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Saying And Silence

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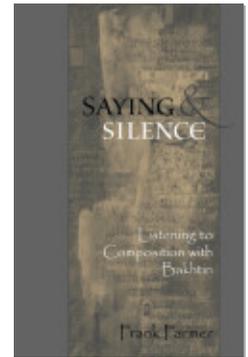
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INTRODUCTION

One development in recent scholarship centers upon what is often referred to as a rhetoric of silence. Not that we have just discovered such a rhetoric, for it is clear from even a cursory look at Richard Lanham's *Handlist of Rhetorical Terms* that our predecessors long ago established a whole family of words to describe the power that silence could effect in situations that were clearly rhetorical. Indeed, within this family of ancient terms, we find not only the obvious, *silence*, used in a rather specialized way, but also the far less familiar *obticentia*, *praecisio*, *reticentia*, *interpellatio*—all of which fall under the umbrella term, *aposiopesis*, a rhetorical figure that attempts to capture the persuasive effects of sudden silence. Classical rhetoricians apparently understood the strategic and dramatic purposes for which a refusal either to speak or to cease speaking might be appropriate, as evidenced in their constellation of terms for this one particular genre of silence.

But contemporary investigations of a rhetoric of silence have been largely (though by no means exclusively) tied to the project of recovering women's contributions to the history of rhetoric and rhetorical theory. This ought not to be especially surprising, given the status of women's discourse throughout much of Western history and women's long familiarity with silence as an ascribed quality of patriarchally-defined femininity. But of late, some feminist scholars have sought to reveal the communicative realities of silence, detailing, in particular, the ways silence has been creatively deployed by women rhetors and rhetoricians through the ages.

Cheryl Glenn's investigation of Anne Askew makes exactly this point. Tortured for her radical beliefs, the sixteenth-century Protestant reformist Askew developed a host of ways *not* to answer her brutal and cruel inquisitors. In *Rhetoric Retold*, Glenn argues that

Askew occupied a familiar position in a longstanding tradition of women's rhetorical silence, a lineage that continues today in such contemporary figures as former Texas governor Ann Richards and law professors Anita Hill and Lani Guinier, as well as former Surgeon General Jocelyn Elders—all of whom, Glenn points out, are quite accomplished in exercising silence as “a strategy of resistance” (177). Glenn wants to dispute the conventional reading of women's silence as always (and necessarily) the consequence of oppression, as strictly the muting of voices unheard. “Silence,” Glenn insists, “is more than the negative of not being permitted to speak, of being afraid to speak; it can be a deliberative, positive choice” (176). Largely because “silencing and silence” are “rhetorical sites most often associated with women” (177), we have only begun to understand the historical and potential importance of silence as a rhetorical strategy.

As Glenn knows well, there is a profound difference between silence enforced and silence freely chosen. Yet, what's implied in her study (and others) is the possibility of a relationship that may obtain between these two modes of silence. Indeed, the history of women in rhetoric itself would suggest that *some* relationship must exist between enforced and chosen silences, for surely that special history is characterized again and again by this very tension. And, in fact, other feminist rhetorical studies do much to confirm this relationship. Julie Bokser's examination of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, the seventeenth-century Spanish nun and poet, for example, points the way to understanding something of the intricacies of that relationship.

In her reading of Sor Juana's autobiographical letter, *La Respuesta* (*The Answer*), Bokser details the context that prompted an exchange between Sor Juana and the bishop of Puebla, “Sor Filotea,” a feminine pseudonym for Manuel Fernández de Santa Cruz y Sahagún. In the verbal guise of a fellow nun, Sor Filotea chastises Sor Juana for her “secular studies and her writing” (2) and urges her to desist from any further critiques of the church hierarchy. As Bokser notes, the bishop essentially tells her to silence herself. Sor Juana's epistolary reply, *La Respuesta*, is (not surprisingly) a text that is regarded as “her most explicitly feminist and polemical” (2). For in her letter, she takes up the issues of who may speak to whom, who may interrupt

whom, who may choose not to respond to whom. By electing to answer the bishop, she has not only interrupted his discourse; she has interrupted the silence that he demands her to assume. In *La Respuesta* she tells the bishop that, not quite knowing how to respond, she has

nearly resolved to leave the matter in silence; yet although silence explains much by the emphasis of leaving all unexplained, because it is a negative thing, one must name the silence, so that what it signifies may be understood. Failing that, silence will say nothing, for that is its proper function: to say nothing. . . . [O]f those things that cannot be spoken, it must be said that they cannot be spoken, so that it may be known that silence is kept not for lack of things to say, but because the many things there are to say cannot be contained in mere words. (41, 43)

In her gloss on these passages, Bokser observes that not only is Sor Juana making a general claim that all silences must be named if they are to have meaning, but Sor Juana is making this claim for herself, that is, for her own biographical silences. As Bokser points out, Sor Juana “interrupts the bishop in order to explain her past reticence and to announce her impending silence so that she herself will be listened to—by those who know how to hear” (5). And, indeed, Sor Juana writes very little after *La Respuesta*, a fact that does nothing to exempt her from charges of heresy leveled by an ecclesiastical tribunal two years later and for which transgressions she makes both public confession and a renewal of vows.

Like Sor Juana, the Russian language philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin understood all too well that the relationship between saying and silence is hardly one of uncomplicated opposition. Bakhtin realized that utterances were not confined to words, that gestures, sighs, yawns, exclamations, laughter—all such forms of wordless utterance were rich in their ability to answer and address others, to communicate meaning. Further, as if to emphasize this point, Bakhtin reminds us that “to a certain degree, one can speak by means of intonations alone.” There are times, Bakhtin observes, when the uttered word itself has no semantic function whatsoever, except perhaps to serve as “a material bearer for some necessary intonation” (SG 166).

Though he did not pursue to any great degree the rhetorical possibilities of silence, he nonetheless understood that silences could speak, that silences could readily assume the position of utterances within what he refers to as the “chain of speech communion” (SG 84). Thus, the relationship between silence and the word, Bakhtin points out, is a qualitatively different relationship from that of the “mechanical and physiological” relationship occurring between quietude and sound. Because of their meaningful relationship, silence and word *together* constitute, for Bakhtin, a “special logosphere, a unified and continuous structure” of significance (SG 134). Bakhtin’s further claim that “active responsive understanding” can simultaneously be a “*silent* responsive understanding” of action postponed only reinforces his viewpoint (however undeveloped) that certain silences can assume the function and status of the utterance (SG 68–69).

For Bakhtin, then, silence and words do not exist apart from one another, nor do the significances that we ascribe to each. That words can disturb silence in “personalistic and intelligible” ways, as Bakhtin claims must imply as well, that silence can disturb words in ways that are likewise meaningful (SG 133). Understood in this way, Sor Juana’s *La Respuesta* is indisputably an eloquent, forceful rejoinder to the bishop’s ecclesiastical cajoling. But it is her announced silence that may have proved in the end to be the more powerful utterance.

In what follows I offer a sampling of explorations into the relationship between the meaningful word and the meaningful pause, between the said and the unsaid, especially as this relationship emerges in our classrooms, our disciplinary conversations, our encounters with publics beyond the academy. Each of the chapters included here addresses some aspect of how it is that we and our students, colleagues, and critics have our say, speak our piece, often under conditions where silence is the institutionally sanctioned and preferred alternative. For my purposes, I have enlisted the potential of a number of Bakhtinian ideas to help in the project of interpreting the silences we hear, of naming the silences we do not hear, and of encouraging all silences to speak in ways that are freely chosen, not enforced.

Chapter one, then, examines the possible muting effects of certain widespread conclusions arrived at in the theoretical milieu of the past

decade. Attempting to situate Bakhtin within the so-called theory wars that drove so much intellectual discussion in recent years, I draw extensively on one of Bakhtin's very early philosophical texts and later bring to the fore his concept of the superaddressee. I argue that Bakhtin offers us a third way out of the usual "closed loop" arguments that accompany debates about foundations by showing how theory itself is a function of the situated utterance, how every utterance is thoroughly steeped in normative evaluations, and therefore how dialogue is irretrievably joined to some conception of truth, however qualified that conception may be. Reviewing debates about foundationalism in composition (e.g., Bizzell, Smit, and most recently, Bernard-Donals), I try to show how the problem of *speaking truly* is never too far removed from what we ask of our students or what they ask of themselves—whether we realize this or not. In a time of regnant antifoundationalism, I argue, Bakhtin's commonsense observation that "every utterance makes a claim to justice, sincerity, beauty, and truthfulness" seems hopelessly passé, but this hardly means that our students are well served by dismissing such aspirations as nonsense (SG 123). For this reason, I conclude by showing that often, as writing teachers, we are the most readily available sounding boards for the many students who do embrace such ideals, and thus we often function in the role of superaddressees for our students. By the same token, however, we may discover ourselves to be the cause for students needing to find a superaddressee beyond ourselves and our classrooms.

The second chapter provides a concrete illustration of some of the issues raised in chapter one, especially those that address the silencing power of teacher authority. This chapter examines the difficulties faced by one student, Devlyn, who perceives his social and political views to be at odds with the views of his teacher (and a majority of his classmates). I begin by noting the tradition of "Aesopianism" among Russian artists and intellectuals, a manner of writing that has roots in the nineteenth century. As I explain, Aesopianism refers to a genre of camouflaged, oblique, deflective writing that seeks to say something, but only in an indirect, often coded manner (since doing otherwise could be extremely hazardous to a speaker or writer, especially during the Stalinist purges). Though I hardly mean to suggest any equivalence

between the experience of my student writer and that of Russian thinkers writing under the most dire conditions, I do suggest an analogy. The problem for my student, Devlyn, was to find a way to express his views without tempting the institutional sanctions and penalties that may have befallen to him for doing so. Devlyn chose not to be silenced, but found ways to say what he needed to within circumstances that might not have been very congenial to his views. Drawing extensively upon one of his papers, I attempt to describe how he manages the rhetorical problem he faces and how his predicament complicates the too facile, naive, and supposedly unproblematic value of clarity in writing. The chapter ends with Devlyn's written response to my interpretation of his paper.

Chapter three begins by observing that there are alternative Bakhtinian frames within which we might understand Devlyn's struggles. Not only can we see them as illustrations of Aesopian strategies, but we can also understand them as evidence of Devlyn's process of transforming the "authoritative discourse" of Paulo Freire into his own "internally persuasive discourse." Along these lines, it becomes further possible to see Devlyn as [some]one who—already possessing a distinct voice—must [now] come to terms with the challenge that a new voice poses, a voice that is unfamiliar, difficult, and vexing, to say the least. To see Devlyn's struggles this way, however, demands that we come to understand voice in a specifically dialogic context. This chapter, therefore, explores a social, dialogic understanding of one of composition's venerable concerns—the problem of voice—by examining how Bakhtin and his contemporary, Lev Vygotsky, enable us to think about voice dialogically in three distinct but related aspects: developmental, rhetorical, and historical. After elaborating their respective ideas in each of these three senses, I conclude with a full discussion of how their ideas might be applied to the writing classroom, and, revising a caveat expressed long ago by Richard Lanham, I suggest that exhorting students to discover their one true voice may well result in nothing more than a confused and helpless silence.

Another of composition's long-standing practices is highlighted in chapter four. In the same way that Bakhtin's ideas enable us to understand voice differently, his conceptions of dialogue, I contend, enable

us to reveal imitation as something more than “servile copying” or “mindless aping.” Noting that several of Bakhtin’s explicators in our discipline—Charles Schuster, Jon Klancher, Mary Minock, and others—have hinted at the possibility of revived forms of imitation from a Bakhtinian perspective, I examine closely what Bakhtin said about imitation in his various works. I then attempt to show how dialogic approaches to imitation differ from our received understandings, outlining the distinguishing characteristics of what I call a dialogic imitation. What I suggest is that any dialogic understanding of imitation requires the student to take a position toward the modeled utterance, to be open to revising that position, and to come to understand the contingent, situational, rhetorical features of staking a position toward another’s word, no matter how much that position might later be altered. To practice imitation otherwise is to practice the worst form of silencing.

Chapter five attempts to draw attention to how composition studies is constructed in public discourse and what we might say in response to how we are represented in popular media. Bakhtin’s apparent belief that the gaze of the outsider is always kindly, beneficent, gift-bestowing, I argue, does not quite square with my experience that composition’s outsiders seldom look upon our practices with a generous or neighborly point of view. After detailing three such perspectives, I note a second problem with Bakhtin’s concept. In relying on the spatial metaphor of the “outside,” Bakhtin has (perhaps unwittingly) formulated a potentially anti-dialogic concept, since dialogue, and hence meaning, require a temporal dimension as well. To make this latter point, I draw extensively on the work of C. S. Peirce as a way to restore the temporal to Bakhtin’s idea of the outside. From there, I attempt to show why spatial metaphors, which govern so much of academic discourse, work against our ability to answer public criticism in any manner that could be regarded as truly dialogic. But, I conclude, our forays into the public sphere, if they are to be truly dialogic, must be not only responsive but also transformative, having the power to critically interrupt discussions about us and likewise the power to begin new lines of conversation. As I note, this will require a commitment to a better public sphere than the one we have now.

The final chapter explores the relationship between dialogue and critique as hinted at in the previous chapter. Arguing that dialogue needs critique as much as critique needs dialogue, I look at two key Bakhtinian concepts, anacrisis and the superaddressee, to show how these ideas accommodate elements of both dialogue and critique—the former, because it refers to the word that is capable of breaking silence and thereby of revealing the conventionality of the truths we embrace; the latter, because such a figure shows how the hopes we entertain of altered social conditions can be discovered within the most ordinary words we utter to one another. I elaborate the importance of both concepts in the context of student responses to a writing assignment involving a cultural studies approach to thematic materials. By closing with yet another examination of the critical and rhetorical significance of Bakhtin’s superaddressee, I come full circle, returning to the focus of chapter one.

Here, then, is a sampling of attempts to identify how our many silences can be named and understood, whether those silences and their meanings happen to be about foundations or teacher authority; about whether voice *can* be taught and whether imitation *should* be; about public representations of writing teachers and writing students; about spatial metaphors and timely words; about cultural critique, its relationship to dialogue, and the relationship of both to social hope.

Indeed, if there is a single, guiding assumption that underlies these essays, it is that, within the dialogues we commence with our students, our publics, and ourselves, there is ample warrant for hope—hope that, through the words we share, the world we likewise share can be revised to include more voices, can be reimagined as a meeting place where, in Terry Eagleton’s phrase, “people feel less helpless, fearful, and bereft of meaning” (184). It is my hope that these essays contribute to that end.