, but it is itself pierced, perforated, constantly riddled with silences that reflect an inner malaise. The silence expressed by Duras's *maigre* aesthetics is, in short, a faithful rendering of the suffering and emotional intelligence that belonged to her: “C’est quand l’intelligence est au comble de sa puissance qu’elle se tait. Et c’est alors que l’écriture va”⁹¹.

⁸⁹ Ibidem.

⁹⁰ Ivi, p. 237.

⁹¹ Marguerite Duras, *Le Bruit et le Silence*, in *Outside*, cit., p. 541.

III. Perec: “écriture non liée”, or the Aesthetics of the *cassure*

In a linguistic meta-reflection on his own writing, Perec defines his style in these terms:

Ils sont comme cette écriture non liée, faite de lettres isolées incapables de se souder entre elles pour former un mot, qui fut la mienne jusqu’à l’âge de dix-sept ou dix-huit ans, ou comme ces dessins dissociés, disloqués, dont les éléments épars ne parvenaient presque jamais à se relier les uns aux autres, et dont, à l’époque de *W*, entre, disons, ma onzième et ma quinzième année, je couvris des cahiers entiers: [...] les jambes des athlètes étaient séparées des troncs, les bras séparés des torsos, les mains n’assuraient aucune prise. Ce qui caractérise cette époque c’est avant tout son absence de repères : les souvenirs sont des morceaux de vie arrachés au vide. Nulle amarre. Rien ne les ancre, rien ne les fixe. Presque rien ne les entérine.⁹²

The writing that Perec talks about in *W* is fragmented, untied, without connections, just like his memories as a child and like the sketches he made and the bodies he drew. The untied words and isolated letters are reminiscent of the definition of writing proposed by Blanchot, who spoke of a wandering word:

Cette parole est essentiellement errante, étant toujours hors d’elle-même. Elle désigne le dehors infiniment distendu qui tient lieu de l’intimité de la parole. Elle ressemble à l’écho, quand l’écho ne dit pas seulement tout haut ce qui est d’abord murmuré, mais se confond avec l’immensité chuchotant, est le silence devenu l’espace retentissant, le dehors de toute parole.⁹³

Such a wandering and isolated word, almost exiled, reminds us of Jabès's poetics and recalls the idea of the echo in the desert, of the silence from which Rovatti's word rises, of the nakedness of Duras's word, of the breath of voice coming out of the shell. It is no coincidence, perhaps, that in *Les Lieux d'une ruse*, Perec uses a metaphor linked to the marine world and calls his a “écriture carapace”⁹⁴ that protects him: “L’écriture me protège. J’avance sous le rempart de mes mots, de mes phrases, de mes paragraphes habilement enchaînés, de mes chapitres astucieusement programmés”⁹⁵. Perec's writing thus seems calculated, rational, schematic, controlled, as in an attempt to control the real through the word. At the same time, in this text, he speaks of a “parole encore absente”⁹⁶ and compares “la feuille blanche à cet autre lieu d’hésitations, d’illusions et de ratures que fut le plafond du cabinet de l’analyste”⁹⁷. Writing thus appears to be a shell in which Perec protects himself before

⁹² Georges Perec, *W ou le souvenir d'enfance*, cit., pp. 97-98.

⁹³ Maurice Blanchot, *L'Espace littéraire*, Paris, Gallimard, « Folio essais », 1955, p. 56.

⁹⁴ Georges Perec, “Les Lieux d'une ruse”, in *Penser/Classer*, cit., p. 70.

⁹⁵ Georges Perec, “Les gnocchis de l’automne ou Réponse à quelques questions me concernant”, in *Je suis né*, cit., p. 73.

⁹⁶ Georges Perec, “Les Lieux d'une ruse”, in *Penser/Classer*, cit., p. 65.

⁹⁷ Ivi, p. 61.

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an absent word and a blank sheet of paper, that is, before the fear of nothingness, emptiness, the blank page: “(et je demeurai tremblant, un long moment, devant la page blanche)”⁹⁸. This void is made explicit when the writer, in *Espèces d'espaces*, describes what writing means to him:

Écrire : essayer méticuleusement de retenir quelque chose, de faire survivre quelque chose: arracher quelques bribes précises au vide qui se creuse, laisser, quelque part, un sillon, une trace, une marque ou quelques signes.⁹⁹

From this quote, we can draw the conclusion that all of Perec's writing is an attempt to create a jumble of scattered, unbound fragments that resist the abyss of existence. This feeling of emptiness is taken up and reiterated constantly in Perec's writings, which he also mentions in *Le saut en parachute*:

On est en face du vide, et d'un seul coup il faut se jeter. D'un seul coup il faut refuser sa peur, d'un seul coup il faut refuser d'abandonner. Et puis... et puis il faut se lancer.¹⁰⁰

The emptiness that Perec feels inwardly is so deep and dangerous that signs are needed to cope with it. These signs are words, as well as letters: just think of the dedication “Pour E” at the beginning of *W*, which represents a silent sound. Yet, we know that Perec also uses other signs, silent but extremely eloquent, to express this emptiness: the most famous case is undoubtedly that of the suspension points in brackets inserted in the completely blank page in the middle of *W ou le souvenir d'enfance*. He speaks of it in these terms:

Dans cette rupture, cette cassure qui suspend le récit autour d'on ne sait quelle attente, se trouve le lieu initial d'où est sorti ce livre, ces points de suspension auxquels se sont accrochés les fils rompus de l'enfance et la trame de l'écriture.¹⁰¹

It is, in short, a rupture, a fragmentation, a fracture in the middle of Perec's novel and life that cannot be said with words but needs a different sign: punctuation. Suspension points indicate an expectation, a pause, an explicit silencing of the text and oblige us to interrupt. The parenthesis within which these are inserted is a further sign of suspension: a fragile container of something that cannot

⁹⁸ Georges Perec, “Les Lieux d'une fugue”, in *Je suis né*, cit., p. 31.

⁹⁹ Georges Perec, *Espèces d'espaces*, Paris, Galilée, 2007, p. 123.

¹⁰⁰ Georges Perec, “Le saut en parachute”, in *Je suis né*, cit., p. 43.

¹⁰¹ Georges Perec, *W ou le souvenir d'enfance*, cit., p. 1.

be put on the page through words, because language proves insufficient. This graphic ellipsis is emblematic of the interior ellipsis with which Perec lives.

However, it is not only Perec's fragmented syntax - made up of broken and laconic sentences - or the ellipses used that render the text silent. The structure of the novel is in fact the most significant aspect: as already mentioned, the text alternates between chapters written in italics, of fictional material, and chapters in normal type relating to the author's autobiography. This aspect already reveals how not only the word, but also the graphic sign was a communicative element for Perec. In addition, of course, the splitting and alternation of these chapters means that there is a constant fracture within the novel: the reader cannot follow either story with a consequential and linear reading. In fact, the intervals placed between one chapter and the next force the reader to suspend reading and make one perceive that shattering and rupture that Perec himself makes explicit when he speaks of the ellipsis, which is the greatest type of fracture we find in the text. In fact, from that point on, the fictional material changes: the reader no longer finds the previous references; the story being told seems to be another. This causes disorientation in the reader, who finds himself without points of reference, just like Perec orphaned. Perec's writing and his style thus trace his experience: life and writing are so closely linked¹⁰² that they are inseparable and even the graphic sign communicates.

Le livre est la trace de cette quête infructueuse sous laquelle apparaît en filigrane ce parcours de l'écriture à la recherche de sa vérité : un jeu dont les règles sont si simples mais où la partie est de plus désespérément compliquées.¹⁰³

Tout le travail d'écriture se fait toujours par rapport à une chose qui n'est plus, qui peut se figer un instant dans l'écriture, comme une trace, mais qui a disparu.¹⁰⁴

The book object is thus a trace, a concrete element that speaks of an emptiness by keeping silent, of a search for truth that is unattainable and unspeakable, of a vanished and inaccessible moment. Indeed, writing for Perec is difficult:

Écrire est toujours difficile (toujours aussi difficile que par le passé) et raconter une histoire, une aventure, des épisodes et des péripéties est encore plus difficile : le seul véritable problème est bien évidemment de commencer. Je pense que quand j'aurai vraiment démarré, et si alors je crois encore avoir besoin de recourir au feuilleton, je vous soumettrai le début de *W* ; mais il est probable que j'aurai alors trouvé la méthode, le rythme,

¹⁰² "J'écris pour vivre et je vis pour écrire". Georges Perec, "Les gnocchis de l'automne", in *Je suis né*, cit., p. 71.

¹⁰³ Georges Perec, "Kléber Chrome", in *Je suis né*, cit., p. 49.

¹⁰⁴ Georges Perec, "Le travail de la mémoire", in *Je suis né*, cit., p. 91.

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le style et les points de départ qui me manquent aujourd'hui (ce n'est pas tellement que j'en manque; en fait il y en a trop, chacun est possible mais aucun n'embraye vraiment).¹⁰⁵

As he writes in his letter to Maurice Nadeau, taking up writing is an action that requires inner strength, because it means immersing oneself in the past. The element that makes writing easy, however, is finding the right rhythm, just as Woolf argued, along with method and style. As we know, one of Perec's stylistic elements linked to his period in the OuLiPo is certainly the rhetorical artifice - just think of the numerous and very complicated *contraintes* - behind which he hides secret meanings and words that he does not dare to write down in black and white, and that one has to decrypt through the hints hidden in the text's texture. However, although this too can be considered a way of keeping silent through writing, most of the texts from this period are not examined in this study. Rather, it is interesting to note how a rhetoric of silence has a continuity from a complex text such as *Wou le souvenir d'enfance* to a novel such as *Un homme qui dort*. The common element in these texts is fragmentariness, i.e. fracture: "J'ai écrit des morceaux d'autobiographie qui étaient sans cesse déviés"¹⁰⁶. Perec's style is in fact constantly interrupted, broken, made up of seemingly unconnected fragments, since it is precisely within this mania for breaking everything down that something can come to the surface and reveal itself, instead of remaining silent: "A travers cette minutie dans la décomposition, quelque chose se révèle"¹⁰⁷. Moreover, on the subject of research, if we think of texts such as *Récit d'Ellis Island*, we cannot but notice that Perec's writing has another characteristic - which he shares with Celati -: that of nomadism. This state derives from the author's experience of exile from his origins. Marcel Bénabou in fact speaks of a "degré zéro de la judéité"¹⁰⁸, where Jewish identity is something that constantly escapes, and can only be approached by accepting the gap, disappearance, nomadism and exile that characterise it. Lévinas, in fact, describes Jewish identity in these terms:

S'interroger sur l'identité juive, c'est déjà l'avoir perdue. Mais c'est encore s'y tenir, sans quoi on éviterait l'interrogatoire. Entre ce *déjà* et cet *encore*, se dessine la limite, tendue comme une corde raide sur laquelle s'aventure et se risque le judaïsme des juifs occidentaux.¹⁰⁹

In short, loss is intrinsic to being Jewish and this is reflected in lacunar writing, where the lacuna does not so much represent a void as the only way to relate to one's identity as a Jew, which

¹⁰⁵ Georges Perec, "Lettre à Maurice Nadeau", in *Je suis né*, cit., p. 65.

¹⁰⁶ Georges Perec, "Le travail de la mémoire", in *Je suis né*, cit., p. 90.

¹⁰⁷ Ivi, p. 84.

¹⁰⁸ Marcel Bénabou, « Perec et la judéité », *Cahiers Georges Perec*, n°1, 1984, p. 20.

¹⁰⁹ Emmanuel Lévinas, *Difficile liberté*, [1963], Paris, Albin Michel, Le livre de Poche, « Biblio essais », 1976, p. 85.

means having an identity suspended between a *déjà* and an *encore*. Perec's style reflects all this in a writing that is defined as “une forme de nomadisme”¹¹⁰: one merely has to think of the litany of names and lists that Perec makes use of in *Ellis Island* as well as in other novels: “L’énnumération vise à défaire la syntaxe constituée et enracinée, à perdre les mots dans une ivresse nomade et babélique, où les noms deviennent des balises indiquant un mouvement égaré”¹¹¹. Such nomadism recalls not only Blanchot's idea that Jewish wandering is the only authentic way of residing¹¹², but also Jabès's idea that only in non-belonging is there real belonging¹¹³, since the writer is always an exile.

This is precisely the logic of the protagonist of *Un homme qui dort*, which is characterised by what Genette called a “rhétorique restreinte”¹¹⁴. This text is stylistically particular for several factors that we will analyse. Firstly, note the enunciative position of the second person singular, which interpellates the reader and gives a vocative character to the text. Secondly, the word “indifférence” stands out above all others, which is not only a theme of the novel, but also constitutes its aesthetic. In fact, in *Un homme qui dort* it is the negative sentences that prevail, just as we find many indefinite pronouns such as “rien” or “nul” and negative prepositions and conjunctions such as “sans” and “ni... ni...”. Often, Perec also uses verbs in the infinitive, which cancel out the perception of the subject. All these stylistic choices result in neutral, negative sentences, which take the form - and not only the tone and content - of indifference and nullification. The metaphors used by Perec also refer to images of stasis, immobility, silence and death: “L’eau t’attire comme la pierre, l’obscurité comme la lumière, le chaud comme le froid”¹¹⁵. The word “rien” is repeated many times within the narrative, often precisely to indicate the annulment of the subject and the absence of desires or preferences: “Tu es patient, et tu n’attends pas, tu es libre et tu ne choisis pas, tu es disponible et rien ne te mobilise”¹¹⁶. There are many repetitions, giving the text the cadence of a litany of indifference. The sentences are not marked; Perec's writing is “limpide, classique, gelée, glacée”¹¹⁷, and the verbal tense used is the present indicative, so that the effect obtained is that of a simultaneity, of a constant duration in which a nomadic character wanders aimlessly. For this reason, critics have spoken of an “écriture de l’aphorisme”¹¹⁸ that emancipates itself from narrative. This style also involves the use of serial elements, accumulation of visions without apparent meaning, lists of objects, as when the protagonist

¹¹⁰ Maxime Decout, “Georges Perec: la judéité de l’autre”, *Roman* 20-50, 2010/1 (n° 49), p. 123-134, <https://www.cairn.info/revue-roman2050-2010-1-page-123.htm>, p. 132.

¹¹¹ Ivi, p. 133.

¹¹² Cf. Maurice Blanchot, *L’Entretien infini*, cit., p. 185-186.

¹¹³ Cf. Edmond Jabès, *Du désert au livre*, Paris, Belfond, 1980, p. 52-53.

¹¹⁴ Cf. Gérard Genette, [1970], « La rhétorique restreinte », *Figures III*, Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 1972, p. 21-40.

¹¹⁵ Georges Perec, *Un homme qui dort*, cit., p. 95.

¹¹⁶ Ivi, p. 90.

¹¹⁷ Georges Perec, *Entretiens et Conférences 1*, cit., p. 65.

¹¹⁸ Florence de Chalonge, *Stylistique de l’indifférence : Un homme qui dort*, in *Georges Perec artisan de la langue*, Lyon: Presses universitaires de Lyon, 2012, <<http://books.openedition.org/pul/2762>>. ISBN:9782729711238. <https://doi.org/10.4000/books.pul.2762>, p. 8.

takes stock of his life. However, these collections are often interrupted and become preteritions, which silence the totality. Another device used by Perec is that of sequences of gestures, which are written down as if they were instructions: “te lever, te laver, te raser, te vêtir”¹¹⁹. These robotic gestures are from time to time emphasised by a writing that makes *brevitas* its main characteristic and makes use of alliteration and juxtapositions within lists that see the character frustrate his efforts because they tend towards nothing. Adverbs and locutions of quantity - *peu, trop, à peine* - tend to be pejorative and suggest the idea of perpetual dissatisfaction. Frédéric Yvan speaks, in this regard, of an ecstasy of emptiness and writes: “*Un homme qui dort* se présente davantage comme somme ou juxtaposition de fragments narratifs décrivant des états perceptifs, physiques ou corporels [...]; mise en série d'états instantanés sans situations, le récit est proche de la liste qui est un procédé peu configuratif et peu architecturé – forme minimale de la narration – qui est déjà manière d'écrire l'expérience d'une disparition des limites”¹²⁰. Burgelin adds that it is a “écriture du constat [...] en touches plates que ne suture aucune coordination”¹²¹. It is in fact an extremely repetitive text, which stages visions rather than actions and which describes rather than narrates. Regarding the structure of the text, Yvan argues that the state of immanence derived from the use of the present indicative produces an achrony, which is also generated by “la composition musicale du texte et par sa rythmique particulière”¹²² which according to Burgelin becomes “une musicalité mate et sourde”¹²³. The text is in fact composed of recurring motifs and regular repetitions that, even if they concern everyday banalities such as the slow extinguishing of a cigarette or the rhythmic falling of a drop of water, give the feeling of an eternal return of the identical and suspend time by saturating it. Burgelin speaks of a “épuiement monodique, [...] saturation par la répétition et la variation autour de quelques thèmes ou de quelques notes”¹²⁴. This muted musicality, coupled with the use of 'you', generates a listening hypnosis that confuses the reader and draws him or her into the chasm of non-sense experienced by the main character.

Signifiants sans signifiés, les mots ne sont plus que sons ou graphes non seulement indéchiffrables mais également désamarrés. Cette défaillance des signes désigne certes une exténuation du sens mais plus précisément aussi une stase hors langage. L'atopie d'*Un homme qui dort* est alors structurellement associée à une aphasie.¹²⁵

¹¹⁹ Georges Perec, *Un homme qui dort*, cit., p. 91.

¹²⁰ Frédéric Yvan, *L'extase du vide de Un homme qui dort à Espèces d'espaces de Georges Perec, Êrès | « Savoirs et clinique »* 2007/1 n° 8 | pages 143 à 153, ISSN 1634-3298 ISBN 9782749208299, pp. 143-144.

¹²¹ Claude Burgelin, *Georges Perec*, cit., p. 71.

¹²² Frédéric Yvan, *L'extase du vide de Un homme qui dort à Espèces d'espaces de Georges Perec*, cit., p. 145.

¹²³ Claude Burgelin, *Georges Perec*, cit., p. 71.

¹²⁴ Ibidem.

¹²⁵ Frédéric Yvan, *L'extase du vide de Un homme qui dort à Espèces d'espaces de Georges Perec*, cit., p. 146.

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The reader is confronted with writing that is indecipherable, since it is neutral, devoid of any tension, and generates only constant bewilderment and indecision. The aphasia reached is the apex of finding oneself without words in a crisis of language that is also a crisis of identity, i.e. the abandonment of the wandering subject, the nomadism of the narrator without belonging or destination, the unspeakable fracture of being an orphan and a Jew, the aspiration to sleep and a progressive disappearance through silence.

The silence of Perec's aesthetics is thus given by a multiplicity of factors: the rhythm of the novels of a deaf musicality, the ellipses and preteritions, the punctuation that constantly interrupts the narration, the *brevitas* of the syntax, the lists and enumerations that break the rhythm of the narration, the metaphors that recall still life, the typographical blanks that force one to pause, the unspoken words hidden in the folds of the text, the flatness of the style that becomes, to all intents and purposes, an *écriture blanche*.

IV. Celati: “un barbaglio di visione”, or the Aesthetics of Short Forms

Celati always had a conception of writing linked to two elements: musicality and vision.

Regarding the former, he used to compare music to literature, as we read below:

Prendiamo un brano musicale e ascoltiamo bene. Anche se non si è esperti di musica, più lo si ascolta, e più si riconoscono certe cose che non si erano sentite prima. Tutte le note, tutte le frasi cominciano ad avere un'eco diversa nella nostra mente. Così quella musica non si consuma a forza di ascoltarla, perché, al contrario, prospera nell'ascolto. Io credo che con la letteratura sia la stessa cosa, più un libro lo si rilegge e più prospera nell'orecchio.¹²⁶

With regard to reception, Celati also believed that there were people who were 'tone deaf' or 'deafened', i.e. unable to listen to a literary text and grasp the nuances of the mother tongue:

Voglio solo dire che questa distinzione così rigida, tra scrittura e oralità, ha dei fondamenti molto traballanti. Leggendo un testo ogni tanto non capiamo un giro di frase, e allora abbiamo bisogno di rileggere il passo ad alta voce. Perché? Perché una lingua che apprendiamo bene, sia la lingua madre o una lingua straniera, ha prima di tutto una base sonora. Anche se sono scritte, le parole continuano ad avere una sonorità particolare [...]. Ci sono degli stonati che non sentono bene gli intervalli musicali, e ci sono gli stonati al suono e al tono delle parole. Ma questa stonatura è tanto più forte, quanto più dipende dai filtri del pensiero discorsivo.¹²⁷

Celati argues, in short, that universities and schools, with their discursive filters and mania for explaining everything, have dulled the ear of the reader-listener so definitively that we no longer notice when a text is deaf or out of tune.

How, then, is the musicality of the text related to the second element, namely vision? Celati argues that professors' pedantic explanations inhibit the reader's ear and imagination: “Allora addio visioni, addio emozioni e fantasie che ti danno la voglia di leggere!”¹²⁸. The musicality of the text, in other words, produces not only a sonority that becomes familiar to us, but is also the form that suggests visions to our minds: “Che la letteratura crei degli strambi è una cosa risaputa, ed è semplicemente perché ti mette in testa delle visioni...”¹²⁹. Such visions, Celati argues, lead the reader to an experience of abandonment over which one has no control: “È come attraversare il deserto a piedi”¹³⁰. Jabès's desert metaphor returns to suggest a nomadism, an exile, a constant and irrational

¹²⁶ Gianni Celati, *La lettura dei classici come terapia*, in *La parte del lettore, Inchiesta*, ottobre-dicembre 1995, p. 12.

¹²⁷ *Ivi*, p. 13.

¹²⁸ *Ibidem*.

¹²⁹ *Ibidem*.

¹³⁰ *Ibidem*.

displacement. The more the reader experiences this surrender to the musicality of the text and the visions it suggests to him, the greater the value of the book: “Quando segui la fluidità delle parole, devi per forza lasciarti andare a un azzardo che è al di là di te”¹³¹. Such fluidity of words can also be found in the writings of Woolf and Duras, who sometimes seem possessed by the flow of thought that becomes a stream of ink.

How do visions, musicality and fluidity affect Celati's aesthetics of silence? The secret lies, once again, in rhythm. Menetti writes:

È la rapidità il segreto dello scrittore delle forme brevi: si tratta di un segreto di ritmo, ma anche di un certo tipo di concatenazione che produce una logica compositiva essenziale ed attiva, una nuova economia espressiva. Il tempo come ordine di successione degli eventi è, dal punto di vista narratologico, una discriminante basilare ed è il “metro campione” del tempo del racconto.¹³²

Rapidity thus consists of a particular use of narrative time and the succession of narrated events, which translates into a speed of the mental visions in which we are immersed, since, according to Celati, narratives flow in time. Discussing Celati's style in particular, Menetti adds:

E Celati, lo scrittore delle pianure, ha raccolto le primizie del sottobosco letterario italiano in sintonia con i cambiamenti della nostra epoca, dominata da una nuova percezione della lettura a frammenti, sincopata, espansa. Una narrazione la cui visione complessiva è composta dalla frammentazione della storia e da un'arte del racconto come assemblaggio di materiali ripescati nella vita quotidiana, nella memoria delle popolazioni e nelle immagini della natura.¹³³

This paragraph highlights the fragmentary nature of Celati's writing, which proceeds by discontinuous visions that create a final unity. The reading of one of his texts is syncopated and intermittent. His narrative style is rhythmic, cadenced, and this rendition also occurs thanks to the numerous repetitions of a word that resonates in the text as dominant.

La parola è il microcosmo da cui ricava, quasi come un raddomante, meraviglie inaspettate da collezionare nel suo originale vocabolario, composto di neologismi, giochi di parole, assonanze, malapropismi con cui dà vita a uno stile narrativo modulato e ritmico, spesso creato con la ripetizione-ritornello di una parola sola, che risuona più volte in una frase come una nota dominante.¹³⁴

¹³¹ Ibidem.

¹³² Elisabetta Menetti, “Calvino, Celati e il narrare in forme brevi”, in *Carte Romanze* 7/2 (2019): 437-457, ISSN 2282 7447, <http://riviste.unimi.it/index.php/carteromanze/index>, p. 450.

¹³³ Ivi, pp. 453-454.

¹³⁴ Elisabetta Menetti, “Gianni Celati”, in *Il romanzo in Italia, IV il secondo Novecento*, cit., p. 392.

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Celati's prose is then musical, with words instead of notes and pauses instead of silences. The text becomes a music score along which fragmented visions are scattered, based on the assemblage of visual associations. Celati's style also involves the use of simple words, as his teacher Melandri taught him, against the heaviness of academic knowledge. In fact, the lightness of Celati's visions stems from his ability to “trovare una luce di meraviglia in ogni cosa”¹³⁵. Not only that. This lightness also stems from a long period of silence on the part of the writer, from 1978 to 1985, a period in which he did not write. His return to literary production sees him changed and expressed in an ambivalence: on the one hand there is a comic and melancholic vision of life, on the other hand there is an observation of radical human frailty. Moreover, his return as a writer sees him accompanied by photographers such as Ghirri, from whom the famous collaborations will spring. After the pause of silence, therefore, Celati returns as a writer-observer-walker who walks on the uncertainties of the human being, searching for his own roots on the banks of the river Po. On such journeys, Celati seems to discover that even words are appearances and can be misunderstood by others. This is reflected in his prose, as well as in the subjects he writes about:

La prosa si semplifica e si distende nella ricerca di un effetto di trasparenza tra il mondo e la parola. Cerca, al contempo, una prosa sonora e musicale, ispirata ai narratori orali, e specialmente a quelli antichi, che incantano l'uditorio con la modulazione della voce. Anche i tempi verbali, che un tempo suonavano pazzamente a ritmo jazzistico, si acquietano in una dimensione meno sperimentale e sincopata, ma limpida, cristallina, ripulita dalle sperimentazioni comico-grottesche dei primi anni. Si tratta di una prosa dal tono familiare, in cui è possibile riconoscersi come gruppo: una narrativa delle riserve che cercherà di realizzare anche nella rivista “Il semplice” [...]. Le sue brevi osservazioni finiscono nei taccuini, che sono la prima stesura dei nuovi racconti che condivide innanzitutto con esperti narratori per immagini, come i fotografi (Luigi Ghirri, Luciano Capelli) e i registi [...].¹³⁶

Orality is thus the element that Celati attempts to transcribe onto the page, making it resonate in the reader's ear through a musical, rhythmic, modulated prose. The prose Celati uses follows the model of spontaneous and natural conversation between people. In an oral conversation, of course, there are also many unfinished sentence fragments:

Io non ho mai scritto un libro dall'inizio alla fine, con un piano di lavoro e una trama in mente. Ho sempre scritto pezzetti sparsi, senza nessuna trama di riferimento, cioè scrivendo quello che mi veniva in mente giorno per giorno, secondo gli stati d'umore, le voglie o le depressioni. Poi il difficile era mettere insieme i pezzi sparsi. Lì

¹³⁵ Gianni Celati, Ivan Levrini (1996), *In memoria di Enzo Melandri* (La linea e il Circolo, 1968), in “Il semplice. Almanacco delle prose”, 3, pp. 173-7, p. 177.

¹³⁶ Elisabetta Menetti, “Gianni Celati”, in *Il romanzo in Italia, IV il secondo Novecento*, cit., p. 399.

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c'era l'intoppo, con la necessità di riscrivere e adattare i pezzi, per far finta che fossero una narrazione continua. Difficile anche tenere le tonalità musicali, comiche ed esaltate, o malinconiche e depressive.¹³⁷

Celati's writing thus proceeds in a similar way to Perec's: through fragments, scattered pieces, crumbs of sentences that later find unity within a larger and more complex mosaic. It seems that writing is the art of assembling elements taken from everyday life, from nature, from the simplicity of ordinary people: "I narratori pescano pezzi di roba qualsiasi dal fabulare quotidiano"¹³⁸. Celati's stories are in fact stories of ordinary people, who in turn tell stories in simple words, which are brought back to the page in an attempt to resume the same modulations of orality. This multiple voicing is reflected in Celati's stories and allows us to identify the emotional state of the people, along with the narration. In fact, Celati seems to take as a reference two of Calvino's *Lezioni Americane*: the one on visibility and the one on rapidity. Both refer to the two elements that drive Celati's style: vision and musicality.

Narrare per Celati è una incessante ricerca delle forme nell'armonia della fabula, intesa come piacere e come libero volo fantastico dei pensieri che si fanno beffe di tutte le norme critiche, per inseguire le intensità emotive, sempre diverse a seconda degli umori sia di chi scrive sia di chi legge o ascolta. L'arte dello scrivere è una lunga esperienza con le parole che serve ad attivare l'ascolto in chi legge, a creare una sorta di armonia musicale su una certa tonalità e a sviluppare le diverse sfumature della lingua.¹³⁹

Celati's writing is thus forged on the basis of musical harmony and the idea of the fragment that is also part of orality and that allows us to communicate with others and not be deaf. The idea behind Celati's style is therefore a predisposition to listen and to communicate with the other: "Il segreto della percezione acustica del narrare è trovare questa giusta tonalità che ci mette in comunicazione con l'altro, che è sempre in movimento"¹⁴⁰. In Celati's prose, what counts is not the alternation of word-notes and pause-silences, but rather fable, that is to say, narrating by singing, in service to others who can vibrate on the same chords proposed by the narration. For the writer, in fact, narrating means keeping himself on the edge of temporality:

ossia nel sentire e far sentire come tutto cambia ogni momento, e come in ogni momento si debbano usare le parole in un modo diverso, con accezioni diverse; e nel sentire e far sentire che tutte le nostre frasi e gesti e toni

¹³⁷ Gianni Celati, *Conversazioni del vento volatore*, Macerata, Quodlibet, 2011, p. 111.

¹³⁸ Ivi, p. 119.

¹³⁹ Elisabetta Menetti, "Gianni Celati", in *Il romanzo in Italia, IV il secondo Novecento*, cit., p. 405.

¹⁴⁰ Ivi, p. 406.

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dipendono dal variare dei momenti, nella fluidità dello scorrimento, nell'impossibilità di fissare un senso perpetuo e definitivo.¹⁴¹

Once again, the fluidity of writing returns, recalling what Woolf and Duras said. Indeed, reading, like listening to music, takes place in time and relates to the momentary, the contingent. Celati writes: "Le narrazioni sono come le musiche"¹⁴². It is not possible to extrapolate meanings or to stop the flow of music, just as it is not possible to make the writing intemporal, since it proceeds with infinite changeability and is in perpetual mutation. Celati, as a writer, defines himself as a diviner¹⁴³ in search of the right vibrations in the story.

Recounting the writing of *Verso la foce*, Celati claims that by taking notes in the moment, rather than writing from a distance, he was able to maintain a sense of vision and the appearance of things: "La visione d'un luogo sorge certamente non come un discorso con risposte pronte, ma come un pensare-immaginare su come è fatto il mondo"¹⁴⁴. Once again, we find writing that proceeds by visions, yet there is something that will always remain outside the frame, that is, outside the frame of the visible and the representable, as Luigi Ghirri maintained. This also happens in writing:

Tu guardi e sai che tutto questo è inenarrabile, non puoi pensare di svelare il segreto dei fenomeni, puoi solo accennare al fatto che esistono e fan parte della nostra immanenza.¹⁴⁵

What is not represented is what is hushed, the silence that inhabits the Celatian rhetoric. The writer admits his limitation: it is not possible to get to the heart of phenomena. What remains to be done, then, is to *hint*, that is, to proceed by hesitation, by hypothesis, by wavering. Writing then consists in 'showing', without documenting anything precisely. Much of reality is in fact unspeakable, and therefore remains in silence and in the territory of the hypothetical.

Questo è il lavoro di chi scrive racconti: sente una cosa, vuole capire ciò che si dice, e parte a farsi domande, ossia a fantasticare. Quello che lega gli uomini sono le domande che gli uomini si fanno: non le affermazioni, ma il pensiero interrogativo, dove ogni interrogazione promuove altre immagini e fantasie.

L'idea di ascolto e di visitazione fantastica degli altri è un bel concetto. [...]

Essere al mondo vuol dire essere con gli altri dall'inizio alla fine. Anche se sono su un'isola deserta, gli altri sono sempre con me in una trama che determina i miei gesti, i miei atteggiamenti, quello che voglio e quel che non voglio.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴¹ Gianni Celati, *Conversazioni del vento volatore*, cit., pp. 29-30.

¹⁴² Ivi, p. 31.

¹⁴³ Cf. Ivi, p. 33.

¹⁴⁴ Ivi, p. 64.

¹⁴⁵ Ivi, p. 69.

¹⁴⁶ Ivi, pp. 76-77.

Celati's aesthetics are therefore constantly linked to the dimension of the Other, as Jabès suggested. There is a common sense from which to draw words and sounds, pauses and silences. Writing is a ritual, something that has to do with others.

Solo in questi termini riesco a scrivere, e sopporto poco chi prende lo scrivere come un riflesso della sua esperienza personale o della cosiddetta realtà nuda e cruda, senza vedere il processo rituale a cui le parole debbono essere sottoposte (metrica, ritmo, colore tonale, distanza focale).¹⁴⁷

The insistence on the sonority of words, rhythm and metrics returns. Celati's attention to this aspect is such that, speaking of the writing of *Lunario del paradiso*, he writes: “avevo scelto un ritmo sincopato come nel jazz, che diventava un parlare a scatti, con la sintassi a salti”¹⁴⁸. However, not satisfied with the rhythm obtained, he rewrote it, as “la riscrittura è un modo di prolungare lo stato di non-fissazione che c'è nei flussi immaginativi”¹⁴⁹. The narrative is always perceived as a flow, a current - “una ventosità che ti investe”¹⁵⁰ - which, like the wind, silently suggests images and words. The resulting fragments are the words drenched in silence that Rovatti spoke of and make up a collage: “E li ho un po' riscritti, mettendo dei titoletti ad ogni pezzettino, per evidenziare l'effetto di discontinuità del collage”¹⁵¹. Such fragmentariness is, according to Celati, a matter of voids and intensity, where the voids are given by the disunity of the writing. It is precisely because writing gives credence to one's own emotional state and nomadism that this statement by Celati - relating to the writing of *Guizzardi* – seems particularly interesting:

Facevo tutto con fanatismo freudiano, tenendo un taccuino accanto al letto e svegliandomi due o tre volte per notte ad annotare i sogni che avevo fatto. Scrivevo una pagina al giorno ed era come aprire un rubinetto [...]. [L]a struttura sintattica delle frasi è quella di mia madre, del suo adattamento all'italiano: un adattamento melodico, perché il dialetto di mia madre era una nenia con sottili modulazioni melodiche. Ecco perché non c'è neanche una virgola nelle frasi, perché vanno lette come una nenia continuamente modulata.¹⁵²

Once again, we notice metaphors relating to the flow of water, the notebook as a jumble of scattered fragments, the mother tongue as the inexhaustible source of the music that is writing.

¹⁴⁷ Ivi, p. 80.

¹⁴⁸ Ivi, p. 109.

¹⁴⁹ Ivi, p. 110.

¹⁵⁰ Ibidem.

¹⁵¹ Ivi, p. 112.

¹⁵² Ivi, pp. 116-117.

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Avevo bisogno di sentire una parlata familiare nell'orecchio: quella dei miei zii muratori, di mio zio sarto, di mio zio calzolaio, di tutte le zie materne. Buttavo giù brani sparsi riferiti a un mio retroterra mentale, oggi si dice culturale, per ritrovare un suono delle parole, per bilanciare la mia stranieritudine. In quello che scrivevo c'era sì la fuga dalla famiglia, ma c'era anche il richiamo di quel grembo che è il suono d'una parlata di casa.¹⁵³

The musicality of his mother's speech is thus an inescapable sound memory for Celati, who finds in the accent of his family members the cadence of his writing and who feels the constant reminder of the harmony of his native language, between notes and silences. His musical prose is such because it consists of sounds and the absence of sounds, of a rhythmic structure involving blanks, ellipses, preteritions, of images and metaphors that speak of silence through still life or the muteness of simple characters. Above all, for Celati, writing is first and foremost the rescuing gesture of naming things, which means wrenching them from their silence, but also making them appear enveloped in that silence.

¹⁵³ Ivi, p. 117.

Interlude 3. In Dialogue with Theory

At the end of this chapter on the poetics and aesthetics of silence in the four authors chosen, it seems necessary to draw some lines that unite the styles of the texts examined. First of all, it is important to start from Rovatti's premise that one must learn to write by introducing silence:

bisogna *imparare a scrivere* introducendo il silenzio. Far sì che le parole, da parole piene o miranti alla pienezza, si trasformino in parole *riempite* di silenzio.

Il contromovimento, iniziato con la sospensione, si realizza nella parola: è nella parola che va ora effettuata un'operazione di *scavo*.¹⁵⁴

What the philosopher invites us to do is a digging operation, that is, a search *in* and *for* depth. In fact, if it is true that words are open and porous, as Fink reminds us, it is also true that they can be, in a certain way, filled. The filling to be sought for a word that wants to call itself authentic is, paradoxically, silence. By this we do not mean that the word has no meaning or that one should prefer to say nothing. In fact, the point is that masterfully expressed by Merleau-Ponty, namely:

Il faudrait un silence qui enveloppe la parole de nouveau après qu'on s'est aperçu que la parole enveloppait le silence prétendu de la coïncidence psychologique. Que sera ce silence ? [...] ce silence ne sera *pas le contraire* du langage.¹⁵⁵

Silence is *not* the opposite of language. Rather, silence is one of the *modes* of writing. Writing knows how to *produce* silence: it creates it through metaphors, whitespace, fragments, pauses, ellipses and a myriad of devices that we have explored. Reviewing the eight texts analysed, we highlight here which formal strategies and expedients enabled Woolf, Duras, Perec and Celati to make silence in their writing and to allow themselves to be inhabited by the other voices referred to by Jankélévitch.

Woolf's poetics saw writing as a means to save herself, as a cure from that "inner loneliness" from which she suffered so much and of which she could only speak through fiction, in *The Waves*. The word was the means by which she could establish herself again and speak her mind: power is linked to the ability to translate sensations, perceptions, impressions into words. The search for the exact word, resulting in an intolerable perfectionism, is fundamental for Woolf because the battle against the silence of death is done with words. If death, in both "A Sketch" and *The Waves*, is assumed as an inescapable element in the natural circle of life, it is also true that survival is linked to

¹⁵⁴ Pier Aldo Rovatti, *L'esercizio del silenzio*, cit., p. 103.

¹⁵⁵ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Le visible et l'invisible*, cit., p. 233.

language. Not just any language, however: what Woolf seeks is a silent language, that is, as she herself wrote: “I want to write a novel about Silence”¹⁵⁶. The language that allows itself to be filled with silence, in the same vein as Rovatti and Merleau-Ponty, is the language of the children mentioned in *The Waves*. Bernard's character, in fact, is heroic because he understands the importance of the “words of one syllable”, of the “little language of broken words”¹⁵⁷. Indeed, it is precisely because of the possibility of the fragment that Woolf writes silently. Yet, it is never a question of writing scattered pieces that do not communicate with each other. Taking up the very famous quote from “A Sketch of the Past”: “We are the words; we are the music; we are the thing itself”¹⁵⁸, it is possible to consider how it is thanks to music - the language of memories and the privileged way of creating silence for Jankélévitch - that it is possible to recompose all the divergent fragments into an all-encompassing unity that flows together like so many rivers that finally pour into the sea, an emblematic image of Woolf's writing, which flows like water. Woolf's thus becomes, to all intents and purposes, what Merleau-Ponty would call a “thinking language”, just as thinking are the soliloquies of the characters in *The Waves* whose voices we never hear, but only silently read:

Le langage réalise en brisant le silence ce que le silence voulait et n'obtenait pas. *Le silence continue d'envelopper le langage* ; silence du langage absolu, du langage pensant.¹⁵⁹

As for Duras, it is immediate to write that the emblem of her poetics and aesthetics lies in Lol V. Stein's “mot-trou”. Indeed, Lol's, as well as Duras', is a journey that gradually goes from word to silence. The devices of madness, love, passion and the unspeakable lead towards a common point: the mystery, the enigma. Just as Lol is missing a piece of her identity, the novel is 'punctured' in the sense that pieces of story and pieces of dialogue are missing. This seduces and attracts the curiosity not only of the narrator Hold, from whom the *quête* that drives the novel arises, but above all of the reader, who is seduced precisely because, as Alvaro Barbieri and Elisa Gregori write, what is missing, like the ellipsis, attracts interest and preserves the density of what remains in the shadows and does not emerge on the enunciative surface. Indeed, the non-expressed irresistibly attracts¹⁶⁰. As the two critics argue, the most vivid forces of the imaginary lurk precisely in the flaws of the narrative¹⁶¹: *Le Ravisement* is the novel of absence and fault by definition. What is to all intents and purposes an identity crisis is also perfectly rendered by a crisis that also affects language. From Lol's truncated

¹⁵⁶ Virginia Woolf, *The Voyage Out*, cit., p. 216.

¹⁵⁷ Virginia Woolf, *The Waves*, cit., p. 213.

¹⁵⁸ Virginia Woolf, “A Sketch of the Past”, cit., p. 72.

¹⁵⁹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Le visible et l'invisible*, cit., p. 230 [my emphasis].

¹⁶⁰ Cf. Latenza. *Preterizioni, reticenze e silenzi del testo. Quaderni del circolo filologico linguistico padovano -31-*, cit., premessa, X.

¹⁶¹ *Ibidem*.

name - as well as those of Robert L., D., and others in *La douleur* - to the lack of punctuation after her unfinished sentences, we witness a language that cancels itself and becomes silent, registering the absence of desires, will and identity of the protagonist, who is absent from herself: we are spectators of a real cancellation of the subject and, in some ways, of her speech. Lol's internal fracture and her abduction to an elsewhere are reminiscent, as well as Jankélévitch's elsewhere, of the experience narrated in *La douleur*, where Duras herself experiences madness and absence from herself. This experience of body and mind is translated through a language characterised by a strong repetitiveness - which almost follows the rhythm of the beating of the temples mentioned by Duras -, by nominal sentences, by fragments of interrupted sentences, by metaphors, by a general reticence and by what Boué has called a negative rhetoric:

L'insondable des êtres est donc la matrice romanesque des récits. Cette dernière s'appuie sur *une rhétorique de la réticence*. Dialogues qui taisent l'objet du discours, effets de parataxe qui empêchent la sédimentation du sens, et phrases nominales qui suspendent l'action produisent une *rhétorique négative* qui bloque le procès du sens entre deux mouvements contradictoires : appel au déchiffrement et dissolution de ses effets.¹⁶²

Indeed, *La douleur* is also characterised by a punctured syntax, by a lack of information, by the truncated names of the protagonists, by the absence of yardsticks to describe the suffering of Antelme's psyche and skinny body, by waiting as a substitute for personal identity, by the suspension - at times - of thought that is silence. All this is part of negative rhetoric, a language that, oscillating between the two opposite poles of shouting and silence, is profoundly authentic.

Perec's poetics and aesthetics are characterised, above all else, by lack, by *cassure*, by fracture. He himself, talking about his writing, refers to many pieces, fragments that are not bound together, as if finding a glue was impossible. Yet, it is precisely in the missing interstices, in the unsaid, in the hole, in the ellipsis, that we find the truth of his life and his writing, so intimately linked. The emblem of Perec's writing are the three suspension points enclosed in brackets. In this ellipsis, as in all his *contraintes*, lurks an absence that reveals a presence, just as in the silent E to which *W ou le souvenir d'enfance* is dedicated. If there is in fact a writer for whom writing has been salvific, it is Perec himself: the word for him is an existential act, the affirmation of a life, against “the scandal of their silence”, that is, the silence of those who have died. Perec's writing is inhabited, impregnated, drenched with the existential anguish of emptiness, which, however, never leaks out emotionally - since his writing is neutral, opaque - but is perceptible in its modesty, that is, in its saying *less*.

¹⁶² Rachel Boué, *L'éloquence du silence. Celan, Sarraute, Duras et Quignard*, cit., p. 79 [my emphasis].

Jankélévitch wrote that the mark of modesty lies precisely in saying less, that is, in discretion, in repressing expressive fury and remaining *en retrait* with respect to emotionality:

La marque de la pudeur n'est pas seulement de dire *autre chose*, mais aussi et surtout d'en dire *moins* ; et par le mot « moins » il faut entendre ici non pas une simple diminution quantitative, ou une intensité atténuée, mais une certaine qualité intentionnelle et pneumatique du discours. L'esprit de litote est celui de l'homme non plus secret, mais *discret* et qui, réprimant en lui-même la furie expressive de l'*appassionato* et du *disperato*, reste *constamment en retrait par rapport à l'émotion*.¹⁶³

Such characteristics, which the musicologist attributed to music, are also evident in Pécès's writing, who challenges the phantasmatic with the desire for reconstruction, competes with death through the repair possible with language. Pécès's detached and neutral writing is thus a strategy, just as his metaphors are clues: Pécès seems to be telling us that there are pains that can only be told by winking at the cunning reader who, in the silence of the unspoken or the barely said, will be able to draw out the hidden and unspoken meanings in the text. Pécès, who was the first not to speak explicitly about concentration camps or sex, is the one who knows how to derive survival from silence, while firmly believing in the power of words. Indeed, just as in *Un homme qui dort*, even in the face of the most total indifference, of the renunciation of life, of detachment from the world, language is what resists. Even when the student tries to consume words by dint of reading them so that they no longer mean anything, silence suggests his unhappiness, forcing him to change course. It is precisely in the metaphor of the stern of the ship that awakens in the student the epiphany of his own loneliness in the darkness of his room resembling a sea abyss, that the sleeping man finds himself resembling an oyster - a metaphor skilfully used by Pécès -: closed and curved in on himself, he discovers that the myth of self-sufficiency to which he aspired does not exist. Rather, Pécès seems to be an invitation, in the second person singular, to resistance against the vanity of everything. Resistance that, first and foremost, is done with words drenched in silence, since, as Jankélévitch reminds us, it is not by saying everything that we express ourselves best:

La litote prouve déjà l'indépendance de la qualité par rapport à la quantité, et manifeste paradoxalement l'efficacité expressive d'une expression contenue : *l'inexpressif, et a fortiori la moindre expression suggèrent le sens, et parfois plus puissamment que l'expression complète et directe* ; car comme le mieux est l'ennemi du bien, ainsi le trop se détruit lui-même dialectiquement. Chacun le sait, *ce n'est pas en disant tout qu'on s'exprime le mieux* : la fin du Socrate de Satie atteste la force convaincante de la réticence, la force d'une émotion soustraite, et qui ne doit rien à la gesticulation. On sait à quelle profondeur d'émotion chez Fauré, à quelle puissance

¹⁶³ Vladimir Jankélévitch, *La musique et l'ineffable*, cit., p. 61 [my emphasis].

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d'évocation chez Debussy 'esprit de litote peut atteindre... Car le superlatif est ordinairement plus faible que le positif ! La véritable éloquence ne se moque-t-elle pas des adjectifs de l'éloquence ?¹⁶⁴

Finally, Celati reminds us how, in his aesthetics of short forms, there is a constant link with something that has been lost. His aesthetics is in fact a formal reference to something substantial that, unless it is saved by the word, is destined to disappear. This applies as much to the landscape on the banks of the Po as it does to the funny subjectivities he encounters in the villages of his origins, among old people's clubs and professors. In his walking-writing duo, Celati, with a simple and brief style, rich in colloquialisms, brings to the surface what is normally not even noticed. Taking fragmented notes in his notebook, Celati performs an operation of saving things by calling them by name: by naming them, in fact, he not only makes them exist, but gives them back a space of affection. Calvino describes this operation by comparing it to a bridge which, not by chance, links our world with that of the dead, the same as Baratto:

Leggere [...] è sempre stato questo: c'è una cosa che è lì, una cosa fatta di scrittura, un oggetto solido, materiale, che non si può cambiare, e attraverso questa cosa ci si confronta con qualcos'altro che non è presente, qualcos'altro che fa parte del mondo immateriale, invisibile, perché è solo pensabile, immaginabile, o perché c'è stato e non c'è più, passato, perduto, irraggiungibile, nel paese dei morti...¹⁶⁵

Celati's observational tales not only help us rediscover familiar places with a renewed and at times photographic gaze, but also help the reader mirror the outer landscape to reflect the inner one. And if at times such landscapes are battered and melancholic, resonating an echo that smacks of emptiness and non-sense, Celati, with his faith in words, as a poet-philosopher, tenaciously shows how authentic speech - which is that which puts us in a true relationship with others - only comes from silence. Such silence is to be guarded against the gibberish of our modern age, deafened by catchphrases and people's conformity. Forcefully opposing the anaesthetised and emotionless language of the experts, Celati, as a true cantor of the Po Valley, returns to that simple imagination that is a gesture of love towards others. Silence, in this panorama, is experienced as the origin of depth, as the source from which authentic words flow. The hole that each of us has within us can only be inhabited with these words, which are the demure words of a subject-body that knows how to let itself be filled by the voices of the other, just like a place. Celati's rich symbolism, which uses the metaphor of the river as a narrative, the image of water as a place of birth and death, the motif of the shadow, that of the mouth as *finis terrae*, tells us how the only way, apparently, to live our noisy age

¹⁶⁴ Vladimir Jankélévitch, *La musique et l'ineffable*, cit., p. 64 [my emphasis].

¹⁶⁵ Italo Calvino, *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore*, cit., p. 70 [my emphasis].

is to be silent and to renounce fixed definitions by welcoming, as Jabès suggests, the contingency of the passage of time in our being exiled strangers. In order to discover how to inhabit silence without being swallowed up by it, we must therefore take our cue from Baratto, who lived by leaving the doors of his house open, as well as his ears. In this way, his silence creates multiple voices around him and founds a narrative space in which others can tell their stories. Baratto is the silent gravitational centre around which the voices of others unfold: in this way, silence, from modesty, becomes power. Silence is an open space - in the profound sense indicated by Fink - of communication of and for others. Celati seems to want to tell us that silence, in the age of noise, can be a state of grace.

In conclusion, it is evident how, in different ways, the four writers examined trace a trajectory over the last century that privileges silence as a mode of communication. Blanchot defined this language in this way: “un langage dont toute la force est [...] d'évoquer, en sa propre absence, l'absence de tout : langage de l'irréel, fictif et qui nous livre à la fiction, [qui] vient du silence et [qui] retourne au silence”¹⁶⁶. Indeed, such also seems to be Rovatti's observation in his book *L'esercizio del silenzio*, the springboard for this work. Indeed, the philosopher writes:

Il silenzio apre, ma ciò che si dà nell'apertura è forse ineffabile? O ricade, forse, con necessaria ripetizione, nell'ovvia visibilità del dire, cioè subito assorbe il precario intervallo per ritrovare la propria funzionalità nella macchina del linguaggio? Oppure quel pensiero che si mette in movimento nell'intervallo, e che potrebbe propriamente corrispondere al pensare, non ha parole? Si esce, e come, da questo dilemma?

Il problema sembra quello di individuare un linguaggio silenzioso, una lingua che paradossalmente scaturisce e si articola dal silenzio e grazie a esso.

[...]

Restituendo loro *la pausa, l'intervallo, l'attesa, il vuoto*, le parole che normalmente usiamo cominciano a perdere la loro durezza di cose: possono flettersi, attenuarsi, riacquistare la mobilità, la polisemia, la nomadicità di un dire che certo i poeti ci indicano.¹⁶⁷

The problem of identifying a silent language, which inhabits the paradoxical posture of saying and remaining silent, is the one addressed so far. The words sprung from silence are not its opposite, but dense, nomadic, polysemic, poetic words. The same question, in different words, is identified by Derrida, who writes: “Il faut trouver une parole qui garde le silence”¹⁶⁸. Such a word is one that knows how to be demure, that alludes to what is not made explicit, that knows how to say less in order to communicate more, that knows how to pay attention to the potential and communicative energy of

¹⁶⁶ Maurice Blanchot, *L'Espace littéraire*, Paris, Gallimard, 1973, pp. 38-39.

¹⁶⁷ Pier Aldo Rovatti, *L'esercizio del silenzio*, cit., pp. 125-127 [my emphasis].

¹⁶⁸ Jacques Derrida, *L'Écriture et la Différence*, Paris, Seuil, 1979, coll. « Tel quel », pp. 385-386.

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the unspoken, that ultimately knows how to suspend itself. To the age-old problem of the sharp polarisation between a conception of silence as a positive element and one that sees it instead as a negative one, also presented by Alvaro Barbieri and Elisa Gregori¹⁶⁹, we can respond with a third way, which does not attempt to connote silence, but rather welcomes it in writing as a founding element, as a source and resource to continue to draw on in order not to become deaf to the sensitivity of words and indeed, to begin to hear better the voices that inhabit us.

¹⁶⁹ Cf. Latenza. *Preterizioni, reticenze e silenzi del testo. Quaderni del circolo filologico linguistico padovano -31-*, cit., premessa, X.

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*I would like to beg you, dear Sir, as well as I can,
to have patience with everything unresolved in your heart
and to try to love the questions themselves as if they were locked rooms
or books written in a very foreign language.
Don't search for the answers, which could not be given to you now,
because you would not be able to live them.
And the point is, to live everything.
Live the questions now.
Perhaps then, someday far in the future,
you will gradually, without even noticing it,
live your way into the answer.*

Rainer Maria Rilke

The presence of silence in literature can be narrated and analysed.

As we have seen, there are several keys to interpretation. The ones chosen in this thesis, limited to four authors representative - in our opinion - of this phenomenon in the last century up to 2022, are: the one related to trauma studies, the thematic one and the aesthetic one. We have highlighted how silence can be represented in the text both graphically as a physical space - through blanks, typographic spaces, blank pages - and through the implicit, i.e. all those modes of enunciation that hint at an element without revealing it. The writing and reading - understood as reception - of silence thus occur mainly on these two levels. It is worth mentioning, however, that sometimes silent writing speaks of itself, through metalinguistic reflections, and speaks of its own fatigue in becoming silent, its own difficulty in expressing the unspeakable, its own limitation in confronting the ineffable. These too are ways of uttering silence. At the same time, to use musical terminology, the counterpoint of silent writing is *bavardage*, i.e. the excess of words, the saturation of textual space, the immoderation of enunciation. These phenomena, seemingly contrary to silence, can actually conceal, beneath the excess, the unspoken. It is evident, therefore, that silence can take the form of a presence that signals and refers to an absence in the text. Moreover, although it is undeniable that silence as an acoustic phenomenon belongs to orality, it is a phenomenon of the word, which finds its written correspondence in literature through multiple modalities.

After analysing autobiographical texts and their relationship with traumatic experiences - which first inhibit language and interrupt the ability to speak -, we can also affirm that silence also constitutes a psychological space, as well as a literary and textual one: in fact, the writer experiences

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a certain solitude, a certain silence and recollection in order to be able to find the right words to express what, by its nature, appears as inexpressible. This is well described by Marguerite Duras in *Écrire*. However, as trauma studies argue, the process of healing takes place through the word, which is not a word coming from another word or from the noise of the world, but rather a meditated, guarded word, preserved in the womb of the writer until its written production, which is surrounded by silence and which, at the same time, dissolves in silence. Moreover, such a word is often fragmented, just like the soul of the subject issuing it, and requires an incommensurable lexicon and syntax that unsettle the language. This applies as much to individual traumas - such as Perec's orphanhood or the abuse suffered by Woolf - as to collective ones, such as the Holocaust. Yet, in these cases, it is not only the writer who experiences silence, but also the reader, who according to the aesthetics of reception interprets the text and does so in an even more potentially creative way through the blanks, the unspoken, the omissions. Now, the reading of silence is not only a subjective experience, but also makes use of precise categories - from literary criticism to philosophy of language studies to psychoanalytic studies - to attempt to discern and distinguish the author's intentions and his or her silences. Naturally, in an analytical study of silence, it is inevitable to distinguish between the ineffable - that is, what is so sublime that it cannot be expressed, such as certain of Woolf's sensory perceptions of the nature and light of things - and the unspeakable - that is, what is so traumatic or horrific that it cannot immediately find a verbal expression capable of translating it. Both of these terms are intimately linked to silence, and can be expressed in many ways, among which we emphasise - amidst other rhetorical figures - metaphors, which are based on a silent mechanism of substitution, as opposed to similes, which instead explicitly bring the object of discourse into presence.

Another phenomenon observed is the obvious relationship between lack, loss, death and silence. In fact, not only is lack a space that we often inhabit in solitude, but it is also accompanied by great silences, as in the case of Marguerite Duras in her waiting for Antelme, who unashamedly shows the madness she experienced in those days and lets the reader into her intimacy, in a silence that is meant to be demonstrative of suffering. In other cases, absence is a psychological condition of the subject, as for Lol V. Stein, who cannot find suitable words, other than a "mot-trou", to express the absence and emptiness at the centre of her existence. There is in fact also a silence of the unconscious, which often emerges through broken sentences, metaphorical images and silences made explicit in the text. However, silence can also be the result of a conscious choice and a voluntary and subversive renunciation of speech, as in the case of Georges Perec's *homme qui dort* or Gianni Celati's *Baratto*. It is no coincidence, however, that in the end these characters return to speak and, in a way,

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return to the world. The word born of silence is in fact a poetic word, renewed, repaired and even salvific.

In nonfictional writings, a particular case that deserves to be analysed as a phenomenon in its own right is the silence of Auschwitz: the question of what was right to say, what was possible to say, what was necessary to say has long been asked. These questionings, experienced by survivors as well as relatives of deportees, have given rise to a series of reflections that have evidently underlined the need for speech not to become *bavardage*. In a certain sense, therefore, vacuous and superficial speech is less and less tolerated and telling something is experienced as a responsibility. Breaking the silence becomes a courageous act to be performed only if one has something meaningful to say and with adequate words. Robert Antelme, as Marguerite Duras writes, chooses to make this effort by writing *L'Espèce humaine* by shattering the walls imposed by repressed silence during his imprisonment, and yet, after writing it, he can no longer even pronounce the name of the concentration camp. Often, silence is linked to a lost meaning that must be regained in order to continue living. At other times, silence conceals enormous wounds that cannot be made explicit, only hinted at. Such is the reason why, as in Perec's case, it is essential to look not only at what is in the text, but also at what is *not*. Certain absences in fact - such as the love theme in Perec's work - are extremely eloquent: reticence in saying can be the result of many factors, including modesty and shame.

Silence appears not only formally in the texts, through aesthetic expedients that we have seen, but is also thematised - indeed, it is fair to say that silence is one of the most significant thematic cores of the 20th century -, especially through the presence of mute or silent characters such as Percival, Lol, the sleeping man and Baratto. These silences obviously have different reasons and, if in some cases they appear as the negation and death of dialogue, in others they turn out to be its perfect culmination. We need only think of the episode of the meeting between Baratto and the Japanese lady. The declinations of silence in the characters are varied: they range from renunciation, to subversion, to modesty, to psychological impossibility, to listening space, to non-verbal communication. Clearly, silence is also capable of triggering the most curious questions in the reader. Indeed, as is evident in Lol's case, the mystery surrounding her person makes the narrator experience a *quête* bordering on madness in order to solve the enigma. Silence is therefore fascinating, attractive, seductive. Silence in these cases does not remain so, paradoxically, because it calls forth the words and imagination of someone else.

Literature therefore sometimes allows discourse to be interrupted, suspended, paused, making it discontinuous and fragmentary: writing allows self-suspension, in fact, in order to imply something more that does not emerge on the enunciative level, but which exists and is significant.

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Lastly, we have noted how a true aesthetics of silence exists and is profiled through a certain rhetoric and lexicon - which see the use of words related to lack, absence, indifference, neutral, white, black -, significant punctuation - which sometimes breaks sentences, making the syntactic rhythm syncopated, and sometimes slows down the syntactic rhythm, showing a fluid and slow writing -, some rhetorical figures - such as anacoluthons, preteritions, metaphors -, a macrostructure that includes ellipses, blanks and eloquent white typographic spaces. The aesthetics of silence, which makes use of formal and graphic, visual and typographical elements, thus stages a writing that allows for self-suspension, that knows how to be demure, that alludes to what is not made explicit, that knows how to say less in order to communicate more, that succeeds in removing something from the text in order to trigger a searching question, that knows how to focus on the hidden potential and communicative energy of the unspoken. The attraction for the unsaid and the tension arising from the lacunae of discourse are fundamental in an aesthetics of silence, because it is in the gaps of the text that the living force of the imaginary lurks.

This aesthetic is reflected, in our four writers, in a poetics that lays it bare and narrates it. Our writers, in short, not only thematise silence in their fictional works and go through it in their autobiographical ones - making the superhuman effort to find a silent and exact word - but also describe it, with metalinguistic reflections, in the essays and critical texts in which they tell how to write in silence. Modest writing, then, is not that which does not tell, but that which, by hinting, winks at the reader and says not to tell, thus revealing the presence of something else, which the reader will have to make an effort to search for, as in a police investigation. Silent writing thus resembles a *quête*, on the part of the reader, who must search for clues in and outside the text to find the deeper meanings and find all the pieces of the puzzle. Silent writing is a kind of writing that makes use of the fragment, the small, the hint and that, through such smallness, points to a more complex mosaic, which can only be seen if one makes the effort to investigate and interpret the silent word.

It is also important to emphasise that despite the inextinguishable differences that exist between the four authors examined, there are also some common elements.

The first of these is undoubtedly the use of images of the underwater world, which is par excellence a place of muffled sounds, of silences, of silent creatures, of sinuous and slow movements. Virginia Woolf uses the metaphors of the flow of the waves, the current of the river, the vessels and the fish, but also the sound of the voice of the sea, from which the musicality of *The Waves* derives with the streams of consciousness of its characters. Woolf also employs the metaphor of the mirror of water to speak of deep memories, which only return to the surface if the water is flat and calm. Marguerite Duras uses the context of the sea and the beach as the concluding image of *La douleur*,

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just as she also uses the image of the flood to refer to the moments of delirium and hallucination experienced during Antelme's unbearable and spasmodic wait. Georges Perec sets part of the fictional tale of *W* on an island and writes that Gaspard Winckler's mother had organised precisely a sea voyage so that her deaf-mute son could gain access to language, only for her to die in a shipwreck and thus in the depths of the sea. Perec also uses the metaphor of the oyster in reference to the sleeping man, who does nothing but wait for his detachment from the world to lead him to total dissolution in a constant, unchanging immanence, where the subject is emptied, like an oyster without a pearl. Perec also uses the image of the seabed as a mirror of the darkness of the room in which the sleeping man lives, which is instead compared to the stern of a ship. Gianni Celati uses the image of the flow of the river as well as the mouth of the river, which is the *finis terrae* recalling motherhood, death and birth in the amniotic fluid that is at the origin of life. Celati also uses the metaphor of the river to describe his own fiction, whose words flow like water. Let us also emphasise that Baratto, in his stubborn and subversive muteness, is not content to stop talking, but also tries to experience apnoea: a gesture that is commonly associated with being underwater and comes here to represent a suspension from social interaction and a pause from speech.

A second recurring motif is that of the shadow which, ever since the proposed methodological framework and Jung's reflections, returns as an element that refers to silence. In Woolf, it appears in *The Waves* through the mouth of Bernard, especially linked to the theme of death - which deprives characters of their shadow - and to the character of Percival, who is the shadow par excellence in the soliloquies of others, reminding them of the possibility of death and allowing others to access the truth behind the veil. In Perec, the sleeping man is described as a wandering shadow, a man who follows his shadow, a mute ghost who wanders like a somnambulist through Paris repeating gestures that have no meaning. In Celati, the motif of the shadow appears as much in *Verso la Foce* as in *Novelle sulle Apparenze*. Suffice it to say that Baratto is associated with a shadow that has no intentions, but follows others, like the group of Japanese tourists.

The third recurring motif is that of the desert and of the stranger: images proposed by Jabès that have to do with the silence of and in speech. The image of the desert is to be found in Lol V. Stein and is associated with the absence of desire and will that Lol manifests, as well as with her immense loneliness and delirious nomadism. The archetype of the stranger is also represented in *The Waves*, where it is in the shadows that Bernard sees the face of the Other, of the stranger who allows us to recognise ourselves: the Other is the founder of the ego's identity. Perec uses the motif of the desert to speak of the barrenness of the life of the sleeping man, of the empty scenery on which he moves. Gianni Celati often uses the image of the desert to speak of himself as a foreigner, a nomad, uprooted, exiled, without a place of belonging because the archetype of home is destroyed. The desert

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in him becomes an image of fullness, and silence is what gives rise to the authentic word that puts us in a true relationship with others: that word that becomes a trace for orientation in the desert. The motif of the stranger also returns in Baratto, who is only able to converse with those who are foreigners and do not understand his language, like the Japanese lady.

The fourth recurring theme is that of the *quête*, which in silence explodes with questions. Indeed, the *quête* is not only a theme, but also a narrative device that both precedes and structures the writing and is closely linked to the notion of the hole, insofar as it imposes a search: one seeks what is absent, one seeks the word when it is not there. Thus, if the search is made explicit, it is precisely because one hopes to arrive at what is not (yet) said, where words are missing. In Duras, the most emblematic is the *quête* around the inaccessible and enigmatic character of Lol by Hold, who is fascinated and intrigued by her. In Perec, there is a parallelism between Winckler's *quête* and Perec's: both are in fact in search of a lost identity. In Woolf, the *quête* is that of the search for identity, experienced by all characters. In Woolf's personal history, then, it is worth mentioning that one quest animated the writer throughout her life: that for the exact word, which would be able to grasp the incessant transformation that is life, between the *moments of being* and the *cotton wool*, because for her, power is associated with the ability to put into words, and thus to control, the perceived reality, since writing is catharsis and cure. In Celati, on the other hand, there is a quest linked to rediscovering familiar places with a renewed gaze, to the encounters that punctuate the narrative, to calling things to give them back a space of affection.

The fifth recurring element is related to the musical motif - a contrapuntal element in relation to silence - which becomes the source of an epiphany. This happens for Lol V. Stein during the ball, when she senses the love between her partner and his new lover, as it does for Duras in her diary, who does not tolerate the piano music in the painful wait for her husband. In Woolf, the symphony is a metaphor for the wholeness, in diversity, of the characters in *The Waves*, who are the divergent fragments of an all-encompassing unity. The music is also an epiphanic moment for Rhoda, who by listening to the chant and opera receives a *violent shock* and comes to an awareness to which she previously had no access. For Baratto, the final musical moment takes on the semblance of a moment of suspended *bavardage* that allows for authentic dialogue between the characters.

The sixth recurring element is the motif of sleep, emblematic of the pause from *logos* and thus of a certain kind of silence. Lol is constantly sleepy, almost as if exhausted by her impossible attempt to relive the past in the present, and the novel closes, not surprisingly, with her sleeping. Everything in this novel seems like a *rêverie* with cinematic and dreamlike atmospheres, and the semantic field of sleep is constantly taken up. From the very title, Perec's sleeping man reveals this structural trait: his is a stubborn training in indifference, an attempt to experience no tension, creating a sense of

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suspension that becomes a soporific resistance against the squalor of modern life. Baratto constantly sleeps and even falls asleep at school, on uncomfortable surfaces, often even naked, signifying that his actions become meaning: he is pure and transparent appearance. He is also compared to a sleepwalker when he wanders around the city. Finally, it is worth noting that Baratto returns to speak when he wakes up from a deep sleep in which he had responded to the words of the other characters attempting to interrogate the dead.

Also the silent and lonely aimless walking returns again and again. Lol appears as a robot wandering the streets alone and mute. So does the sleeping man, who wanders like an automaton through the Parisian streets resembling a rat. Celati himself is the one who, par excellence, wanders alone through the streets and the urban and country landscapes without a destination, experiencing the emptiness and alienating liquidity of modernity, but also the extraordinariness of the infra-ordinary. Celati's character, Baratto, lives like a robot and leads an apparently passive existence, observing reality without participating, following groups of tourists in an apparently random manner.

Moreover, silence is often associated with the theme of madness. Duras and Lol shamelessly stage the madness that inhabits them; Baratto is taken for a fool by his colleagues and the headmaster, who ask questions about him; Woolf was constantly worried about her mental health, as is Rhoda, who fears she cannot resist the unbearable immensity of her epiphany; the sleeping man, as soon as he sees his own eye looking at himself in the mirror, experiences a devastating anguish that resembles the delirious panic of someone who no longer has any balance, as well as enacting an obsessive and compulsive attention to insignificant details, to the point of focusing his gaze on microscopic and macroscopic elements without any apparent meaning.

Old people and children are other elements close to silence and which are recurrent. In Woolf, there is a reference to the simple language of children, which is what will save Bernard and enable him to use the word - the "little language of broken words", the "words of one syllable" - as a means of salvation thanks to the possibility of the fragment. Children's language is poetic, because it is the language of the beginning and has all the originality of poetry; children's language is silence that becomes voice. Perec recounts that the sleeping man, after seeing himself in the mirror and recognising himself as sad and lonely, realises his own unhappiness and experiences a kind of symbiosis with the body of his elderly neighbour, who is vaguely reminiscent of the bodies of deportees in concentration camps. The elderly man's speech, moreover, is slow, as it approaches the silence of death. Perec, moreover, often makes explicit the link with childhood, which is a central theme for him as an orphan, and recounts how, as a young child, he was already an avid reader who drew fictional characters from the imagination of books to be made into parents in some way. In Celati, the old storytellers are those who remind us that storytelling is a human activity and that the

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word is salvific with respect to the hole that each of us has inside ourselves. Moreover, Baratto, once he becomes mute, chooses to go and live at the home of two elderly people, with a passive, quiet and listening lifestyle. In Duras, the element of the body is central and Antelme's body, after returning from the camp, resembles the worn and frayed body of an old man and recalls, at the same time, the helplessness and fragility of a child.

The protagonist's silence then becomes what enables the voices of others. Baratto's silence creates a multiple hubbub around him: others tell him their stories. Baratto is a silent gravitational centre around which the stories and voices of others unfold: silence becomes an open space of communication of and for others. Not only Baratto, but Celati himself becomes a subject-body that allows himself to be filled by the voices of others, like a receptor of the external environment, where imagination becomes a gesture of love towards others, to whom he makes space. Percival's silence is what allows others to show who they are, to make themselves known, to access truths and awarenesses that are terrible or perfect gifts: his silence is the voice of others. Lol's silence allows not only Hold's attraction, but also his suppositions about her: it is precisely the mystery linked to the absence of information that Lol keeps to herself that triggers the narrator's lucubrations, who constantly speculates about her. In addition to this, we emphasise how Lol's unfinished sentences, the dialogues characterised by great silences, and the fragmentary nature of the narratives about herself only amplify the rumours about her by the other characters.

There is also a silence associated with the theme of death. In Woolf, this occurs as much with regard to the mother - the gravitational centre of the writer's life - as it does with regard to Percival - who never accesses speech and who may be an elegy to her deceased brother, Thoby - as it does with regard to Rhoda - a character who, after accessing a heightened awareness, chooses suicide because she feels an intolerable "inner loneliness", but tells us that the battle against the silence of death is done with words. Duras even personifies death, constantly trying to grab the fragile and obscene body of her husband returned from captivity. In Celati, the theme of death is made explicit from the outset in his 'tales of observation', which begin in the context of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster. Perec, finally, is the one who best speaks of death by choosing not to speak of it directly: all of *W* is in fact played out on this thematic nucleus, and the island of *W* is a huge metaphor for the concentration camps, right up to the final ellipsis of Rousset's quotation, in which the extermination of the Jews is not made explicit.

Lastly, in the aesthetics of silence, proper names are always significant. Indeed, we have already seen the hidden meanings behind Percival's name. It has been emphasised that in Duras, the truncated names of the characters have as much value in *Le Ravissement* - where Lol's name is truncated to indicate the loss of identity and lack that inhabit her, since Lol is only herself in fragment

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and absence - as in *La douleur*, where although the characters are real, they are as well protected behind a fragment. Let us also emphasise how for Duras hearing her own name is at the very least as unbearable as the thought that her and Antelme's eventual children must bear, even in name, the tragedy experienced by their parents. Hearing one's own name spoken aloud is also unbearable for Lol, in the moments immediately following the loss of her lover. Perec is the one who played with names and letters the most: just think of the bifid letter W, the silent letter E, Gaspard Winckler and the names of the two mothers. Celati, lastly, calls Baratto this perhaps to emphasise how, in his bizarre and ridiculous existence, this character has traded language for a 'state of grace' that has made him immune to *bavardage*.

Through all this, what we are witnessing is the emergence of a gesture of reconfiguration of silence. The disappearance of the word calls for a return: we need to start up again with words born of silence, but still words. Word and silence, in fact, imply each other and are essentially united. The idea is the one, expressed by Rovatti, of opening the word, of rarifying the word in order to intensify it, and silence is the means to accomplish this renewal. Silence, in fact, intensifies the relationship with the text. The key issue, in our view, is that silence is a substance that infiltrates the text in order to clean and perfect it, and not the expression of an impossibility. Indeed, precisely in affirming an impossibility, literature is already defeating that very impossibility and the silence that would have resulted from it. Silence is thus not an enemy of the word, or a negative element, or a neutral background for the literary and poetic word, but is the nourishing substance in which the word immerses itself and becomes dense, profound, authentic. As emphasised at the beginning of this thesis in the words of Rachel Boué, silence is in fact a paradoxical posture of the word. This paradox consists in the fact that the exploration of the limits of the sayable does not lead to the extinction of writing, but is a positive provocation that confirms it. Silence is not the impossibility of writing, therefore, but rather the springboard, the founding element of the literary word, which is driven by the desire to overcome the dilemma between saying and not saying. Silence, therefore, founds the literary word. Barthes called this paradoxical posture an 'endless agitation' from which literature springs, which aims to grasp the real, from the crudest to the most sublime. In this sense, we can say that today there is a reaction to silence, to that silence linked to the impossibility of saying: with the evolution of psychoanalysis, as well as with the realisation of the horror of the Nazi exterminations and the potential evil of which humans are capable, humanity has somehow exorcised the curse of silence and attempted to find new forms, aesthetically valid and intellectually honest, to say everything. These forms are, at the same time, a reaction to the 'negative' silence of impossibility and a reconfiguration of the 'positive' silence of authenticity. Silence thus becomes a third way, between

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the reductive polarisation of negative and positive, to begin writing again. Silence is an experience that allows for a new beginning of the word, animated by the aforementioned desire for transcendence. Silence, in a certain sense, has its own deontology, the primary purpose of which is to fight against *bavardage*, that is, the undisciplined and superficial use of the word, which we often witness today and against which Gianni Celati rebels. Silence becomes the means to understand that, while it is good that the word is democratised, there is nevertheless a fundamental distinction: there are words that are more intense than others, just as there is one literature that is more legitimate than another. In storytelling today, there is a compromise between silence and saying too much: that compromise is the ellipsis. This, in fact, as Perec has well demonstrated, refers back to an implied sound and word. Restarting is possible with a history of art that has understood how to *dose* silence, with an attitude tied to the concept of *preciousness*. What is precious is that which is limited and intense: silence must have these two characteristics. The measure, that is, the limit, lies somewhere between *bavardage* - i.e. the excess of saying, the emission of breath, the vacuous, vague, superficial word - and traumatic silence - i.e. that of one who says nothing, of one who renounces speech completely, of one who remains imprisoned in the unspoken. The preciousness of silence lies in this awareness: if used wisely, silence is a source of intensity *in* and *of* speech. Words become fragments, typographic spaces become breaths: silence thus intensifies the value of words and gives humanity a voice again. The literary word is born from silence and longs for it. Indeed, language does not cease in silence, which is part of it, but rather includes its absence: literature is both presence and absence of words. Words do not merely draw things out of silence, but also create the silence in which they can vanish again. Words, as Wiesel wrote, do not serve to change silence, but to complete it. Woolf, Duras, Perec and Celati have faith in words, provided they are drenched in silence, and remind us that silence and writing are the voices that inhabit us.

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*Il silenzio ha bisogno della vita quotidiana.
Ha bisogno del rumore, dei gatti, degli urli,
per sapere che sono una cosa sola.
Basta stare nel piccolo e col piccolo,
perché il grande si rivela da sé
quando siamo attenti.
E il percorso della comprensione
passa lieve
per tutta la nostra vita.*

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