

The Pragmatics of Silence in Pasquale Verdicchio's

Only You

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Received: November 3, 2024 Accepted: December 13, 2024 Published: December 23, 2024

doi:10.5296/ijl.v16i6.22503

URL: <https://doi.org/10.5296/ijl.v16i6.22503>

Abstract

In this essay I offer a reading of the collection of poetry *Only You* by Pasquale Verdicchio, in the light of the theories of Pragmatics applied to silence. In the first section, I examine the main contributions to the debate on silence and Pragmatics, from Steiner (1967) to Khatchadourian (2015), passing through Austin, Grice, Searle and Sperber & Wilson. Particular relevance is also given to Jaworski's (1993), Kurzon's (1998) and Ephratt's, the latter being the author of many recent studies on "eloquent silence" and its pragmatic functions (2008; 2011; 2022). Some biographical information and an overview of Verdicchio's poetic production is then offered in the second section. In the third section, I analyze a choice of the poems from the above-mentioned collection, in the wake of Khatchadourian's theory of the standard stages in illocutionary speech acts, McLuhan's concept of "hot" as opposed to "cool" medium of communication and Jaworski's idea of silence as it is enacted in visual arts. Silence invariably seeps through the loose limits set by Verdicchio's poetic language, often evoked by the rhetoric device of negation or suggested by the extended metaphor of absence and its correlatives.

Keywords: Verdicchio, *Only You*, Pragmatics, Silence, Absence

1. Introduction: Silence and Pragmatics

Silence is a wide-reaching and elusive concept, which has been variously approached and interpreted throughout the ages. George Steiner draws a dividing line between the perception and interpretation of silence in the Eastern world as opposed to the Western one. In the former, silence is seen as a positive state or condition:

The highest, purest reach of the contemplative act is that which has learned to leave language behind it. The ineffable lies beyond the frontiers of the word. It is only by

breaking through the walls of language that visionary observance can enter the world of total and immediate understanding. Where such understanding is attained, the truth needs no longer suffer the impurities and fragmentation that speech necessarily entails. (Steiner 1967, p. 30).

In the latter, it creates bewilderment and puzzlement:

The Apostle tells us that in the beginning was the Word. He gives us no assurance as to the end. It is appropriate that he should have used the Greek language to express the Hellenistic conception of the *Logos*, for it is to the fact of its Greco-Judaic inheritance that Western civilization owes its essentially verbal character. We take this character for granted. It is the root and bark of our experience and we cannot readily transpose our imaginings outside it. We live inside the act of discourse. (Steiner 1967, p. 30)

In Steiner's view, "the assumption that words gather and engender responsible apprehensions of the truth" (Steiner 1967, p. 38) continues to be dominant in the Western world up to Descartes and Spinoza. With them, the conviction that language and truth create an indissoluble binomial is forever broken and language starts to be viewed in terms of "a spiral or gallery of mirrors bringing the intellect back to its point of departure. With Spinoza, metaphysics loses its innocence" (Steiner 1967, p. 39). In the Twentieth Century, Wittgenstein endeavors to escape that very spiral and wonders whether there exists a verifiable relation between word and fact. Language, he maintains, can deal only with a limited part of reality, in that "speech is merely a kind of infinite regression, words being spoken of other words" (Steiner 1967, p. 39). The rest is silence.

Throughout the Twentieth Century, silence has been studied under different perspectives, namely psycholinguistic, ethnographic, sociolinguistic, political and pragmatic. Adam Jaworski, in his essay *The Power of Silence*, provides a survey of these different approaches and concludes by writing that silence "belongs to the communicative continuum of linguistic forms from most to least verbal" (1993, p. 95). It follows that silence is "the least verbal aspect of linguistic communication" and its meaning depends on whether the interaction is structured through talk or through silence: "silence per se is neither communicative nor non communicative [...] when examined from the perspective of a given pragmatic framework, it can be communicatively relevant or irrelevant." (Jaworski 1993, p. 95).

Pragmatics is a branch of Linguistics which studies language used in context in its practical implications. Charles Morris defined it as "the relation of signs to interpreters" (1938, p. 6), which underlines the social and contextual dimensions of language. John L. Austin (1962) built on this concept by insisting on the fact that words are not only used to communicate, but also to obtain practical results. He maintained that every speech act bears three levels of signification, namely locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary. The locutionary level refers to the act of speaking in itself, which needs to comply to the shared conventions of a language structure. The illocutionary level indicates the "true" nature of the action the speaker wishes to perform by means of the locutionary act, while the perlocutionary level points to the practical effect of the speech act. He then designed a typology of the actions a speaker may wish to perform. This classification was subsequently perfected and

systematized by John Searle, who distinguishes five types of illocutionary acts: representative, directive, commissive, expressive and declaratory (1976).

As a matter of fact, not only does Pragmatics study what speakers (and writers) say, but also what they mean, which formally might be the opposite of what is actually stated (e.g. the use of irony). This concept questions the traditional code model, which required a coder, a channel of communication and a decoder. If the message was encoded correctly and the channel of communication worked properly, the message would be successfully received and decoded – unless the decoder made a mistake (Shannon & Weaver 1949). Since the 1970s, scholars have realized the limits inherent in this traditional code model and have elaborated different views concerning an alternative model of communication. According to Sperber and Wilson's inferential model of communication (1996), hearers (and readers) are not only decoders, but also active interpreters of the message, who use both the linguistic code and the contextual information to achieve the best possible interpretation of the message. Within this same model, Paul Grice focused on the inferential effort the hearer needs to make in order to attain a faithful understanding of the message, which he called "conversational implicature" (1991). In any respect, he thought that both the speaker and the listener need to collaborate to bring the conversational exchange to a successful conclusion. Grice's "cooperative principle" envisaged four categories (Quantity, Quality, Relation and Manner) and a number of maxims. Any speaker may decide whether to respect or violate these categories. A speaker may opt out of the maxims or decide to exploit them. Any decision will have a corresponding effect on the illocutionary and perlocutionary level.

Going back to Jaworski's essay, in his second chapter, "Silence and Speech", he mentions, among others, Maltz's study, where the latter draws an elaborate theory concerning noise, speech and silence:

The relation between noise and silence is not just a relationship between opposites but between a presence and absence of something such that silence but not noise can be represented as an absence. Thus silence is in a sense a derivative concept: whatever noisiness is seen to entail, silence is a lack of it. Speaking is one of the main expressions of noisiness [...]. (1985, p. 131)

Jaworski criticizes at large the approach adopted by Maltz, in that, in his opinion, he tends to confuse two different approaches to the study of silence, namely the relativistic and the absolutist ones. Within the former, silence is seen as part of a continuum while, in the latter, "the nature of silence is invariant and its meaning nonarbitrary" (Jaworski 1993). Embracing both approaches at once, he maintains, is an inconsistent choice. Moreover, Jaworski disagrees on the fact that silence is considered as a derivative category and that, within communication, speech is seen as the ordinary mode, while silence is the deviant one. He insists on the non-discrete nature of speech and silence: they are complementary categories, and daily communication witnesses a significant functional overlap between the two. In his view, it is possible to adapt certain pragmatic and linguistic frameworks that have been primarily used to deal with speech to explain the pragmatics of silence.

Differently from Jaworski, Dennis Kurzon adopts a semiotic perspective which focuses on the interpretation of silence through discourse analysis, where silence can be seen from two viewpoints: a modal perspective, which involves, at once, grammatical, semantic and pragmatic analyses, and a syntactic perspective, which focuses on the transitivization of silence itself, where “an agent has the power to impose silence on other persons” (1998, p. 3). Particularly relevant to this work is an essay by Haig Khatchadourian which is basically an attempt to bring together the concept of silence with the concept of doing, thus coming to a unified theory of “silent doing” (2015). “Doing” is meant in its wider extension: “[a]cting, performing actions, speaking and writing, and being silent are all forms of doing: we do something or other when we perform an action, speak or write (perform a speech act), or are silent.” (Khatchadourian 2015, p. 7). The meaning, the purpose, and the implications of a verbal or non-verbal act are to be applied both to actions and silence and are contextual in nature. Khatchadourian identifies three basic species of doing: silence, action and speech and grounds his theory on Searle’s speech-act theory, where elementary illocutionary acts are of the form F(P), that is Force and Proposition (2015, p. 13). Khatchadourian maintains that a silence’s strength resides in “the degree of its capacity, power or potential to express and communicate the silence’s intended goal”, quoting Searle and Vanderveken (2001, p. 5). The pragmatics of silence is therefore interested in how the individual succeeds in effecting a certain response in an audience: “[t]o communicate is to cause other persons to have thoughts (and beliefs) or feelings (and attitudes) of a kind one wishes them to have” (Khatchadourian 2015, p. 18).

Michal Ephratt’s contribution to the linguistic and pragmatic study of silence has been particularly relevant over the last few years. In her 2008 essay, she draws a distinction between “pause”, which does not belong to the realm of language, and “eloquent silence”, a means of communication in its own right, complementary to language, which is used for “significant verbal communication” (p. 1909). Consequently, eloquent silence, just as language, can be investigated following Roman Jakobson’s model of the communicative functions of language (1960). In her 2011 contribution, Ephratt reinstates her conviction that both silences and verbal language should be analyzed by means of the same methodology: “By including ‘verbal’ languages and silences under the same roof as extralinguistic modes of communication, and by classifying them altogether, I wish to reveal and demonstrate the different sorts of silences in light of the various forms and functions” (2011, p.2287). Ephratt then attempts a mapping of silence and speech based on their functions: linguistic, extralinguistic and paralinguistic. Within the linguistic dimension, (eloquent) silences are pure symbols, in that they linguistically replace speech: “Being a variant of a specific linguistic component (a word, a phrase or a chunk of discourse) these silences are symbols (constructed by a null signifier attached to a specific non-null signified) hence belong in the linguistic dimension of communication” (2011, p. 2300). Silence can also be an icon, tying together form and content. In this function, “[s]ilence is external to the linguistic code but is within communication and the communication setup, so as icon, silence’s intersection with speech takes place in the extralinguistic dimension whose focal point is content: the outer world” (2011, p. 2303). The paralinguistic dimension places itself between the linguistic and the extralinguistic ones. Paralanguage is “an intermediate sign incorporating both a symbolic

and an iconic relation between signifier and signified” (2011, p. 2298). If most scholars of silence place it in the domain of paralinguage, Ephratt agrees on this choice, but only when it comes to the pauses used in nonverbal communication and to the psycholinguistic and interactive pauses: “These pauses are indexical as they have an iconic basis since their practical function is to take time off (within an interaction) from that same interaction to admit the necessary space to attend to non-communicative demands” (2011, p. 2298). Ephratt’s latest contribution, *Silence as Language*, is a comprehensive, book-length study on *Verbal Silence as a Means of Expression*, as its subheading recites. It focuses on “silence as a means of expression, reflecting the choice of the addresser (and not the listener) to use an unarticulated signifier as a means of verbal expression” (2022, p. 2). The use of silence is motivated by the addresser’s deliberate choice, for reasons which have to do with iconicity, shortage of words or stylistic and conative considerations. Consistently with her 2008 essay, Ephratt analyzes silence as a “linguistic-verbal signifier”, which “occurs where speech is expected” (2022, p. 3). After a thorough investigation of the different kinds of silence, she investigates silence as a verbal signifier, following the classical categories of Linguistics: Phonetics, Morphology, Syntax and Semantics. These formal aspects are then complemented by the pragmatic-functional valencies of silence: referential, emotive, phatic, poetic, metalinguistic and circumstantial.

Ephratt’s scientific contribution to the study of silence is mentioned, among others, in Naser et al., within their discussion of the existing literature on the pragmatic dimension of silence. Although, they maintain, the notion of silence begins to gain floor in the 1970s, linguists initially tend to deny its functions, insomuch as they are mainly concerned with grammar and lexicography. The following decade, on the other hand, witnesses a multiplication of the studies produced on eloquent silence which, in the 1990s, go hand in hand with the development of Pragmatics. Naser et al. argue that eloquent silence (or “communicative silence”, as they call it) serves a multiplicity of functions and “has a contextual and cultural dependency” (2019, p. 53). They suggest four different functions for silence: rhetoric, expressing empty words, conveying emotions and politeness. In the subsequent sections, they investigate how silence works in literary language, both in novels and in poetry, by analyzing Roy’s novel *The Gods of Small Things* (1998) and Moss’s poem “Silences” (2017).

Differently from Naser et al., Duhoe and Giddi focus on a semantic analysis of silence to investigate its impact on conversational contexts. They synthesize the preceding scholars’ contributions into three main approaches: social-psychological, which studies how “features such as sex, age, gender and temperament” influence the incidence of silence; psycholinguistic, which looks into “the diffusion of silence in speech sequences, and its role in the preparation and development of speech”; lastly, the exploration of silence from a “cross-cultural viewpoint” (2020, pp. 20-21). The use of a behavioral approach assists them in exploring “the meaning embedded in a silence by considering the environment and the situation at hand in that very moment” (p. 18).

2. Pasquale Verdicchio and His Poetic Production

“Pasquale Verdicchio’s words are clusters of unexpected silences, fruits and stones gathered on his way to the desert”: this quote from Antonio D’Alfonso (2021) contains at least four important keywords in the definition of Verdicchio’s poetics: silences, fruits, stones and desert. The desert is the destination of his “nomadic trajectory” (this is also the title of one of his poetic collections, published in 1990), a spaceless and timeless space of existence where the differences in linguistic and cultural belonging cease to exist. But on his way to the desert, he gathers fruits – symbolizing the organic, productive aspects of nature – and stones, which stand for the points of reference of one’s life. Verdicchio’s poetics revolves around the themes of belonging (in its cultural, linguistic and interpersonal meanings), space, time, and the question of self-expression by means of a linguistic code – or its very denial.

Born in Italy in 1954, as a teenager he emigrated to Vancouver, Canada with his family. There, he completed his secondary studies. He then obtained his B.A. from the University of Victoria and his M.A. from the University of Alberta. Subsequently, he moved to the U.S.A., where he received his Ph.D. from the University of California. For many years, he taught Italian Language, Creative Writing, Literature and Film at the Department of Comparative Literature of the University of California at San Diego. An eclectic artist and writer, he published numerous essays in the fields of film and literature, on the question of identity, migration and culture, on photography and ecocriticism. As a translator, he translated into English Italian works by Antonio Porta, Pier Paolo Pasolini, Alda Merini, Andrea Zanzotto and many others. His first collection of poetry, *Moving Landscape*, was published in 1985 and most of his poetry up to 1998 was gathered in *The House is Past: Poems 1978-1998* (2000). Moving from the idea of the house as a loose point of reference for a transition between cultures and between different linguistic codes, he comes to engage themes such as migration and cultural identity, by using (and mis-using) the language that at first defined him as a foreigner. In his subsequent collection, *This Nothing’s Place* (2008), Verdicchio deepens his meditation on the idea of the undefined: conventional space and time are illusory, just as any univocal identitarian definition. The ideal point of arrival is the desert, where space, time and identity blur and overlap and language is absorbed by silence.

3. Silence and Its Correlatives in *Only You*

Only You was published in 2021 and could be considered as the third comprehensive collection of poems by Verdicchio, after *The House Is Past* and *This Nothing’s Place*. *Only You* is composed of 50 pieces altogether: 33 loose poems, 3 “Traveling Poems”, 12 pieces under the heading “What’s the Big Idea?” and 2 concluding poems, followed by a brief essay. The opening poem, “Where Is the Place Where You Are?”, focuses on the perception of the poet’s absence on the part of a child (presumably, his grandson Justino):

What does a young boy see
Through one eye
On the margins of the world.

Keeping watch
From a distance
Makes it feel like abandonment.
His absence follows me
Sits with me
Eats with me
Rests with me after a long day.
What could I say
That might contradict
My absence to let him know
That I am there with him
When he sleeps
When he walks
When he weeps. (2021, p. 9)

The structure is built on the unexplicit opposition between the terms “absence” and “presence”: the former appears at ll. 7 and 13, while the latter is implied in the periphrasis “What could I say/That might contradict/My absence” (ll. 11-13). Presence is an emotional state, and the poet continues to be with his grandson even when he is physically not there. Absence could be considered a correlative of silence, insofar as silence is to language what absence is to presence. Silence and absence only apparently deny their opposites: absence might imply a different form of presence, just as silence enacts a non-linguistic code of expression. This same cross-reference appears in “Can We Resume”:

I may have lost track
Of my words
As they snaked their way
About in and around
Attempting to find
Their right return
The dawn slides its way
Down one side of the canyon
And up toward us

Where we have been lying
Only half asleep
Through the discomfort
Of proximity where
There isn't much to say
I may have lost track
Of my words
The words I used to know
More intimately
Ones that made you happy
Ones that made you smile
And on my return
To what are now
Just whispers
I stumble upon you again
Can we resume
Our rest with calm
Or will the shroud
Of regret bind us
Birds begin to sing day
As they always do
Hover about bright
Blossom colours
Our presence or absence
Makes no difference in this. (2021, pp. 29-30)

The poem is composed of seven stanzas, where the three six-line stanzas signal, respectively, the beginning of the first and second part, and the conclusion. The first two lines, "I may have lost track/Of my words" are repeated at ll. 15-16, thus creating a cohesive parallelism, which is reinforced, at l. 17, by the repetition of "words". Once again, silence is evoked by an unexplicit negative construct, which could be paraphrased by "my words (my language) are not with me

anymore”. Silence is not only evoked but is enacted by the actual absence of its explicit nomination.

In “Savary Island, British Columbia” (2021, pp. 53-60), one of the pieces included under the heading “Traveling Poems”, a reversal of the expectations can be witnessed: “voices” are not associated with presence, but they become “apparent where/presence is not” (ll. 79-80). Silence is nominally evoked only once as a perception which “alights in verticality”, where “Flight traces the shoreline,/the stand of trees” (2021, pp. 60). Khatchadourian theorizes five standard stages in silent expression/communication, which correspond to five standard stages of illocutionary speech-acts to be enacted in relevant contexts by a person’s performance of acts of silence (2015, p. 19). They are presented in an order which mirrors their increasing complexity.

In Stage 1, a person would manifest, through some kind of action, a feeling or emotion in a spontaneous way, with no communicative purpose. In Stage 2, a person would manifest the same but, differently from Stage 1, he or she would have a communicative purpose, implying the presence of an audience. In Stage 3, the person would add the intention to affect the audience, by arousing similar feelings or emotions. Stages 4 and 5 imply a conversational situation, where a person wants the audience to respond appropriately, either by silent body language or speech. In Stage 5, the silent (or, partially silent) conversation would be completed by the person acknowledging, in turn, the audience’s acknowledgement of his/her silent message.

Stage 3 could be applied to Verdicchio’s direct or indirect praxes of silence. Khatchadourian’s exact definition is formulated as follows:

P wishes, desires or aims *not only to communicate to A* the feeling, emotion, thought, etc., she is silently experiencing but also *wants or desires to affect A accordingly*; that is, to arouse a like feeling, emotion, desire, etc. in A. Here, as in Stage 2, the silence would be deliberate or intentional, purposive. Stated in terms of the concept of meaning, P would want or desire to affect A in the manner I described by *A’s becoming aware of or recognizing the meaning of P’s silence*. (2015, p. 20)

We can figure out at least two kinds of “doing”: the wish to communicate and the desire to affect the audience. The latter could be furtherly de-composed into three sub-intentions: that the audience receives his message, understands the meaning of it and, possibly, acts accordingly in its life. These three sub-intentions can be retraced in Verdicchio’s communication of silence: the act of writing (and publishing) a poem manifests in itself the desire that an audience receives his message and understands the meaning of the silence which is involved. Understanding does not mean mere decoding of the message but an ostensive-inferential act, where the readers use contextual information to bridge the gap between saying and meaning, in a perspective of cooperation (Sperber & Wilson 1996; Grice 1991). Moreover, the audience can be affected in such a way that the understanding of the message brings about a transformation in its way of perceiving the world and the meaning of life.

In his discussion of the concept of “psychic doing”, Khatchadourian differentiates “mental states” from “mental activities”. The former, such as happiness or sadness, are usually unintentional and cannot be considered as a kind of doing. On the other hand, mental activities such as dreaming, imagining, remembering and feeling can be considered a form of psychic doing (2015, p. 53). Most of Verdicchio’s poems witness his intention to bring across his daydreams, his imagination and his thoughts about life, identity, motion and origin.

In the long poem “Solitary Retreat, Savary Island”, which is inspired by the homonymous small island located in the Pacific Ocean, solitude, in the middle of a non-anthropized landscape, arouses an intense mental activity: “aloneness is welcomed/for now at least/all set for/solitary retreat” (Verdicchio 2021, p. 74). Since “nothing needs immediate attention”, the poet reaches the most suitable state of mind to meditate about the value of presence vs absence: whether the existence of reality is an objectivity, or it depends on somebody’s perception is questioned:

if a tree falls and
everyone is facing
in the opposite direction
does the tree fall... (Verdicchio 2021, p. 76)

Presence itself is a message which needs somebody to receive it, in order to make sense of its existence:

a plane
does not fall
out of the sky
but is
suddenly present
circling
close to shore
low to the sea
and circling
as if searching
or to signal
I am here
just barely
and take

the uncertain message

to be

a message

without

meaning

without

anyone

to receive it

but me here

by accident

barely here

not here

there is no-one

here

to receive

the message

as the plane rights

back

upon its course

and disappears. (Verdicchio 2021, p. 77)

The whole of this section revolves around the apparent opposition between presence and absence, intertwined with a meditation on the effectiveness – and validity – of a possible communication of these states. From a linguistic point of view, this effect is obtained through the repetition of the adverb “here” (ll. 12, 23, 25, 26 and 28), used in different ways: as the full affirmation of the poet’s presence (l. 12); as a weaker statement (l. 23), preceded by the adversative “but” and followed by the specification “by accident”; as a borderline state (l. 25), preceded by the adverb “barely” and immediately followed by its opposite “not here” (l. 26); the poet’s absence is then reinstated and engulfed in a complete state of absence which characterizes that place: “there is no-one/here” (ll. 27-28). But the hyphenated “no-one” may also refer to the presence-in-absence of the poet himself, which was hinted at by the verses “I am here/still I do not hear it/ [...] I am not/ but I am there” (Verdicchio 2021, p. 76).

Language is a cage that limits expression, while silence allows freedom and understanding out of set codes of communication. Seemingly, presence bridles the human being to a set

space and time, while absence can be a deeper and broader kind of presence. Much of Verdicchio's poetry is built on the opposition between structure and absence of structure, limits and limitlessness. In "Moving South", the landscape is deprived of borders and becomes a land of all possibilities:

It all looks like landscape

from here toward

what once was

continuity of sight;

what this is

is what that is,

and what it was

is no longer.

It all looks like

landscape unobstructed

by borders, where

a white line divides

lanes of approach and

departure as it extends

beyond sight

beyond belief.

It all moves like

landscape unfettered

undulation well-defined

rise and fall

beneath our feet.

It whispers a tale

of travel

and visitation.

It all moves like landscape

with unquestioned direction

coordinates recall
returns and attempts
at residence where
residence cannot be had;
this place is landscape
and moves like being. (Verdicchio 2021, p. 40)

The space Verdicchio imagines is an open space of being and communication, where mental and physical movement are “unobstructed/by borders.” In this dynamic condition where existence means continuous becoming, residence becomes inane, because “this place is landscape/and moves like being.” Just as limitlessness is a condition of freedom, which makes possible a virtually universal kind of communication, the same applies to identity. Differently from the concept of multi-layered identity which was defining in the cultural context of the so-called Italian Canadian literature, the poet imagines an open identity, which evolves and encompasses diversity while becoming its own story:

Hold My Story
I become
in becoming,
hold my story
as I live it (Verdicchio 2021, p. 35)

At the end of this short poem, there is no period, which gives the syntactic structure a sense of openness and continuity. The poet’s story can only be told by a broken syntax, in the absence of stiff rules which unsuccessfully try to define the undefinable. Here, in the last stanza of “Sense of Support,” we learn that dreams and children’s broken syntax can express what escapes definition:

I have waited
and waited,
learned patience,
learned that dreams
can reveal
what language
can only hint at,
and in your broken syntax
I hear my own story told. (Verdicchio 2021, p. 16)

Azadeh Moghaddam, in his study on “eloquent silence” in Persian Language, affirms that “[silence] can be defined as a meaningful absence, which leaves its traces back in the signifying empty place in a text. These traces are taken as markers of silence which are represented in various forms.” (2014, pp. 250-251). As we have seen, the silence Verdicchio both suggests and enacts becomes a tool to perform a communicative act which, besides having an impact on his own approach to life and identity, is aimed at having the reader understand the meaning of his silence and its correlatives – and, possibly, have an impact on the reader’s life and worldview. As theorized by Sperber and Wilson in their Relevance Theory (1996), communication involves two modes: code decoding and an ostensive-inferential act: with the former, the audience/reader receives and understands the informative intention of the encoder whereas, with the latter, it tries to figure out the communicative intention of the encoder. Poetry, as a literary genre, is particularly apt to suggest the unexpressed and the inexpressible.

Marshall McLuhan (1964) theorized the existence of two different kinds of media, namely “hot” and “cool”. The former include radio and the movies, in that they extend “one single sense in ‘high definition’”, which is “the state of being well filled with data.” On the other hand, “cool” media require the cooperation of the listener:

Telephone is a cool medium, or one of low definition, because the ear is given a meager amount of information. And speech is a cool medium of low definition, because so little is given and so much has to be filled in by the listener. On the other hand, hot media do not leave so much to be filled in or completed by the audience. (McLuhan 1964, p. 36)

If speech is a “cool” medium, the artistic expression which occurs by means of the poetic genre is even cooler, in that it can convey the unsaid – what is left in silence – in a powerful way. In particular, in Verdicchio’s poetry, language is imbued with silence, comes from silence and returns to silence. Since formlessness and silence can be said to be the opposites of form and language, his poetry seems to emerge from a vacant space, a meditative emptiness, which are characteristic of much Japanese Zen art. As Will Petersen states, “[t]he blank sheet of paper is perceived only as paper, and remains as paper. Only by filling the paper does it become empty.” (1960, p. 107).

While discussing visual arts, Jaworski elaborates on this concept and comes to the affirmation that “the meaningfulness of silence in visual arts (as probably in any art) depends foremost on finding appropriate contrasts to what appears as the void” (1993, p. 152). It follows that it is the sound that gives form to silence, just as form defines formlessness. Categories are no absolutes in Verdicchio’s poetry, in that existence is in movement and transformation. The same applies to the other “shared” categories of humankind: motion / motionlessness; space / spacelessness; time / timelessness; self / other. The last poem of the collection, “The Self in Others and the Other as Self” exemplifies this very fluidity, since

language changes in transition
from state to state to state
the obvious but I mean that language

even changes on the way
from mind to mouth slowed down
and slurred feet up
to get the blood flowing again
down to my head and full circulation
no longer a way out
walking against direction
in fuselage again leaving to return
and return as leaving. (Verdicchio 2021, p. 85)

This poem is followed by a prose where Verdicchio briefly focuses on some of the recurring themes of his inspiration: translation, movement, migration and places. Translation, as he himself suggests, can be considered as the most representative activity of his daily life, not only as a writer and an academic, but also as an individual. Soon after his emigration to Canada, he had to start translating himself into a new language and culture and began to devise the construction of a self

that could negotiate a new language, new social spaces, and a new cultural grammar, projecting an existence onto a place that had been, up until that point, completely unknown. Not only, but in living in such a reality one also becomes aware of a residual self that remains in the place left behind. (Verdicchio 2021, p. 86)

Migration and a new language acquisition is, in itself, a form of translation, if we remind the etymological meaning of the Latin word *translatio*, which is “carrying something from one place to another”. Verdicchio mentions Rilke’s theory of mirrors as “intervals in time,”

an apt description for the process of translation. The translator takes a step into a linguistic interval between languages in which we exist in suspension, neither in one nor the other; a mirror of expression and interpretation that defies fixity in its very ability to remain between sense, construction, syntax and meaning. (Verdicchio 2021, p. 86)

This existence in suspension could be seen as a metaphor for Verdicchio’s poetry: an existence-in-silence and of silence, which awaits the poetic act to be given a form of expression. It is this very form that manifests the silence and the formlessness from which it derives.

4. Conclusion

The poems included in *Only You* suggest an incessant “mental activity,” – in the sense implied by Khatchadourian – which brings the poet to meditate upon the essence of life by means of his pragmatic use of silence. Silence is partly recalled on the surface of language but is mostly referred to as both the content and the source of the poetic act. The foregrounding of silence is made cogent by the rhetorical device of negation since, as Jaworski states, the appropriate contrasts make silence visible. Verdicchio could be said to

deliberately violate at least two of the categories pertaining to Grice's "cooperative principle": Quantity – by means of the exiguous number of details the reader is provided with – and Manner, in that Verdicchio does not avoid either obscurity or ambiguity of expression. The reader is thus challenged into a stronger, cooperative hermeneutical act, in order to make out the message of the poem.

Verdicchio forces the limits of his locutionary acts to extend the boundaries of their illocutionary and perlocutionary scope: language and truth are not an indissoluble binomial, but language is given stronger impact by the silence it suggests. As a "cool medium", each poetic act is virtually a blank space to be filled in by the reader, helped by the meagre clues suggested by the poet. The correlatives of silence, which are frequently evoked in his verse, enforce the reach of his message: absence, limitlessness, formlessness. But the list could be enlarged to any extended metaphor of subtraction: absence of structure, of residence, of space or of time. What emerges is an idea of identity and reality which escapes boundaries and outlives any cultural and linguistic frame.

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