Storying Silence: A Visual Essay

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Cover Page Footnote
With thanks to my supervisor, Professor Jim Field who encouraged me to respond hermeneutically to the topic. Also, much gratitude to Professor Jackie Seidel for her guidance on earlier versions of this essay.

This photo essay is available in The Goose: https://scholars.wlu.ca/thegoose/vol18/iss2/27
A Backstory

In this visual essay, I present eight visual vignettes (images accompanied by poetic interpretations) to explore the idea of silence as generative. This work was the result of a self-study where I questioned my interpretations of the phenomenon of silence. It is a principle of interpretive work that a researcher needs to acknowledge assumptions and pre-understandings, recognizing that the research is shaped by the researcher’s presence. Interpretive studies are typically organized around a “biographically meaningful event” (Denzin 2). Maureen Jane Angen notes that we cannot separate ourselves from what we know, because our “subjectivity is an integral part of our understanding of ourselves, of others, and of the world around us” (385). A self-study is not a matter of being self-absorbed or an act of self-indulgence, but a recognition that “self-understanding always occurs through understanding something other than the self, and includes the unity and integrity of the other” (Gadamer 83). I conducted this self-study in preparation for a hermeneutic inquiry into instructors’ and students’ experiences of silences in class discussions about literary texts.

Scholars have called for greater attention to be paid to the role silence has in educational contexts (Belanoff 420; Zembylas and Michaelides 210). Therefore, my study has been grounded in a theoretical orientation around silence (Dauenhauer 78) and silence pedagogy (Mosher 369; Ollin 265; San Pedro 144), and a philosophical grounding that silence is a part of language (Risser 6). I pursued the self-study in the hopes of curating vocabulary to describe the phenomenon I sought to explore.

I was studying the idea of silence as generative, but to speak of it in that way was proving to be challenging because in educational contexts student silence is often thought of as a deficit, a lack, an emptiness, or an indicator of a lack of intelligence (Schultz 17). How would I be able to pull together the language to describe school silence as something generative and productive, when a literary studies class expects discussions to flow readily from students? Can silence support class talk when there is a propensity to see talk and silence as opposites?

During my routine walks where I cherish silence and its power to help me think, I noticed that the landscape offered a metaphorical rendition of the complementary relationship between silence and speech. I considered Freeman Patterson’s idea that looking at naturally occurring phenomenon, what appears to be random contains “an invisible but pervasive order” (42), and
that order can support efforts to understand that which seems abstract. As much as I am
tempted to present a conclusion or a result of the experience, I think it is more appropriate to
allow the visual vignettes to imply the emerging understanding of the process I went through.

I went on a series of walks between 2017-2018 and when certain vistas evoked the aspect of
silence that I had been thinking about, but I had been unable to verbalize with precision, I
captured the image. This process was in keeping with interpretive research methods. For
example, Sandra Weber notes, that it is the “paying attention, the looking and the taking note
of what we see that makes images especially important to art, scholarship, and research” (2). The broad body of interpretive inquiry is a quest to understand lived experiences (Van Manen 31). An assumption guiding this kind of research is that lived experiences are distinguishable
from experience, in that lived experiences are experiences where there is consciousness,
reflection, or ongoing interpretation of what one is living through. Our experience in the world
is subject to forgetfulness of being (Freeman 549) and understanding happens when we
encounter our lived experiences through reflection and attention on our lives. The process of
capturing the silence to my personal experiences of silence allowed me to find routes to the
language to describe the phenomenon.

When I had collated a series of photos over a few weeks, I noticed that there were themes in
the academic literature that were exemplified by some of the images. The poetic renditions
came much later, while I was preparing for fieldwork and I was searching for ways to further
verbalize the phenomenon I was seeking to study in detail. I found that poetic writing practice
supported my quest because as Margaret Atwood notes, “Poetry is an uttering, or an uttering
. . . it lets the shadowy forms of thought and feeling come out into the light, and perhaps come
to a better understanding of who we are and what we want and what the limits of those wants
may be” (76). This essay is a culmination of that work. In some places I include references to
selected academic literature and literary works. I do this without elaboration in order to allow
the visual and poetic to intersect in an interpretative way for the reader, because as António
Nóvoa has pointed out the pictorial turn in academic work does not mean converting images to
text or vice-versa (22). The poetic renderings were also in part to guard against the literalism of
the interpretations of the images, and a way to engage in dialogue with the ineffability of the
text of silence, because as David Jardine recommends, “for interpretation to engage, the text
and I must be allowed to play” (57).

Maureen Jane Angen notes that “interpretive research might disrupt received notions of how
research is formulated, carried out, and written up” (389), with implications for how we pass on
knowledge and understanding, as well as how we continue to live our lives. This idea that
interpretive research challenges traditional processes and modes of representation is a caution
that method might not be laid out in a step by step form in interpretive work. Melissa Freeman
recommends that in this work, one does not pursue a rigid answer for the topic, rather one
pursues “the desire to keep the conversation open and give it the space it needs to say
something about itself” (547). In this essay, I seek to let silence say what it needs to say, if it can
be said.
1. A Thing

Gnawing at the naught is something.

A thing, not fully thinged

But barely there. And where I reach to fetch

I recoil, 'cause nothing roils the will

To be, to do, or see, or hear. The unsaid.
2. Space

out of the void          the vast emptiness and surging silence,

             a deity spoke or tumbled out somewhere,

emptiness which gives rise to all manner of explosion and birthing of lighting

             and

             star dust

just when we think we got it, it gets us wound up in its mysteries,

space feigned fertility, while dark matter churns away within the vastness

making a something of the silence of space, the spacing

             of silence    making a something
And just like that I remember the miraculous of the past:

Days spent striding hopeful,

To where the sky meets the sea,

And briny breezes greet me with the grit I harness to claim a dream of poesis.

The sun bakes my dreams into utterances scowling on the pages,

Scowling back at me, too loud,

Understanding which is half-baked from the silence of solitude

Becoming full cooked in the recognition of a villanelle half formed:
I’m searching deep for inner peace and waves come crashing upon me,
With ripples that distort focus on the page I want to fill;
Despite the words that creep on me like the green of the hills that I see.

And now

I’m searching wide for inner speech and flakes come tumbling upon me,
With ripples that distort focus on the sense I long to fill;
Outside of words that escape in the chill of the scene that I see.
4. Something

The rush and roar of a furling whirling Ferris wheel

    Stopped
    Short
    Mid

-air

and all you hear is trouble.
Not that silence.

The heavy hush which comes over a crowd waiting for the team to score a roar of a goooal!

Not that quiet.

The shuddering shush of let me hear this, let me listen, because so much depends on this news.

Not that silence. But

the lush lull of a luxuriant pause in a frenetic conversation.
5. Power/Disempowerment

“Apollo said – I wonder what would happen if we gave one of these creatures our language?
   – Our language? said Hermes. No mortal could learn so many shades of silence.
   – I didn’t say teach, said Apollo. I said give.
   – You’ve been down here too long, answered Hermes. Let’s go home.”
   (Alexis 157)

Ready to hand, or ready at hand,
my pen drives the will to consciousness of the essence
Senses affronted by the hard reality of the hands which have had a hard life
to toil at
this too might be hard to work at, bracketing my pre-meanings and see at hand
what is in hand
not a tool for my using
but the what it is
as it is, with or without my seeing
it can be, what it needs to be.
6. Discord and Furtive Evasion

I catch the pattern
Of your silence
Before you speak.
(Hughes 234)

—what the scene said:
thinly thick with the has been and the will be
story this vista before me
and instead of parts, I see
layered into the now
hurtling through space
like consciousness that has pelted at a pace
beyond the imagining and
layered with the has been and the will be that though I look, long lines of meaning move
past me as the movement through space traces
a
compact
square
of meaning?
I sense, a spiral into a semblance of sense, consciousness unpacks lines upon lines,
I line them up, further into thick thick thickened description
of the
is
7. Rest

A something
reaching out and for
into being, into seeing
into the delicate sturdiness of softness
which lands and lingers, obscures the determination of being
as a yearning to be insists on being seen
touching all within its reach
and reaching it enriches my view,
its view which asserts itself into consciousness
willing and wiling its way onto even the sturdiest of intentions,
to not be swayed by its purpose to be
while my purpose to see
confirms, I may need to pause. And rest.
8. Contemplation and Coming into Being

“A listening silence is not just a withdrawal, but a coming forward. It is not just the removal of oneself from the space, but an entering into the space differently, to welcome what else may come forth.” (Mosher 369)

Child, if you feel your heart beat like hand to a drum hum
know the strut of a beat is a beating onward
and the unknown is the bedfellow to the known,
beating understanding into your palm facedown,
hold tight to that line down the middle until understanding oozes from between your finger while some remains within the grip unseen.

Child, if you hold understanding taut like the skin of a song beat
know that the heat burns and cools into light and dark, so lightly touch the meaning
which is and isn’t
like the beat of being.

Contrary to knowing firmly, the finer detail is in the finitude of being
knowing finally the beat does go on
9. The Pedagogy of Silence

I went into the wide-open spaces and heard my thoughts louder in the silence.

From an earthen birthing, they rose to meet the air, sheer will shot up through the too cool cold.

And though my voices seem subdued by the temperate times, my inner tomes of trembling forth to meet the world, timidly tucked away in the comfort of whispers,

when I while into wildness of the trees’ wilderness, rising to talk to the heavens,

I find my voices rise with them, And then. I speak.
10. Possibilities

what if it were not just that the trees pushed through to meet the space,
to fill out the space as it allowed, aloud

but the space drew out the trees,
etching little strokes, delicate little nourishments that the trees might feel safe to grow,
or grand showers that the roots might seek out,
or cool hoarfrost to temper a heat,
what if educare and educere, learn the trees to lean into and through the wide expanse of possibility?
Epilogue: The Limits of Understanding

Throughout the interpretive process of gathering images and playing with words, I began to operationalize silence as spaces, as expanse and panorama, while the vegetation appeared akin to speech. That metaphor is not without its flaws, but it allowed me to think about the breadth of meaning in the ways silence relates to speech. Understanding might be the goal in interpretive work, but as part of a process of the craftwork of interpretive inquiry, it is not a preordained outcome. Understanding is fraught with ambiguity and depth which can confound one even more than the beginning of the research process. David Abram states it thus, “the ambiguity of experience is already part of any phenomenon that draws our attention” (34). However, right up through and to the end of the research process that quality of amorphousness can linger in varying degrees. John Smith expresses a similar idea by asserting “traits that are expected from inquiry are gathered into lists that are open ended in that they are constantly subject to change and modification” (6). To approach this work is to be open that kind of nebulous, yet resonant understanding. Silence, personal, or in a public space, while it may sometimes be an emptiness, it is not necessarily an insurmountable void, but to interpret the range of meanings, even in a single encounter, is an unpredictable, sometimes ineffable task.
Works Cited


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