

Working Paper OP-6

Discourse of Silence in Alcanfor and “Te deix, amor, la mar com a penyora”

by

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March 5, 2004

Abstract

Contemporary Spanish literature abounds in narratives where silence has an important function. In the fiction of Cristina Fernández Cubas it has epistemological implications. Mercè Rodoreda and Maria Barbal employ a rhetoric of silence to call attention to the situation of women who are obliged to remain silent and suffer without protest. Carme Riera and Dulce Chacón utilize silences, and acts of breaking silence, to emphasize the lack of voice of marginal beings and to highlight sexual, socioeconomic and political inequalities. In the present paper, I focus on the role of silence in a novel by Barbal and a story by Riera.

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The Discourse of Silence in *Alcanfor* and “Te deix, amor, la mar com a penyora”

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Webster's New World Dictionary defines *silence* as “a refraining from speech or from making noise; absence of any sound or noise; a withholding of knowledge or omission of mention; failure to communicate, write, keep in touch.” One can keep silent or impose silence upon others; one can also break silence in various ways and with diverse objectives. Contemporary Spanish literature abounds in narratives where silence has an important function. In the fiction of Cristina Fernández Cubas it has epistemological implications. Mèrce Rodoreda and Maria Barbal employ a rhetoric of silence to call attention to the situation of women who are obliged to remain silent and suffer without protest. Olga Guirao resorts to narrative silence for technical reasons and uses allusions and omissions to, in her words, “hacer hablar al silencio” (Entrevista). Carme Riera and Dulce Chacón utilize silences, and acts of breaking silence, to emphasize the lack of voice of marginal beings and to highlight sexual, socioeconomic and political inequalities. The fiction of other women writers—and of authors such as Javier Marías, Ignacio Martínez de Pisón or Marcos Giralt Torrente—illustrates other possibilities. In the present paper, after some general observations about silence, I focus on its role in a novel by Barbal and a story by Riera.

Silence assumes many forms: blank spaces, suspension points, lacunae, understatements. The discourse of silence comprehends what is not said or not known; what is merely implied or intuited; what is indirect, imprecise, incomplete or elliptical. Granted, a principle of selection governs texts and all contain gaps or blanks, but in some texts the number of these is greater and they are more significant. Years ago Hemingway

spoke of the similarity between a well-written literary text and an iceberg: "If a writer of prose knows enough about what he is writing about he may omit things that he knows and the reader, if the writer is writing truly enough, will have a feeling of those things as strongly as though the writer had stated them. The dignity of movement of an ice-berg is due to only one-eighth of it being above water" (192). Although for Hemingway writers are presumably men, his analogy is suggestive. Between one-seventh and one-tenth of an iceberg emerges from the water; the remainder is submerged and invisible but nonetheless very real. I should like to resort to two additional analogies to illustrate the impact that silence can have, an impact that is not limited to literary works. Think, for example, of the music of John Cage and the painting of Robert Rauschenberg. Larry Solomon gave the title "The Sounds of Silence" to his essay on the composer, and Cage's most famous composition is his *4'33*." When it was first performed, or perhaps we should say "not performed," it provoked an uproar and the audience thought that Cage had gone entirely too far. The previous year, 1951, he had visited an anechoic chamber in order to hear silence but, to his surprise, he perceived two sounds, one caused by the circulation of his blood and the other by his nervous system. As a result he decided that silence defined as a total absence of sound does not exist (Solomon). Cage composed *4'33*" while at Black Mountain College, an educational center whose professors and students exerted considerable influence on American culture. One of Cage's colleagues at the College was Rauschenberg, whose *White Paintings* are conceptually similar to the composer's music and in fact inspired the "silent piece." The painter used the words "silence," "restriction," and "absence" to describe his monochromatic works and said that they were an experiment "to see how much you could pull away from an image and still

have an image” (Rauschenberg 45). So, without a rich gamut of colors, musical notes or words it is possible to communicate. Absence and silence can “speak” in painting, music and literature. What interests me here are the silences found in literary texts, what King-Kok Cheung calls “articulate silences,” and their expressive possibilities.

Silence on the levels of story and of discourse is fundamental in the novel *Càmfora* (1992) which received the Crítica Serra d’Or, Nacional de la Crítica and Nacional de Literatura Catalana prizes. Barbal employs what Janis Stout has termed “strategies of reticence.” Stout affirms that “just as reticence is a behavioral pattern shared by many women, so verbal reticence is a stylistic trait of many women writers,” and she characterizes the style of the writers she studies—Jane Austen, Willa Cather, Katherine Anne Porter and Joan Didion—as “one of understatement more than inflation, of tautness more than abundance” (20, 23). The use of silences, omissions, euphemisms and other forms of reticence stimulates the active participation of readers, who have to imagine and supply what the author has withheld.

Barbal has often developed the theme of the migration from country to city (she left her native Tremp at the age of fourteen in order to study in Barcelona), and she has commented that journeys are interesting literary material because of what they imply about transformation and reflection upon the past (Entrevista). *Càmfora o Alcanfor* (the Castilian translation of 1998) is the last part of a trilogy that explores migration in conjunction with the themes of solitude, the complexity of human relations, and the lack of communication.¹ The novel has been accurately described as “una xarxa de silencis y ocultacions” (“Corpus literari”). What immediately catches the eye is the amount of

blank space—white space--in *Càmfora*, an amount that is even greater in *Alcanfor* (and it is for this reason that I use the translation). The margins are so ample in the 1998 book that the printed letters cover less than half the page and resemble an island, or an iceberg, afloat on a sea of whiteness. Blank pages separate the four parts of the novel and blanks within the chapters separate one section from the next.

These typographical silences are complemented by structural ones. Transitions or connections between chapters are largely missing, and temporal or spatial gaps increase the sense of disjunction. Events are presented not in their entirety but in part, and it is only by studying effects that we are able to deduce their antecedent causes. In the first chapter the narrator alludes to “un viejo rencor” (12) and to a verbal barb that Leandre Raurill directs at his son-in-law, but Leandre’s words are not recounted. Nor are we told that later, during dinner, Leandre announces to his son Maurici and daughter-in-law Palmira that they are going to leave the village. All that is said is that “Después de la comida, cuando Leandre sale de casa, aún con la mesa puesta, el matrimonio joven habla. Todavía les domina la sorpresa” (12). This surprise and the fact that the second chapter begins with the three already settled in Barcelona allow us to fill in the textual hiatus. This is not an isolated case; there are many other moments when characters’ words and the narration of important moments of their lives are omitted. Some of the most significant examples have to do with Palmira. When she is about to give birth, she suggests to her father-in-law that he call Maurici. Eight pages later someone tells Maurici that there’s a phone call for him and several pages further on the narrator mentions in passing that Palmira is exhausted, “atendiendo a las mamadas de la criatura, a la casa, a la

¹ The other two novels are *Pedra de tartera* (1985) and *Mel i metzines* (1990).

comida y a la tienda” (104). Not a word about the actual birth or the emotions of the young mother. One chapter is titled “La conversación,” but instead of presenting a conversation the narrator provides a summary that incorporates only four bits of dialogue, and these are at cross-purposes:

Palmira aún no había dicho nada y Maurici, seguramente para romper su silencio, le preguntó lo primero que se le ocurrió al mirarla: “¿Pero qué tienes en el cuello?”. Ella no sabía a qué se refería y se palpó donde él decía, mientras pensaba cómo salir del paso.

“¿Y qué vamos a hacer?”. Llevaba la conversación de nuevo al principio, pero él calló. . . . Por fin, él le había dirigido una mirada interrogante. Y Palmira había vuelto a hablar. “A lo mejor tendríamos que ir al médico.” Maurici, señalándole el cuello, había respondido: “¿A que te mire eso?” (105)

There is no communication here. Palmira suggests a visit to the doctor so that he can examine Maurici, who thinks that the reason for the visit is so that the doctor can check Palmira’s neck—and we never learn what’s wrong with her neck.

Barbal habitually combines different types of text in her works. In *Alcanfor* we have a third-person account that incorporates letters and an item from a newspaper. The heterodiegetic, tight-lipped narrator, who withholds information instead of lavishing it, in general abstains from commenting or judging, from exploring the inner world of the

characters and analyzing thoughts or emotions. As a result of this linguistic economy and reserve, a large part of the novel is submerged and we must sharpen our eyes and ears to listen to the sounds of silence and glimpse what lies between the lines or is concealed in the blank spaces of the text. Characters speak but rarely. Almost everything is related indirectly, filtered through the voice of the narrator.

Currently there is much talk of “agency,” “empowerment,” of giving voice to women and allowing them to tell their own story. By coincidence, while I was writing this paper I was reading Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. In her preface to the novel, Mary Helen Washington recounts that at an MLA session on Afroamerican literature Hurston was criticized for having used at a decisive moment of the novel (the trial scene) an omniscient, third-person narrator and thus depriving Janie of the opportunity to speak (xi). Alice Walker, in defense of Hurston and of Janie, argued that “women’s silence can be intentional and useful” (xiii),² as is the silence that Barbal imposes in *Alcanfor*. In the world that Palmira inhabits, women are obliged to obey and to hold their tongues. The novel reflects this situation but instead of protesting and denouncing it loudly and passionately, Barbal chooses another option, that of employing strategies of reticence and leaving it to readers to formulate the protest and denunciation. As Stout observes with respect to Austen’s novels, “the intelligent reader’s active response can be more forcefully evoked by understatement and ellipsis than by full ‘telling’” (191).

Conxa, of *Pedra de tartera*, and Natàlia, of *La plaça del Diamant*, speak in the first person and are the protagonists of their respective novels. Palmira, in contrast, shares center stage with two other characters: Maurici and Leandre. The latter, the patriarch,

dominates his family, a fact underscored by the chapter title “Ordeno y mando.” He makes decisions that affect others’ lives but without consulting them. Contemptuous of his weak son, he tolerates Palmira because she works hard and speaks little, as a woman should. The two men end up returning to the village, and in Maurici’s case, the return is a figurative regression to the womb. He sleeps in the room that was his as a child, wraps his mother’s shawl around his shoulders, and adopts a fetal position. Palmira, however, grows in the city, which offers her the opportunity to undertake a second, metaphorical journey toward maturity and independence. At the novel’s end she sits down to answer the letters written to her by a man who loves her. Again we are not given direct access to her words, written in this instance, but the book’s final sentence suggests that if she is not happy, at least she enjoys a measure of contentment: “Y, antes de poner adiós, le escribió a Josep unas palabras sobre aquel otoño tan dulce de Barcelona” (289). We cannot help but remember the closing word of *La plaça del Diamant*: “Contents” (*Obres* 1:526).

It is well known that Rodoreda, in her life as in her work, was given to silences and secrets, and she chose as the epigraph for the first part of *Mirall trencat* the following words by Sterne: “I honour you, Eliza, for keeping secret some things” (*Obres* 3: 33). Another Catalan writer skilled in the art of silences and secrets is Carme Riera. Her skill is particularly evident in the story “Te deix, amor, la mar com a penyora,” awarded the Premio Recull in 1974.

Students of the short story emphasize its brevity, economy and absence of unnecessary explanations. Mary Louise Pratt writes that the novel narrates a life and the short story a fragment of a life (99). Chekhov asserts that “in short stories it is better to

² This is something Palmira understands: “la mejor manera de escabullirse era callar” (77).

say not enough than to say too much” (198), and Allan Pasco declares that “not only does every word carry a full weight of meaning, short stories also make frequent use of ellipsis” (125). Silence plays an especially important role in short narratives written as letters. It is logical to use a technique based on omission in an epistle addressed to an intimate friend, since both parties have shared certain experiences that a simple allusion can evoke.³ Silence also is important when authors wish to surprise, as in “Te deix.” According to Riera, surprise is one of the most important elements in literature, and she insists that while she does not try to deceive her readers, it is perfectly licit to not show them all her cards (Entrevista). In “Te deix” she keeps an ace up her sleeve until the very end of the narrative. It consists of a letter written by a young married woman in which she takes leave of her first love, her math teacher. In the last paragraph we learn that the addressee is not a man but another woman, Maria--a name that Riera has withheld. Riera here counts on her readers’ expectations and prejudices: a “normal” love story—and particularly so in 1974 in Spain—involves a girl and a boy; math teachers are men; and nice young ladies don’t write about lesbianism, a forbidden subject.

In her 1990 essay “What is not said: a study in textual inversion,” Diana Collecott recalls that Adrienne Rich had written fifteen years earlier that “Women’s love for women has been represented almost entirely through silence and lies” (237). The situation, Collecott argues, has not changed and “the male body dominates current discussion in gay studies, while the female body is doubly deleted: is deleted as a maternal body, and as both subject and object of lesbian desire” (238).⁴ Riera does speak of the female body (Maria’s) as subject and object of desire, but she leads us to believe,

³ See Guirao’s comments on her epistolary novel *Mi querido Sebastian* (314).

or permits us to believe, that it is a masculine body—we might speak here of a figurative transvestism. She resorts to linguistic silence, taking advantage of the possibilities for equivocation that Catalan offers. In a conversation with Geraldine Nichols, Riera pointed out the ambiguity of the pronoun “nosaltres” which “puede referirse a dos hombres, dos mujeres, o un hombre y una mujer, mientras que en castellano ‘nosotras’ es muy claro que son dos mujeres. . . . [A]l escribir ‘Te deix’ me di cuenta que podía jugar con la ambigüedad del ‘nosaltres’” (209-10). Similarly, adjectives that have a masculine and a feminine form describe not Maria but her body, her hands or her face: “el teu rostre em semblà més cansat, més trist, més vell” (29). Ambiguity is thus sustained. The first reading of a literary text is unique, unrepeatable. On rereading we perceive nuances that previously had escaped us, we appreciate more fully the richness of the language and the characterization. In the case of “Te deix” we notice details overlooked in the earlier reading. Once we know that the beloved is a woman, the blindfold imposed by prejudice falls from our eyes and we see the clues that Riera has given us, such as the descriptions of the body of the beloved as “de seda, tèbia, dolça” and of hands with “dits llargs, pell blanca, ungles polides” (20, 21).⁵

In addition to linguistic silences, there are silences that result from the invisibility of certain texts. On several occasions the narrator speaks of letters, those she wrote and carefully hid during the summer she spent away from Palma, those she and Maria wrote to one another while she studied in Barcelona, the lengthy epistle she spent an entire night writing, only to tear it into pieces at daybreak. We do not see any of these epistles.

⁴ The maternal body is the center of attention in *Temps d'una espera*, the diary that Riera wrote during her 1987 pregnancy.

⁵ When Riera prepared a Castilian version of the story she changed “ungles polides” to “uñas cuidadosamente arregladas” (“Te entrego” 11). Perhaps the Catalan adjective struck her as too revealing.

As for the letter we do see, the letter that constitutes “Te deix,” we do not know if it will reach its destination and be read by Maria. The narrator has asked her husband to send it, but he may not do so. These invisible letters, mailed, hidden away or torn up, form a “shadow text,” a phrase that Stout applies to the subterranean text of Austen’s works (50). We do not have access to Maria’s letters—unless we interpret “Jo pos per testimoni les gavines” as being her work. She, her letters, and her name have been silenced and thus we do not hear “the other side of the story” (a phrase I borrow from Molly Hite). Brad Epps in his study of “Te deix” interprets the letters’ invisibility, their virtuality, as a metaphor of lesbian love. He affirms that “Lesbianism, in Hispanic letters, does indeed seem all but lost: ghostwritten, as it were, in invisible ink” (317). I agree—and I propose a complementary interpretation that foregrounds problems of reading.

As professor, scholar, and author Riera devotes herself to reading and writing, and these two activities constitute the core of her book *Contra l’amor en companyia i altres relats* (1991). She has repeatedly shown how difficult it is to read and how easy it is to err. A few examples will suffice. In the story “Estimat Thomas” Riera again keeps an ace up her sleeve until the end of the game, and she plays with readers’ expectations so as to make them think that the letters the young Montse writes are addressed to a lover. In “Princesa meva, lletra d’àngel” it is the internal reader who goes astray and thinks that the letters he receives are personal missives. The idea that they form part of a publicity campaign and are computer-generated is inconceivable to him. A peasant, of little education, he lacks competence as a reader, but so too does the pedantic and pompous critic of “Uns textos inèdits i eròtics de Victoria Rossetta.” In the case of “Te deix” the entire story is based on a misunderstanding, “un engaño a los ojos”—let us remember

that Riera's knowledge of Baroque literature is extensive—and it offers multiple instances of mistaken reading. Two passages in particular demonstrate graphically that words can be understood or interpreted in more than one way and that texts are slippery.

Near the end of the story the narrator recalls that at a professional meeting of mathematicians her beloved made the acquaintance of a learned and wealthy candidate for the Nobel prize who propositioned the beloved:

Un bon dia es presentà a ciutat amb la intenció d'endur-se-te'n amb ell, volia que l'ajudessis a investigar a la seva càtedra dels Estats Units. T'oferia tots els doblers que li demanessis a més de la seva desinteressada protecció. A ciutat no es parlava d'altra cosa, car el savi confessà els seus propòsits als periodistes. La gent comentava que feies un desbarat deixant perdre una ocasió tan bona. (35)

On encountering this passage, situated before the final paragraph which discloses the name of the beloved, it is probable that most readers still believe that the beloved is masculine and the “proposicions deshonestes” (35) have been made by one man to another. The residents of Palma, on the other hand, know that the two individuals involved are a man and an unmarried woman who is being offered “una ocasió tan bona.” An earlier passage concerns the moment when the narrator's father learns of her relationship with one of her teachers and storms that “Aquest és el camí de la depravació” (23). Here there is another “equivoco”: the father knows that the teacher is a woman while readers think he is a man. (The two passages also illustrate how problematic are concepts such as “deshonestedat” and “depravació.”) “Te deix, amor, la mar com a penyora” dramatizes how difficult it is to read, understand and interpret a text, however

competent or incompetent its readers may be. Silences are basic to this dramatization and the misunderstandings that sustain it.