

# “Life Comes as Spring Comes, From All Sides”<sup>1</sup>: Constructing and Reconstructing Silence in *The Noise of Time*

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## Abstract

This paper focuses on a non-linear relationship between the course of one individual’s life and its creative reshaping in the literary work of art as experienced in Julian Barnes’s novel *The Noise of Time*. Contemplating a creative process of writing, the author seems to insist on a symbiosis between art and life. Writing about Shostakovich, he goes on challenging art’s ability to deliver a clear message about life: how to put what one has experienced into words? A creative dialogue thus established between a non-speaking, extra-linguistic, and unique self and its verbal representation in literature is built upon a relational nature of the said and the not-said. Eloquent silence is employed to transpose one’s life experience into the realm of verbal representation. Focusing on the limits of verbal representation, Barnes’ character in *The Noise of Time* similarly strives to grasp a meaning of the relationship among language, “silence”, and liberation from the self. Refiguring silence as one of the most valuable narrative devices, the text challenges the illusory nature of historical time, of historical places, and of selfhood.

## Keywords

J. Barnes, L. Tolstoy, silence, language, self

In *A Life With Books*, Barnes reveals the subtle yet profound way in which fiction communes with life:

I have lived in books, for books, by and with books; in recent years, I have been fortunate enough to be able to live from books. And it was through books that I first realized there were other worlds beyond my own; first imagined what it might be like to be another person. First encountered that deeply intimate bond made when a writer’s voice gets inside a reader’s head. (Barnes 2012)

Revisiting “other worlds beyond [his] own”, the author focuses, in *The Noise of Time*, on a non-linear relationship between the course of one individual’s life and its creative reshaping in the literary work of art. He goes on challenging art’s ability to deliver a clear message about life: how to put what one has

experienced into words?

This paper aims at examining a creative dialogue between a non-speaking, extra-linguistic, and unique self and its verbal representation in literature, as experienced in *The Noise of Time*. Contemplating a creative process of writing, Barnes insists on a symbiosis between art and life, stating: “You took life and turned it, by some charismatic, secret process, into something else: related to life, but stronger, more intense and, preferably, wider” (Barnes 2015: 7).

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The question of how effective a transposing of one's life experience into the linguistic domain of words could be has been receiving expanding attention not only in literature and in linguistics (Bilmes 1994; Berger 2004), but also in such fields of inquiry as psychology, sociology, anthropology, and philosophy. In *Making Meaning of Narratives*, Josselson and Lieblich offer a dialogically conceived, interdisciplinary approach to the narrative study of lives. The search for the "reliable" method by which we can put what one has thought or experienced into words invites us to "think of narrative [...] as a hermeneutic mode of inquiry, where the process of inquiry flows from the question—which is a question about a person's inner, subjective reality and, in particular, how a person makes meaning of some aspect of his or her experience" (Josselson and Lieblich 1999).

In *The Death of the Heart*, for instance, Bowen's narrator examines a conceptual interconnectedness between silence and word encoding a sensorial reality of the self. Her character Portia oscillates between eloquent communication with the social world and the emotional silence binding her to her deceased mother. Both define her as an identity:

The heart may think it knows better: the senses know that absence blots people out [...] Portia was learning to live without Irene, not because she denied or had forgotten that once unfailing closeness between mother and child, but because she no longer felt her mother's cheek on her own [...]. (Bowen 1989: 148)

Reflecting on a close semiotic relationship between the heart, revealed in emotions, and the senses, revealed in character's rational connection to reality, Bowen examines the extent to which (still) unspoken words matter; how can they interfere, constructively, into verbal communication, which stays for the world of encoded ideology. The perception of emotional absence in Portia's perhaps yet unconscious articulation of the self acquires strong

narrative voice of its own, capable to disrupt the established order and social conventions; it invites Portia to perceive reality in a different light, creating a new kind of existential authenticity.

Though many twentieth-century literary critics and linguists (Barthes, Derrida, Heidegger, among others) tend to conceptualize language as an indispensable verbal instrument through which the question of being can be unfolded<sup>2</sup>, it is also true that the rhetoric of silence, theoretically disclosed in an admission of word's inherent inability to fully communicate a clear message about the process of self-construction revealed in time, has been duly acknowledged since Cicero, who considered silence as one of the great arts of conversation. It becomes also self-evident that silence symbolically plays the very central role in many literary works, such as Shakespeare's *King Lear*, Turgenev's *Mumu*, Joyce's *Dubliners*, to refer but a few.

Regarding literary art as "one of the indispensable means of communication, without which mankind could not exist" (Tolstoy 1897: 65), Tolstoy nevertheless reveals his generally present distrust of the linguistic process by which meaning becomes converted into language utterances. In his essays and several fictional works, the writer constantly reflects on the inexpressible side of language, dichotomically stated in the complex conceptual connection between an act (a moment) of living and its subsequent expression in words, defined by Tolstoy as "the instrument of reason". He establishes a clear separation between life and a literary work of art constructed through words:

But if I were to try to say in words everything that I intended to express in my novel, I would have to write the same novel I wrote from the beginning... In everything, or nearly everything I have written, I have been guided by the need to gather together ideas which for the purpose of self-expression were interconnected; but every idea expressed separately in words loses its meaning and is terribly impoverished when taken by itself out of the connection in which it occurs. The connection itself is made

up, I think, not by the idea, but by something else, and it is impossible to express the basis of this connection directly in words. It can only be expressed indirectly—by words describing characters, actions and situations. (Tolstoy 1: 266)<sup>3</sup>

Trying to figure out an appropriate aesthetic method by which he could keep alive, a careful linking between the truth which is lived and its verbal representation, Tolstoy seems to hesitate between two contradictory impulses: on the one hand, he struggles to find the effective way to describe human experience and, on the other, aims for the desire to stay silent:

“If this were not a contradiction, to write about the necessity to be silent, I would have written: I can be silent. I cannot be silent” (Tolstoy 57: 6).

According to Tolstoy’s philosophical reflections on language, an attempt to narrate a sense of the self in words converts into linguistic inability to connect form and content, portraying verbal expression of experience as meaningless, “meaningless simply by virtue of the fact that they are expressed by the word... As expression, as form, they are meaningless” (Tolstoy 1: 399).

Focusing on the limits of verbal representation, Barnes’ character in *The Noise of Time* similarly strives to grasp a meaning of the relationship among language, “silence”, and liberation from the self:

“And yes, music must be immortal, but composers alas are not. They are easily silenced, and even more easily killed” (Barnes 2016: 109).

Regarding fiction as a form of communication between writer and reader, Barnes in his novel, consciously working on a literary task, seems also to be concerned with an attempt to read one’s subjective self:

He could not live with himself. [...]. Or what it was like to have your spirit, your nerve, broken. Once that nerve was gone, you couldn’t replace it like a violin string. Something deep in your soul was missing, and all you had left was—what?—a certain tactical cunning, an ability to play the unwordly artist, and a determination to protect your

music and your family at any price. (Barnes 2016: 155)

The continuous, though non-linear sequel, thus established between life and writing, could actually become a productive dialogic chronotope (Bakhtin 1982), suggestively entranced in the novel’s plot. The artist’s life and the performance of his work go hand in hand:

“But you can still write music? Yes, he could still write unperformed and unperformable music. But music is intended to be heard in the period when it is written. Music is not like Chinese eggs: it does not improve by being kept underground for years and years” (Barnes 2016: 109).

*The Noise of Time* reveals, through its wavering narrative structure and intricate literary discourse of almost oral storytelling, Barnes’ concern with how a particular literary form should best suit the idea. Echoing Flaubert, Barnes seems to be aware that there is no idea without a form, and no form without an idea.

During one interview given on the publication of *The Noise of Time*, Barnes suggests a connection between a life context, an idea for the novel and its subsequent expression in words:

“I think that the novel is a very generous and flexible form, and I allow the story wherever it leads me, often across the old-fashioned borders; so I am happy to mix fiction with history, art history, biography, autobiography—whatever tells the story in the best way”<sup>4</sup>.

From the point of view of literary criticism, *The Noise of Time*, such as a majority of Barnes’ novels, resists clear genre classification. Being called by some critics a nonfiction or even nonfictional fiction<sup>5</sup>, this work of art represents an attempt to recreate, through words, an individual life course submitted metaphorically to the noise of time. It displays a dialectical relationship between two intrinsically connected states of the human condition—the outer, socially constructed sense of identity and the inner,

subconsciously designed personal self. Recalling Tolstoy's philosophical reflections on a metaphysical interconnection between a mortal, ephemeral human physical body and an immortal, eternal human soul, in which the author etymologically separates bodily death destroying spatial and temporal consciousness without necessarily destroying that which makes the foundation of life, *The Noise of Time* challenges the verbal capacity of a narrative to portray a human condition. Taking to heart a full awareness of a castrating relationship between art and power, the main character undertakes a stoic precept to continue living in disturbing desolation, experiencing a destructive feeling of a man sentenced, psychologically, to death:

"He thought of suicide, of course, when he signed the paper out in front of him; but since he was already committing moral suicide, what would be the point of physical suicide?" (Barnes 2016: 156).

Expanding in ample intertextual way, Tolstoy's image of life and death, Barnes creates in his novel a sense of their interconnectability into a metaphor of the artist's human condition in Soviet Russia. A creative life, when lived in full awareness of one's finitude, becomes a metaphor for a wasted self and a desolated artistic self. *The Noise of Time* reveals the silence of its music:

"Life is not a walk across a field: it was also a last line of Pasternak's poem about Hamlet. And the previous line: I'm alone; all round me drowns in falsehood" (Barnes 2016: 111).

The non-linear though extremely hermeneutic confluence of life and art is personified in the creatively conceived well-known historical figure—the Russian composer Dmitry Dmitrievich Shostakovich, living and working under fierce political pressure from the Soviet Party, headed by Stalin. Far from conceptually constructed theory and academically stated knowledge system, art in its purest form lies, according to Shostakovich's perception, in "irreducible purity to itself, [...], which

could not be played cynically":

This was a nonsense: it was not true—it couldn't be true—because you cannot lie in music. [...].

Music—good music, great music—had a hard, irreducible purity to it. It might bitter and despairing and pessimistic, but it could never be cynical. If music is tragic, those with asses' ears accuse it of being cynical. But when a composer is bitter, or in despair, or pessimistic, that still means he believes in something. (Barnes 2016: 125)

Even if the novel's first layer, a narrative structure pursues a chronological line through Shostakovich professional career, culminating at his forced membership of the Soviet Party, the text's main thematic concern seems to reside at the authentically depicted psychological violence displaying unbearable human suffering and artist's desolation. Such stylistic effect is mostly achieved through a suggestive connection of words, utterances, and speech acts functionally employed in order to recreate the disturbing inner monologues and tormentous free indirect speech fluxes of a human mind working under a totalitarian ideology. The obligation to join the Party becomes a culminating point in incompatible relation between pure art and counter-art, embodied in life's scepticism. The bodily expression becomes conceptually inseparable from the inner expression of pain, even when such disruption is discursively perceived:

He felt, suddenly, as if all the breath had been taken out of his body. How, why had he not seen this coming? All through the years of terror, he had been able to say that at least he had never tried to make things easier for himself by becoming a Party member. And now, finally, after the great fear was over, they had come for his soul. (Barnes 2016: 152)

The dialogical plot setting, located in between "History, [that] does not relate" and its controversial perception by an individual consciousness which does not "want get fooled again" functions as one of the main indicators of the yet-inexpressible in words

territory. Its representational depiction lies somewhere in the sense of uncertainty and clouded judgment about Shostakovich's sense of a self split into two:

"He could not live with himself". It was just a phrase, but not an exact one. Under the the pressure of Power, the self cracks and splits. The public coward lives with the private hero. Or vice versa. Or, more usually, the public coward lives with the private coward. But that was too simple: the idea of a man split into two by a dividing axe. Better: a man crushed into a hundred pieces of rubble, vainly trying to remember how they—he—had once fitted together. (Barnes 2016: 155)

Shostakovich's personality split into two becomes representative of the philosophical reflections on the limits of language conceived by Tolstoy in one of his letters to Strakhov, in which he contemplates the simultaneous efficacy and fall ability of verbal representation:

It's very hard for me to judge my life, not just the most recent events, but also the most distant ones. Sometimes my life appears vulgar to me, sometimes heroic, sometimes moving, sometimes repulsive, sometimes unhappy to the point of despair, other times joyful... These oscillations cause me great distress: I can't get any truth from myself! And it doesn't happen just in my reminiscences, but every day in all my affairs. I don't feel anything purely or directly, everything in me splits into two. (Tolstoy 2: 541)

Describing the form of self that frequently lies beyond narrative, Barnes succeeds in creating reflections on the limitations of the word in expressing answers to the fundamental problems of life faced by the character. Frequently, his character thinks about the growing desire to remain silent, and the ever growing desire to stop remembering. The symbolic sequence of silence and memory intertwined with a constructive perceptiveness of history, in order to recreate a tormenting interior monologue on finitude of art when faced with power:

One to hear, one to remember, and one to drink—as the saying went. He doubted he could stop drinking, whatever

the doctors advised; he could not stop hearing; and worst of all, he could not stop remembering. He so wished that the memory could be disengaged at will, like putting a car into neutral... But he could never do that with his memory. His brain was stubborn at giving house-room to his failings, his humiliations, his self-disgust, his bad decisions. (Barnes 2016: 168)

Silence becomes, then, throughout the novel's narrative dynamics, a cross-referential leitmotif dominating the territory of the unsayable in the text's structure. It may be argued that, even contradictorily, the necessity to be silent turns into the most expressive discursive device of the novel. Instead of speaking where one cannot, Shostakovich expresses himself through silence.

In "Truth and Power", Foucault connects conceptually power and knowledge. Moreover, he relates etymologically power and silence, stating that power turns to be more effective when acting in silence. He does not conceive power as exclusively oppressive, for in ideological contexts, it might become very productive, because it constitutes discourse, knowledge, bodies and (inter)subjectivities:

What makes power hold good, what makes it accepted, is simply the fact that it does not only weigh on us as a force that says no, but that it traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse. It needs to be considered as a productive network which runs through the whole social body, much more as a negative instance whose function is repression. (Foucault 1980: 119)

If power is bound both with silence and with knowledge, could we go expanding a constructive relationship among knowledge, power, and silence? In line with Foucault's above stated conclusions, Ephratt's (2008) theoretical path towards discursive analysis of silence proposed in "The Functions of Silence" overtly challenges the meaning of silence associated with "negativity, passiveness, impotence, absence and death" edged into linguistics in 1970. Instead, she defines silence as an important discursive turn-taking point. Instead of turning down the

functioning of silence as focusing on the morphological and the syntactical meaning of absence, Ephratt concentrates on exploring the communicative power of eloquent silence<sup>6</sup> both in conversation and writing, treating it as an “active constituent” in each communicative pattern:

The sequence of premises is laid down: the need for a word; the need for silence. The route of these premises to the reasoning, to the conclusions, is blocked in the verbal sphere, but they stand out and become even more salient specifically through the choice of silence, the unsaid. (Ephratt 2008: 1916)

One of the central roles assigned by Ephratt to silence as a syntactic marker attests to the idiomatic nature of “no words to express”. Reflecting about the language code, the use of silence in this kind of a context expresses the failure of words to carry out an act of communication. Echoing Tolstoy’s theoretical framework which underlines the apparent dichotomy between a word as expression and a content as an act, Ephratt illustrates how silence acts as a discourse marker also on the metalinguistic level:

There are no words (strong enough) act then as a discourse marker on the metalinguistic level. A marker pointing to the code: commenting on the structure of language to indicate: How comes silence—not because I have nothing to say but due to the inadequacy of the code to express. The idiomatic character of “there are no words to express” also attests to its being a marker. (Ephratt 2008: 1928)

Reflecting metalinguistically on the limits of language in expressing the self, Tolstoy nevertheless points out the intrinsic human necessity to establish channels of communication through language embodied in a literary work of art. Distinguishing between art and counterfeit art (Tolstoy 1897: 117-128), the writer attributes to art its naturally assimilated capacity to communicate, to establish an interpersonal contact between the voice which speaks (draws, plays, or remains in silence) and the

interlocutor (reader, listener, or receiver of a message). If art fails to communicate, it becomes counterfeit.

Following this line of thought, Kurzon recognizes, in his article “Analysis of Silence in Interaction”, the importance of a dialogically established contextual interaction in interpreting silence, underlining that “both in conversation and in written texts... language is at the core of the interaction” (Kurzon 2013: 1). According to the author, both in conversations (dyadic interaction or multiparty interaction) and in written texts where the communication occurs between writer and reader, “meaning is created not only by the person who is speaking or writing, but also by those who interact with him or her” (Kurzon 2013: 2).

As a conclusion, Kurzon attributes contextual importance and intensive communicative function to “metaphorical silence”, since it becomes a strong discursive marker in each of three types of silence mentioned in the article: conversational silence, textual silence, and situational silence. All of these types of silence are contextually bounded and therefore subjected to semantic and syntactic variations, implying that silence as a discursive device could be developed beyond language.

How should silence be interpreted in the overtly biographical account of one individual’s life course? Barnes’ mastery lies in exploring, through silence, the deep philosophical question regarding not only the human condition, but also the artist’s condition living and working metaphorically under the noise of time. Recalling a conceptual dilemma between the complete articulation of the self or the complete silence, the text creatively employs narrative devices that help underline great psychological repression articulated through a depiction of a non-speaking artist.

In her article “An Interpretive Poetics of Languages of the Unsayable”, Rogers acknowledges the methodological importance of the relational nature of the said and the not-said, stating that the meaning of the unsayable could only be figured out of what is pronounced. She goes on insisting on the relational

nature of languages of the unsayable:

“We can explore the psychological significance of the contrasts that form an essential part of each response... those contrasts include among other things, the implicit presence of the not-said” (Rogers 1999: 85).

The below quoted episode, portraying an encounter between Schostakovich and Anna Akhmatova, follows a stylistic device of metaphorical counterpointing between active and passive artistic auto-reflexiveness, embodied in the thematic element of intentionally constructed silence. There, history is recalled as a highly suggestive semantic background—a kind of a metaphorical melting spot—of actively passive response towards a totalitarian exercise of power:

“He had also had a ‘historic meeting’ with Akhmatova. He had invited her to visit him at Repino. She came. He sat in silence; so did she; after twenty such minutes, she rose and left.

She said afterwards, ‘It was wonderful’” (Barnes 2016: 134).

The psychological depth of a creative interchange between two artists is expressed through discursive abruptness underlined by suggestively employed lexical and morphological devices. Short, abrupt sentences are trying to express an unsayable. They encompass silence which talks in its own suggestive language, located between dissatisfaction and self-contempt, but also sharing of this “strength for silence”:

There was much to be said for silence, that place where words run out and music begins; also, where music runs out. He sometimes compared his situation with that of Sibelius, who wrote nothing in the last third of his life, instead merely sat there embodying the Glory of the Finnish people. This was not a bad way to exist; but he doubted he had the strength for silence. (Barnes 2016: 134)

In her article “Silences”, Gittins establishes a close metaphoric relationship between power and silence.

Though, according to her initially stated argument that “there are many silences” and each different way to be silent relates epistemologically to different states of mind, she nevertheless concludes that “silence and power work hand in hand”:

In documentary records what appears on the agenda or in the variables chosen for analysis often represents only the acceptable, anodyne face of that issue. More controversial aspects tend to be cloaked in silence, discussed outside official hours, outside official meetings; decisions and agreements that “matter” thus often go unrecorded. Power, as Foucault pointed out, is most effective when invisible. Silent. (Gittins 2014: 46)

Refiguring silence as one of the most valuable narrative devices, *The Noise of Time* contributes to challenge the illusory nature of historical time, of historical places, and of selfhood. Silence acquires voice, rhythm, sound, expression beyond time, and representation. It becomes the world portraying how “life comes as spring comes, from all sides”. It becomes a powerful literary word capable to construct and to reconstruct artistic means of representation:

What could be put up against the noise of time? Only that music which is inside ourselves—the music of our being—which is transformed by some into real music. Which, over the decades, if it is strong and true and pure enough to drown out the noise of time, is transformed into the whisper of history. (Barnes 2016: 125)

## CONCLUSIONS

The semantic density disclosed in a language of silence builds up upon a “downward spiral from speech to silence” (Rogers 1999: 103). Both referential and metalinguistic functions of eloquent silence are symbolically articulated in the discursive construction of *The Noise of Time*. Being artist’s main instrument, music is not silent, but contextually (referentially) could be silenced. Music “belongs to no time” (Barnes 2016: 91), but artist’s life is contextually and temporally bounded. Still, silence

reserves the right to revise power. Silence challenges the accuracy of time, of history, and of ideology.

## Notes

1. Tolstoy's Diary, November 24, 1888. Translated by Irina Paperno, in "Who, What Am I?" *Tolstoy Struggles to Narrate the Self*, 2014. Back cover.
2. For further reading on this topic, see *Writing and Difference*, by J. Derrida; *Being and Time*, by M. Heidegger.
3. References to Tolstoy's work throughout the paper are to *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii v 90 tomakh (Complete Set of Works in 90 Volumes)*, with volume and page number indicated in the text. Translated by Irina Paperno, in "Who, What Am I? *Tolstoy Struggles to Narrate the Self*, 2014.
4. In *Russia Beyond*, November 29, 2016. Retrieved April 10, 2018 (<https://www.rbth.com>).
5. In *Russia Beyond*, November 29, 2016. Retrieved April 10, 2018 (<https://www.rbth.com>).
6. Eloquent silence is defined by Ephratt as: "Eloquent silence alone (not stillness, pauses, or silencing) is an active means chosen by the speaker to communicate his or her message" (Ephratt 2008: 1913).

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## Bio

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