

# Speaking of Silence: Comments from an Irish Studies Perspective

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*'in silence, we speak?'*

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This article will discuss how silence continues to prove a forbearing presence in literary, historical, cultural and political discourse in Ireland, North and South. It will suggest that not only does Ireland prove a useful topic for appreciating the many implications of silence, it will further argue that silence in its own right is a unique and important route to understanding the complexities of modern Ireland in cultural, contemporary and historical terms. This is true, not least in the case of Northern Ireland where the difficult struggle to construct a unified political consciousness in a postmodern era of extensive political change on a global scale is proving to be one of the most serious societal challenges, but also in the context of a 'New Ireland' which is now reflecting on the aftershock of the Celtic Tiger and what it means to be a contemporary European multi-cultural State.

The functions and uses of silence are widely discussed. However, it is often the case that such analyses rely upon a binary approach to silence as either linking or separating; healing or wounding; revealing or concealing; signaling assent or dissent; signaling thoughtfulness or inactivity.<sup>1</sup> As an inter-disciplinary site, Irish Studies is well suited to challenge dichotomous perceptions of silence and supplant these by a more complex perception of the concept, which consciously complicates and overrides the dualism of its use.

Our strategy in the development of this point is to offer specific examples drawn from the Irish politico-cultural context as well as to develop and substantiate more general theories relevant to silence in the Irish context. Our focus throughout is on broader socio-cultural narratives and discourses rather than interpersonal communication.

To introduce silence within this framework, it is worth considering that silence, to an extent, is a concept that necessitates a multifarious approach.

The very word silence is a paradox as it breaks silence, ending the caesura and deferring 'meaning'. As a concept silence is more than just the absence of speech and sound. It can relate a silence that is purposeful or one that is forced. Silence is bound to time, as silence is used to measure the length of sound and vice versa and its duration is thus connected to its power. However, more than simply a boundary to demarcate speech, deconstructively, the meaning of silence is deferred and so silence takes on spiritual tones given its elusiveness and inherent paradoxes. As such, silence due to its complexity, can function in many ways as a cultural and political device; an important part of rhetoric and ritual in many varied contexts. Its resonance in such forums is due to its persistent reference to the materiality of absence and that which cannot (for varied reasons) be spoken. In this way silence is a concept that in all facets invokes the problematics of both empowerment and disempowerment.

Post-structuralist perspectives emphasise the importance of understanding that the binary of speech/silence is arguably one of the most powerful of political tools in modern history. It negotiates a relationship to silence that can be fearful and defined by hierarchy and ideology and this oppressive aspect of silencing as a means of exclusion has received much attention in theory and academic discourse. From a postmodern angle, politically based discourse produces silences and furthers apathy toward the other. According to Foucault, 'there is no binary division to be made between what one says and what one does not say; we must try to determine the different ways of not saying such things, how those who can and those who cannot speak of them are distributed, which type of discourse is authorised, or which form of discretion is required in either case. There is not one but many silences, and they are an integral part of the strategies that underlie and permeate discourses'.<sup>2</sup>

Yet, from an alternative perspective we can see that silence can be a necessary and constructive thing. Silence is not inevitably a violence. Silence can afford a space for dialogue to begin and for creativity to emerge. As Luce Irigaray notes, in encountering 'the other': 'the first word we have to speak to each other is our capacity or acceptance of being silent [. . .] silence is the word, or the speaking, of the threshold – a space of possible meeting, of possible hospitality to one another'.<sup>3</sup> In this regard we cannot truly understand silence without understanding speech and sound, and necessarily the processes of communication with an other. One thinks of Samuel Beckett's narrated characters, who dream of silence and cannot escape the chain of linguistic communication even in a blank page. Language provides silences for every word and silence too inevitably produces language.

Silence, understood as a lack of speech, results in difficulties, since the pauses/silences of the speech act are an integral part of the linguistic system in which meaning is created and affirmed. Jacques Derrida, taking a poststructuralist perspective on the notion of silence, claims that silence is the origin and the ‘source of all speaking [. . .] it is that which bears and haunts language, outside and against which alone language can emerge’.<sup>4</sup> Silence, from such an angle, is not necessarily the ‘other’ of speech. The word gains meaning through its relation to the silences that surround it and thus the binary of silence and speech/language is necessarily one that moves toward a deconstruction of hierarchy and privilege. Silence, subsequently comes to embody that which is not ‘the word’; that which is not speech, not sound. Bound to otherness, it remains a paradoxical space within discourse and an expansive point of intersection between various and often divergent theoretical discourses. In this way, as it relates to Irish Studies, silence offers a rewarding research focus and has a singular capacity as a discursive site. In terms of understanding Irish culture and society, it is invaluable to realise the profound implications of silence for narratives of history and identity. According to Cheryl Glenn, it is important to consider that the ‘rhetoric of silence’ has always relied upon notions of power, authorship, and agency.<sup>5</sup> In the Irish context, understanding this is imperative to appreciating the identity politics that have shaped what we know as the modern Ireland of the twenty-first century in the arenas of literature, culture and politics.

Accordingly, this article will explore four main configurations of silence in the Irish context. In terms of literature, it will investigate silence as a device to negotiate the limits of language and to challenge dominant discourse, using examples from the writings of James Joyce and Seamus Heaney. Moving from narrative to discourse, our discussion will consider the use of silence in constructing legitimate languages and channels of communication, particularly in governmental policy pertaining to Northern Ireland. Drawing on the experience of conflict and the peace process, we reflect on the relationship between ‘talking’ and ‘violence’ and how silence can simultaneously mean an absence of violence while also functioning as a form of violence in itself. Finally, we will examine silences in history and historiography and narrative gaps that make important points of cultural juncture and disjuncture in Irish national consciousness.

### **Silences in Irish Literature**

Much Irish literature, particularly in the twentieth century, embodies an awareness of the need to move away from dominant discourses and to

demarcate alternative strategies for the representation of Irish identity and history. As such, texts often rely upon silence in an important way wherein silence in Irish literature becomes less the thing that one is unable to speak of, and more the thing that one decides not to say. In dealing with such literature we are presented not with the limitations of silence and language but instead, the power of silence and language. And so, in the Irish context, there are ‘not one but many silences, and they are an integral part of the strategies that underlie and permeate discourses’.<sup>6</sup>

Silence is estimated as an important and positive aspect of communication in John McLeod’s consideration of the transcultural threshold. In his words:

[t]he transcultural threshold can *productively* be thought of as one of conversation *and* silence, engagement *and* dis-placement, where cosmopolitan and postcolonial approaches productively inform each other rather than short-circuit an attempt to build ethical, hopeful mondialisation.<sup>7</sup>

Reading silences in Irish literature, particularly that literature which flows through the ‘cultural corridor’ of the North of Ireland, can allow for a fruitful interpretation of the cultural dialogue that has long taken place in and through the literary traditions that have developed on the Island. Appreciating the conversation and the silence of Irish writing as part of a transcultural interchange can allow us to gauge a more neutral position on the interpretation of Irish literature and identity, both within and outside of traditional approaches. This kind of reading necessitates a move away from the trends of postcolonialist readings of the same literature, which focuses on the silence of the subaltern, silences that are imposed in literature and the absence of cultural spaces wherein the Irish language can balance or counterpoint the dominance of English, in a creative context upon which national and international subjectivity is constructed.

### **Significant Silences**

In the context of Irish literature and culture as it is read in its relationship to the cultural dominance of Empire, the idea of silence has long been a useful tool in engaging with the problems associated with ideas of control and collusion. The Irish colonial situation has often been distinguished as unique in terms of the social consequences of plantation and conditions whereby colonial exploitation was aided by the Irish ruling classes whose complicity in colonial rule blurs the boundaries between historical and traditional oppositions of coloniser/colonised. As has been discussed

widely in literary and cultural criticism, the imperial exploitation of Ireland had massive repercussions for the Irish language, and for social issues pertaining to religious affiliation, class and ethnicity. However, from a postcolonial theoretical perspective, Ireland poses a number of difficulties that complicate reading our colonial past through the lens of postcolonial theory. According to Declan Kiberd, the complicated Irish situation, which can be defined at various points by both suppression and complicity, obscures, develops and also challenges the dominant terminology of postcoloniality.<sup>8</sup> Nonetheless, the intensity of the Irish colonial experience and the nationalist backlash of the twentieth century qualify the Irish situation as worthy of a revisionist historical re-reading outside the realm of dominant colonialist discourse. Thus, importantly, Ireland expands the ground on which terms such as colonisation, decolonisation and post-colonialism can be explored and understood, while postcolonial ‘themes’ such as silence can come to be read from a number of divergent and very interesting perspectives encouraging us to move beyond postcolonial theory and toward new theories of cultural interaction.

Elaborating on this, we could take for example the important postcolonial issue of subalterity. Gayatri Spivak in her critique of the postcolonial position invokes Antonio Gramsci when she asks whether or not the subaltern colonised can have a voice. In her discussion of this, she considers if the silence of the subaltern is breakable and if it possible to speak for the silenced other, and if so, is this the appropriate task for the postcolonialist? Her answers begin with a statement to the effect that the marginalised subaltern cannot speak for him or herself. Silence is thus disempowering and inescapable and an inherent symptom of colonial discourses of power. In the Irish context, however, the colonial subject frequently speaks for itself. Complicating the idea of silence in postcolonial theory, Ronan McDonald points out that silence is ‘a symptom of a colonial condition’ but also an important ‘aesthetic strategy seeking to resist this condition’.<sup>9</sup> Silence in this way, artistically, can function as a political tool in evading articulation and thereby withholding the voice, or, it can work in a cultural space where silence on important political issues can reveal more about the position of the silenced than words can ever signify.

### **The ‘Cultural Corridor’ and the Cultural *cul de sac***

Expanding on this idea, one might look to the dominance of Irish writers of the Modernist period who wrote in English and in doing so strove to separate themselves from the colonial relationship to Britain. James Joyce might provide an interesting example in his numerous attempts at gaining a

possibly unachievable power over the English language through intensely Modernist language games, and also in his insistent positioning of Ireland, and Dublin in particular, in relation, not to Europe, but to prominent European counterparts such as Paris and Milan. Joyce is an interesting model for analysis as he offers many anti-colonial and similarly anti-nationalist strategies in his early works through a play on the idea of silence. As early as his writing of *Dubliners*, we can see that his use of ellipsis renders the reader aware more of the meaning-saturated absence of words than even the carefully chosen words that begin his provocative sentences.

Similarly, Joyce remains politically aware in his writing of silenced characters. One could consider Lily, the caretaker's daughter of the final story of *Dubliners*, ('The Dead')<sup>10</sup> in relation to this. Significantly, Lily is the one character of the story that is not spoken for by the narrator. Her presence as a servant in the house of Gabriel's aunts initially seems trivial in the text, as she appears only a few times and does not speak unless spoken to by Gabriel, but Joyce pays significant effort to avoiding speaking for her in the short story. Each one of the other characters in the story is painted in minute detail by the narrator, yet Lily remains invisible and silent. She is a powerful absent presence that haunts the story through her enigmatic relationship to everything else that is said in the text. In this way, Joyce demonstrates how literature can 'use its eccentricities and ellipsis to work against dominant discourse'. As Deleuze and Guattari both agree, in this way literature can be seen to 'give voice to occluded narratives without simply reproducing the languages of authority' thus circumventing the problems of subalterity and speaking for the silenced other.<sup>11</sup> With this in mind, we can see that conventional postcolonial ideas on silence begin to seem less appropriate to the Irish tradition.

In particular, this can be said to be the case if we consider the writing of Northern Irish writers such as Seamus Heaney, who traverses borders of culture, nation, and personal identity in his works. Significantly, Heaney's poetry seeks out an unconventional mode of constructing a sense of history and identity in relation to his own marginalised Catholic Irish experience. Focusing on the local as an alternative to the national, Heaney works out an image of Irishness that is personal and counter-nationalist in its approach. Furthermore, in important poems such as 'Digging', the bog as the central symbol of his work at that time represents a version of history that is silent and that exists in the ground itself. Preserved not in language but in the soil, such an account might be an unwritten authentic version of the past that is exempt from conflicting points of view. Also, in the bog, memory and nature come to be intertwined in a way that links back to a druidic Irish

heritage founded in Celtic spirituality. The writer digs through the earth with his pen and the turf-cutting becomes a metaphor for creative engagement with national identity, and the turf-cutter an image of the poet.

However, Heaney's writing recognises that in certain situations one can be led through a cultural corridor to a metaphorical dead-end in terms of communication and cultural dialogue. In the specific context of Northern Ireland, Heaney further addresses constructions of Irish identity in relation to silence. In the poem 'Whatever you say, say nothing' the poet extends an IRA motto of secrecy to the relationship between Catholics and Protestants of the North. Acknowledging the covert silences of sectarianism, which are taboo, yet paradoxically represented in sloganing and popular reference, Heaney writes: 'Religion's not talked about here' 'of course'. In this, he captures the cultural encounter between both communities as defined by silence and then goes on to represent how this encounter is systematically distorted by silence in pseudo-communicative acts: 'You know them by their eyes, and hold your tongue'. This characterises the common circumstance whereby a context of conflict can deliberately seal off communication and prevent exchange, resulting in miscommunication and the proliferation of the division between 'us' and 'them'.

### **Keeping People Quiet: Silence, Discourse and Hegemony**

Sarajaava and Lehtonen have argued that silence is neither negative nor positive. It simply works in achieving certain communicative goals.<sup>12</sup> While this is unquestionable in terms of interpersonal communication, the concept of silence plays a somewhat different role in public discourses. Discourses in the public domain are often about information exchange but not necessarily in dialogue. In this respect silence becomes more critical.<sup>13</sup> A key point is the way in which power can operate through silence and silencings, glossing over some positions and shouting down others. In such a context, silence is manipulation: an instrument to establish dominant discourses, to trivialise dissent, to discriminate and to disenfranchise. In its negative, oppressive form, silence can be a means of exclusion and marginalisation from which emerges a hegemonic discourse. As coined by Antonio Gramsci, the concept of 'hegemony' has been employed to encapsulate a plethora of dominant power phenomena. Here it is construed as an alliance of political, social and cultural agencies, which create, limit and frame societal norms to fit the views of the ruling class. Through a technologisation of discourse, the reigning beliefs, values, perceptions and explanations are established as universal. Power in this respect can be both implied and explicit. The Northern Irish context renders a particularly

fruitful site of investigation, as public authority and languages are highly contested in divided societies.

### **Constructing Legitimate Languages**

One element in constructing hegemony can take the form of policy formulation understood as a top-down intervention to restructure and redesign discursive practices to fit with the demands of specific policies.<sup>14</sup> Arguably, this is what has gradually happened in the approach to conflict resolution in Northern Ireland. The policy entrenchment of power-sharing and parity of esteem between two national, political and cultural identities perpetuated by successive British and Irish governments has aided in overstating groupism<sup>15</sup> and silencing individualism. As Máiréad Nic Craith suggests, the reigning paradigm of conflict perception creates singular narratives for plural identities.<sup>16</sup> Arguably, one of the most important forces in this respect is the discursive forging of two bounded political communities, which silences the often fluid and layered character of politico-cultural identities.

One potent example of policy formulation and discursive practice converging in marginalising other voices is the principle of designation in the Northern Ireland Assembly. Upon taking their seats in the assembly, members must designate themselves as ‘unionist’, ‘nationalist’ or ‘other’. Thus, the discursive premises of unionism and nationalism have become the naturalised discourse. In Pocockian terms, this means that the alternatives available are to participate on the discursive premises, withdraw from the conversation, or remain to listen to the monologue.<sup>17</sup> The voices that are squeezed out in this duopoly of discourse (amounting to its own hegemony) are for example those of other ethnic minorities, people in mixed couples, from mixed backgrounds, people from outside of Northern Ireland and people whose political proclivities do not necessarily correlate with their ethno-cultural background. Likewise, socio-economic cleavages, issues of gender, sexuality and locality are subsumed under the primary dichotomy of ethno-national identities.

In a similar vein, McLaughlin and Baker argue that in contemporary (Northern) Ireland critical reflection and societal debate has been stifled by the predominant concern to establish consensus around the peace process, evident not just in policy discourses but also in media and cultural representations.<sup>18</sup> Behind this, there is a ‘hidden silence’ regarding continued sectarian conflict, social exclusion and poverty. According to Bilmes ‘hidden silence’ refers to what remains ‘untold’ in discourse, the absence of information and representation.<sup>19</sup> In contemporary Northern



Ireland the stories that remain untold are often from the margins of society. Nobody speaks for the subjects of these stories or about them. While some perspectives are ignored, others are effectively written out of the script. This is perhaps most evident in the treatment of ‘dissident republicans’ who are often portrayed as ‘conflict junkies’ and ‘neanderthales’ intent on dragging Northern Ireland back into a terrible past.<sup>20</sup> But denying them a voice makes it impossible to understand why the political conversation is frequently interrupted from the margins and quite literally with a bang.

### **Banning Speech and Monopolising Discourse**

A dominant position can both silence opposition and revoke the right to remain silent. The first can most directly be engineered by banning and censoring certain actors and opinions, whereas, an example of the latter could be interrogations under terrorism legislation. Arguably, the most direct constriction of freedom of speech in the United Kingdom, since the Second World War, happened in 1988 when the ‘Broadcasting Ban’ was introduced, following on from a similar ban in the Republic of Ireland in 1972. The ban made it unlawful to give voice – ‘the oxygen of publicity’ – to proscribed organisations like the IRA (Irish Republican Army) and the UDA (Ulster Defence Association). The directives in the ban were relatively nebulous and it has been argued that the legislation created subtle pressures rather than exact restrictions:

The single most insidious thing about the ban is the way it has affected producers. They’re just not putting up ideas in areas where it would come into conflict with the ban because they think it’s not worth trying to get round it or they think they might be thought lefties or editors would reject it out of hand. It’s the psychology of it, which I find the most pervasive thing about it.<sup>21</sup>

As such the ban, though ostensibly aimed simply at silencing certain ‘radical’ voices, also worked to subtly control the media coverage more broadly, denying voice to a substantial portion of political and community opinion well beyond the proscribed organisations, misrepresenting the dynamics of conflict and obscuring its solution.

Much work has been done on assessing the consequences of the broadcasting ban,<sup>22</sup> but it is not often remarked upon that the ban of 1988 coincided with a government-sponsored advertising campaign, which could be understood as a coordinated attempt to control speech and break certain silences and thereby construct hegemony in a situation where the state lacked it.<sup>23</sup> The campaign consisted of a series of advertisements aimed at

encouraging the general public to use a confidential phone line to report any information that would help combat terrorism. However, the films also effectively worked as a form of political propaganda, commenting on an on-going political situation and attempting to drive a wedge between the paramilitaries and the communities in which they were embedded. In these adverts and other promotions of the confidential phone line, public silence was construed to be accessory to murder: ‘who will die next because of your silence?’, ‘Your finger on the dial can take the finger off the trigger’.<sup>24</sup> This is a clear example of how public information can be engineered to suit particular policy purposes and cater primarily to the concerns of the powers that be, through manipulating silences. Paradoxically, while the Broadcasting Ban was meant to underscore the unacceptability of violence, it also removed most alternatives to violence for the groups involved. Cast as beyond the pale of politics, these organisations could effectively argue that violence was their only recourse, thus entrenching armed positions, rather than creating a lull in which negotiation could occur. Such a sharpening of the contradictions brings us to a scenario in which we can explore the relationship between discourse, silence and violence as the three have been intertwined in the dynamics of conflict and indeed conflict resolution in Northern Ireland.

### **Negotiating Silence and Violence**

Speaking about the Israel/Palestine conflict, Israel’s President Shimon Peres once said, ‘the good news is there is light at the end of the tunnel, the bad news is that there is no tunnel’.<sup>25</sup> His point, of course, was that any solution to the on-going conflict would depend upon a prior and continuing dialogue between the conflicting parties. The problem can then either be resolved in joint solution-making, or the conflict may escalate and relationships deteriorate. Theoretical approaches often suggest that in such a context, through stages of increasing polarisation and eventually segregation the final fatal stage is destruction. At this stage communication is replaced by both silence and violence, and the preferred method of management is that of annihilating the enemy.<sup>26</sup> In this view, violence begins as talk ends.

Often, political *vacua* are indeed filled with violence. Talks break down and arms are taken up. In this sense, silence can signify the breakdown of communication, and violence may become a discourse in itself, replacing dialogue and effectively blocking the channels of communication. This movement is not confined to extra-parliamentarian actors such as paramilitary groupings in Northern Ireland. Governments and states

involved in the justification of extraordinary means in the name of security<sup>27</sup> (witnessed, for instance, in the on-going ‘war on terror’) take part in generating similar situations, where communication is abandoned and violence ensues. However, even here some channels of communication are almost always kept open, if nothing else through propaganda strategies. In most conflicts, then, silence and violence are never outside discourse, but are linked to and participate in overall communicative strategies, which in turn have consequences. The cumulative effect of violence itself can thus be seen in sectarian attacks and ‘tit for tat’ killings, which in ethno-national conflicts forcefully encourage mixed communities to contract to exclusive enclaves. In this vein, violence can bring a conflict to a permanent state of segregation, which further complicates the propagation of common ground and dialogue, effectively entrenching silence between the parties, while maintaining them as the only viable positions from which to speak.

On the other hand, it is also obvious that (communicative) silence and violence are not necessarily predicated upon each other. Most peace processes glide between different stages more than one of which may simultaneously be in play. Ceasefires, which are often the preconditions for negotiations or ‘talks’, are potentially only gaps or pauses in the violent discourse, rendering even the unspoken threat of violence a speech act. Further, even in times of ‘peaceful’ negotiation violence may be relatively widespread. Here the crucial point is how this violence is framed in ways not deemed to disrupt the negotiating process. Equally, certain historical moments may offer a more benign silence, when securitising and violent discourses quiet down. Here, silence can afford a space for dialogue to begin and for creativity to emerge. Such a space arguably opened up after the joint republican and loyalist ceasefires in 1994 and culminated in the multiparty agreement of 1998.

### **‘Whatever you say – say nothing’: Silence as Social Control**

In the context of war and counter-intelligence silence is critical. WW2 expressions like ‘loose lips sink ships’ and ‘keep mum’, remind us that strategies of silence are basic to wartime life and may be a matter of national security. The purpose here is at least two-fold: keeping the enemy uninformed and disciplining one’s own population. In Northern Ireland, this was demonstrated in the official campaign to use the confidential phone line to report on paramilitaries mentioned above. The campaign in part responded precisely to the key part played by civilian silence, when paramilitary combatants are embedded in civil society. During the supergrass<sup>28</sup> trials of the early 1980s IRA posters warned people that ‘loose

talk costs lives!’ and ordered: ‘Whatever you say – say nothing’. This code of silence, akin to the Sicilian *omertà*, was particularly pervasive in the republican communities in Northern Ireland. It meant (and in some places still means) that the worst crime you could commit was that of talking to and cooperating with state authorities – especially the police and the security forces. Informing (in the local vernacular ‘touting’) was punishable by death. Selling drugs might get you kneecapped or exiled by local paramilitaries, but being a ‘tout’ would get you killed.

Silence as social control is not just a background to speech but takes an active role in social interaction. Complicity is induced, not least by silence. As such, silence is used simultaneously to rally and discipline a civilian population. The paramilitary disciplining of communities in Northern Ireland has continued well beyond the peace process and is further used to silence the dissenting voices of those who are opposed to the peace process, often in the pernicious shape of threats, intimidation, kidnapping, exiling and killing.

### **Better left Unsaid: Transition, Victims and Silence**

Societies emerging from violent conflict go through a period of transition in which official and common narratives for the future are constructed. This process also necessarily creates silences as certain narratives simply complicate and disturb the picture too much. The dominant discourse in the peace process was shaped by a political elite agreement in which the victims of violence only played a marginal part. The Agreement of 1998 contains a clause on victims which states:

The tragedies of the past have left a deep and profoundly regrettable legacy of suffering. We must never forget those who have died or been injured, and their families. But we can best honour them through a fresh start, in which we firmly dedicate ourselves to the achievement of reconciliation, tolerance, and mutual trust, and to the protection and vindication of the human rights of all.<sup>29</sup>

Victims play an at once circumspect and vital role in the exploration of the relationship between silence and violence. Silence surrounding traumatising events can add insult to injury, but at the same time dwelling on the injustices of the past can obstruct the possibility for individuals and societies to move on.

The opposite of silence in this respect becomes revealing the truth about what really happened. However, not only are there different forms of truth: forensic truths (what happened, when, how), narrative truths (primary

accounts of the experience), social truths (common agreement on causes and consequences) and restorative truths (reconciliation),<sup>30</sup> there are also simply different versions of truth (especially evident and problematic in relation to establishing social truths in divided societies) and competing agents that are trusted to deliver truth and justice. Consequently, how to ‘deal with the past’ has been one of the most hotly debated topics since the political agreement was reached. In terms of truth commissions, for instance, the problem is that they perpetuate silences as often as they provide narratives,<sup>31</sup> for example by hierarchising victims, focusing on men’s suffering over women’s, adults’ over children’s, Catholics’ over Protestants’, plainly misrepresenting victims’ experiences or obscuring perpetrator responsibility.

In this sense, silence, violence and social control converge in the figure of the victim. Often victims and their surroundings are perched between the duty to remember and the duty to forget – especially when the social and political structures, which framed the damaging events, are still in existence in some shape or form. This is also evident in another conspiracy of silence, which has unravelled in the Republic of Ireland in recent years. The seemingly endless examples of violent and sexual child abuse in the religious orders, which had gone unrecognised for decades, were finally and forcefully voiced in a succession of official inquiries and reports initiated in the last decade of the twentieth century. In the Amnesty Report *In Plain Sight*,<sup>32</sup> silence was presented as a key explanatory factor in understanding how the abuse continued for so long. The report talks about a ‘conspiracy of silence’ between religious orders, the political class, the Gardaí, the judiciary and the wider public<sup>33</sup> in which the individual rights of children were sacrificed for ‘the greater good’. Silence was maintained for the sake of community. The pivotal question in this respect is not least who should be held responsible and accountable, and how.

When the question of truth recovery is raised in Northern Ireland typical responses follow: the truth is too unsettling; everyone has secrets and it is safer to leave these alone; Northern Ireland is small and the violence intimate, truth-telling would be destabilising; justice cannot be delivered; the Agreement has already granted early release of prisoners and state forces will never be held to account; truth-recovery is too expensive; acknowledgement can only be forthcoming once culpability has been conclusively established; no one would tell the truth anyway; and there are also those that fear truth is damaging and will destroy the peace process.<sup>34</sup>

In general, this means that a largely archival and therapeutic approach to remembering and uncovering has prevailed. ‘Putting things on record’ has been far less controversial than for example the official police

investigations of the Historical Enquiries Team.<sup>35</sup> In that respect, ‘Storytelling’ has become the less problematic alternative to ‘truth’. Victims are not denied the right to share their experiences, and tell their stories but it happens largely within the frames of a depoliticised, neo-liberal narrative. Focus remains on the individual experience as opposed to rectifying structural and socio-economic injustices. What happened in the past is not decisively buried nor hermetically sealed off by silence, but what can be unearthed and voiced carries few consequences for agents and institutions of power.

### **Gaps in the Narrative: The Challenge of History**

That which is ‘left unsaid’, whether in the wake of the trauma of ‘the Troubles’, or in relation to similar national trauma, presents a challenging task for those who inscribe these events in official and cultural narratives. With this in mind, Irish literature of both Northern Ireland and the Republic clearly has a lot to contend with when it approaches the concept of silence as it relates to socio-cultural issues of the modern period. Among these, critical issues of historiography are given significant weight, emerging from problems with narrative, discourse and violence combined. Much Irish literature, openly considers how certain historical events can appropriately be written in a context which is defined by conflicting perspectives and marginalisation. Joseph O’Connor’s novel *Star of the Sea* is one such example as it challenges the writing of the history of difficult national events, in particular that of the Great Famine. O’Connor’s novel, which details the voyage of a ‘famine ship’ from Ireland to the United States during the mid-1940’s uses a postmodern perspectivist approach to historiography in order to question the notion of homogenous narrative as it is applied to events that are contestable and that pose major problems for the construction of national memory and history. The Famine as a watershed event that is much disputed in Irish history demonstrates how historiography can play an important role in literature as it grapples with the volatile status of Irish identity in various colonial, postcolonial, and other contexts. As a case in point, the Famine is a very interesting topic in relation to both silence, Irish literature and the problems of historical narrative, in particular if we read it within the context of the ‘pall of silence’ that surrounds it in terms of its artistic representation. Maeve Tynan in an essay on contemporary Irish historical fiction to the ‘acknowledged dearth of literary and historical texts examining the Famine testifies to the pall of silence that engulfs that devastating event’.<sup>36</sup> Such an opinion leads us to consider why this would be the case.

Arguably, the Famine as it currently exists in the historical record is a significant limit event. It is ‘an event of such magnitude and profound violence that its effects rupture the otherwise normative foundations of legitimacy’. It is a point of caesura in the historical imagination. As such, it is a national trauma that has come to be bound by silence. We are faced with the issue of how it may be both possible and valid to narrate a disaster of such profound scale. Historically, this situation has been problematised by the fact that the narratives of the Famine have been dictated by politicians rather than scholars. So, while it is traumatic on the one hand, it is also, perhaps too polemical to satisfy the demands of an academic approach. Similarly, there is the question of who is then authorised to speak about it? Is it a sacrosanct event, too personal to be narrated by anyone other than the victims themselves? And if not, then how can an authoritative narrative be created in historical and fictional narrative, given that the distance between the contemporary voice and the historical sources that account for the trauma has become so extended. This time-gap has resulted in a historiographic self-consciousness that mediates socio-historical narratives of the event. Responding to this, Margaret Kelleher notes that Irish Famine scholarship, testifies to ‘historiographical consciousness and anxiety’, as Pierre Nora puts it, to ‘the reflexive turning of history upon itself’.<sup>37</sup> This historiographic anxiety has led many to consider what kind of history writing can effectively and objectively account for the difficult Famine period since it poses such challenges for literary and historical narratives alike. Mary Daly suggests an interesting idea in her essay: ‘Revisionism and Irish History – The Great Famine’ when she claims that ‘ultimately ultimately only a blend of analysis and emotion, an account of the Famine which takes stock of its legacy in economics, folklore, and poetry will meet the needs of scholarship and popular memory alike’.<sup>38</sup>

### **A Need for Silence**

In general, trauma theory has much to contribute to the issue of silence in response to such events. Much writing on the topic promotes the idea of the necessity of narrative as a means of recovery. We must speak in order to accept. Every event needs a narrative in order to register a closure and an end of the story before the point at which one can move on. Significantly, there is a vast amount of literature and art that engages with such concepts and takes on the task of writing the difficult experience of trauma. As yet, no such Irish literature, trauma literature, as it has come to be termed in literary criticism, has grappled with the problem of the Famine. But is

narrative, historical or fictional, always the answer? Silence in the form of a commemorative gesture or as a quiet period of reflection is also generally understood to be an important part of the post-traumatic phase. Perhaps Irish literature is waiting for enough silent time to pass before it can adequately speak of such an intense and emotional episode in Irish history.

But aside from this, there is a taboo that lingers over the event, as lingers over many national traumas. In a context of on-going debate about Irish national identity within a contemporary multicultural framework (which has developed in and through the Celtic Tiger period most notably) there are difficulties in opening a forum for its speaking that can remain clearly outside of nationalist or other fundamentalist discourses. The silence of shock and awe that is hinged to the Famine in both literary and historical narrative comes from both inside and from without. There is both a refusal to speak and an inability to speak of the subject. In this way we might consider the ideas of Wittgenstein, who in *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* wrote: ‘whereof one cannot speak, therefore one must be silent’,<sup>39</sup> as an important route to understanding this issue in both historical and literary terms. One could also refer to the theories of Pierre Bourdieu on social silence and consider if it is the case that a dominant group uses the production of cultural discourse as a means of social control in this particular situation. If cultural discourse defines societal knowledge it also delimits what society does not know about itself. Social silence can perhaps be used as an interesting approach to understanding the large-scale denial of the traumas of the colonial experience. This could explain why, in the current democratic environment, there is a gap in social awareness and therefore in the narratives of Irish history and identity.

Susan Sontag discusses contemporary art and the need for a movement away from the inadequacies of language and in the direction of an ‘aesthetic of silence’. In doing so she offers silence as a conceptualisation of a pure and neutral vision which may drive the creative production of art that is ‘inviolable in [its] essential integrity by human scrutiny’.<sup>40</sup> Arguably, this is an impossible goal for the artist, yet the ideals behind it reveal much about the difficulties of language and representation and the emergent aesthetics that push literary and artistic expression forward toward a more authentic vision of experience. Much Irish literature has already provided attempts at achieving such a vision, moving away from dominant discourses and finding an alternative strategy of representation that incorporates silence as a discursive tool in its own right.



## Speaking of Silence

In conclusion, we can, from these examples, see how silence is a complex and highly relevant topic in the exploration of Ireland in cultural, contemporary, and historical terms. Silence opens up a challenging forum for discussing both narrative and discourse in Ireland, politically and artistically. The Irish context, in the same movement, delineates a deconstructive space for the consideration of the idea of silence as a meaningful concept and beyond dualistic notions of language and non-language. Reflecting upon the silences of Irish literature, it becomes clear that silence is both the unspeakable and the unspoken and so it functions as both an obvious zone of disempowerment but also as an empowering act of strategically asserting or circumventing certain discourses of authority and control. In the literature of Ireland, North and South, silence is both an opportunity for dialogue and for the sealing off of communication and is recognised as serving both functions in a context that requires both communication and discretion. In the broader context of Ireland, silence 'speaks' and renders an awareness of the challenging positions of those who are silenced, or choose not to speak.

Getting into the complexities of this situation, in the unique environment of Northern Ireland in a post-conflict era, silence needs to be understood in relation to hegemony, violence and trauma. Hegemony, establishes a norm which is considered universal and authoritarian at the expense of silenced perspectives, and values. In Northern Ireland, this has led to much 'hidden silence', leaving the marginalised with a difficult choice: to partake in dominant discourse, or to remain silent. Further complicating this situation is the explicit censorship of potential voices which is a violence that runs as an undercurrent to the physical violence that also forces many into a position of complicit silence in a community pervaded by fear.

This said, violence is not the only motivational force behind silence on 'the Troubles', which like other historical traumas in Ireland, most notably, the Famine, reminds us of the adage 'some things are better left unsaid'. Thus, certain events remain in the past as difficult sites for narration and interpretation in which we are forced to self-consciously consider our role as speaker and narrator and the consequences of the narratives we create and what they do not say.

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