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RESEARCH ARTICLE

**THE ELOQUENT VOID: WORDSWORTH’S POETICS OF SILENT
COMMUNICATION**

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Abstract

Although silence constitutes a recognizable phenomenon, scholarly traditions have typically conceptualized it as mere absence, a deficit of communication rather than examining its multifaceted communicative potential. An investigation into silence’s varied manifestations within William Wordsworth’s poetry illuminates the complex dimensions of its rhetorical capacity. The intricate and frequently ambiguous interrelationship between vocal expression and silence reveals how literary works give voice to previously unnarrated experiences.

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Introduction:

Auditory stimulation permeates our conscious existence so thoroughly that even during intervals of apparent stillness—within remote forests, for instance—the acoustic environment remains populated with minute sounds from insects, avian calls, or atmospheric movement. This constant presence of sound frequently overshadows the importance of its counterpart phenomenon: silence. Yet silence deserves sustained investigation.

Researchers including Jensen (1973) and Johannesen (1974) call for enhanced scholarly attention to silence as a rhetorical phenomenon, while Johnstone (1978, p. 58) proposes that silence functions rhetorically. Ehrenhaus(1988) addresses this research agenda by examining silence’s communicative operations within the Vietnam Veterans Memorial context. The constructive function of silence in textual materials, however, remains insufficiently examined.

Further research has extended these insights significantly. Tannen and Saville-Troike’s (1985) foundational collection solidified silence studies by “reversing polarities and treating silence as a figure to be examined against talk, thereby “emphasizing its complex nature as a cultural phenomenon” (p. xi). Saville-Troike (1985) advocated for the centrality of silence in formulating a comprehensive theory of communication, positioning silence not merely as speech’s absence but as a constitutive element of communicative meaning.

More recently, Glenn(2004) demonstrates that silence operates as a rhetorical device that can alter not only social relationships but also reinforce or challenge systemically embedded social hierarchies. Strategically deployed

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silence, unlike traditional communicative techniques, challenges Western culture's equation of speech with authority and its misconstrual of silence as passive acquiescence.

This investigation seeks to illuminate silence's significance within textual material, specifically examining William Wordsworth's poetic representations of silence. Alternatively, we might inquire: How do readers encounter silence when engaging with Wordsworth's poetry? Such questioning warrants rhetorical consideration, particularly if demonstrating a poem's operation, "to what ends, intended or unintended, and by what means it operates on the readers, the audience—how it manages to realize such potential as it exhibits and what the quality of that potential is" belongs to "the province of rhetoric"(Bryant, 1978, p. 106). The study that follows, as an effort to establish connections between rhetoric and poetics, corresponds with Cicero's (1985) contention that literature and oratory share bonds illustrating how "all branches of culture are closely related and linked together with one another"(p. 148).

This analysis examines four dimensions of silence. The initial section summarizes negative silence, experienced as lacking positive value. This exploration of negative silence leads toward comprehending primordial silence, the phenomenon from which utterance originates. Treating primordial silence as an element in utterance's ontogenesis directs investigation toward silence as a mode of being. Finally, attention turns toward silence as terminus, particularly regarding its significance for Wordsworth's poetic ambitions.

Two potential contributions justify pursuing this phenomenological investigation. First, this analysis should yield more comprehensive understanding of silence as a communicative phenomenon. Second, the inquiry should deepen comprehension of Wordsworth's poetry. This understanding would emerge from systematic articulation of Wordsworth's encounters with silence and from recognizing silence's importance for Wordsworth's project of articulating the unspoken.

Wordsworth's silence characterizations display inconsistency. The apparent contradictions within how he structures silence reflect the truism that experiential phenomena do not consistently adhere to logical coherence. For instance, silence appears as something that "Surpasses sweetest music"("Lines Suggested by a Portrait from the Pencil of F. Stone," line 10), yet emerges as activity's lull "if music be not there"(1850 Prelude, VI.669). This essay attempts no resolution of such inconsistencies, instead adopting Wittgenstein's prescription of perspectival variety as philosophical astigmatism's antidote (Wittgenstein, 1958, §593).

Negative Silence:

Initially, silence may appear worthless, constituting an impediment to successful communication. It frequently receives treatment as an obstacle requiring surmounting, hence new acquaintances' desire to sustain conversation regardless of cost (McLaughlin & Cody, 1982). The imperative to continue speaking induces utterance of any comment, often disregarding relevance or significance. Party guests may experience discomfort when the crowd momentarily quiets without apparent reason.

The expression 'dead silence' suggests productive activity's cessation. Characterizing silence as 'dead' positions it opposite to all constructive activity. In Wordsworth's (1936/1984) poem "Michael," the title character's silence (lines 447-482) parallels his inactivity when failing to construct a sheep-fold. The shepherd's silence accomplishes nothing; he passively attends to wind (line 457) after his hopes for his son's success and return dissolve. Wordsworth also references a "dead pause"(1850 Prelude, X.109) following Robespierre's open challenge to receive criminal charges. However, dead silence remains valueless only if death itself lacks value. Setting aside Christian perspectives on death as reward and gateway to greater blessings, we will revisit the issue of silence and death when discussing deathly silence as a mode of being.

Silence frequently manifests as emptiness or cessation. Wordsworth (1936/1984) mentions the "pause of silence" following narrative ("The Excursion," IV.8) and connects "silence and empty space"("Address to a Child," line 17). Silence as inactivity and unproductivity emerges in the poet's reference to his own "barren silence," part of a lifestyle from which he nonetheless derives "great gains"("Personal Talk," lines 10, 44). Silence's negative aspect becomes evident when someone calls for a companion and receives no response. In this instance, silence indicates familiar life's absence, so silence's habitation becomes similar to dwelling with "Wild beasts, or uncouth savages impure"("Artegal and Elidure," lines 27-28). Such silent absence terrifies Betty in "The Idiot Boy" when she cannot hear Johnny's burring or his pony's gallop (lines 282-283).

Negative silence also manifests as muteness, withholding sound or inability to vocalize. Wordsworth's haunted tree spitefully refuses producing any leaf sound ("Haunted Tree," lines 32-33), perhaps personifying silence's resilience against poetic attempts to comprehend nature. Muteness, however, remains 'un-speakable'. Whatever is mute cannot articulate, so muteness opposes sound. Silence, however, does not equal muteness. It might be possible to conceive silence as complementary to, rather than the opposite of, speaking. Silence and utterance sometimes receive treatment as mutually exclusive (Cappella, 1979; Lustig, 1980). Silence could also be understood not as refusal to speak, but as intimately connected with utterance (Froman, 1982, p. 136).

While Wordsworth occasionally encounters silence as absence or nothingness, characterizing silence negatively captures only part of its experiential emergence. Silence and speech remain dialectically intertwined (Froman, 1982, p. 29), and the difficulty of articulating the silent frustrates—without preventing—poetic expression. The poet's words constitute his legacy, so he cannot remain silent. Wordsworth rejects the suggestion that Harmony must remain silence's "destined bond-slave," responding:

"No! though earth be dust / And vanish, though the heavens dissolve, her stay / Is in the WORD, that shall not pass away ("Power of Sound," lines 222-224). Articulated sound, here the trumpet's blast (lines 213-216), opens graves, thereby exhuming dead silence and bringing it into the sayable realm. Wordsworth's (1936/1984) capitalization of 'Silence' in this poem and in "Musings Near Aquapendente" (line 196), "Descriptive Sketches" (line 88), "Intimations of Immortality" (line 159), and "Wanderer that..." (line 3), also indicates that silence is not a mere thing to be ignored, but a potency the poet must address. Silence adds power dimensions to natural events. For example, silence lends Evening power, while Evening derives splendor from darkness ("Vernal Ode," line 38).

Wordsworth affirms that poetic utterance does not serve silence. For poems to reach the page, silence must be utilized but not destroyed. Wordsworth (1936/1984) describes silence as "mother of sound" ("The Germans," line 5). The maternal metaphor portrays the delicate relationship utterance maintains with silence. The articulated word, like a developing child, must achieve independent standing while maintaining appreciation of its origin. The next section examines the extent to which silence can be treated as 'origin-al'.

Primordial Silence:

The notion of silence as sound's mother warrants further investigation. The metaphor suggests that silence is ontologically, but not necessarily causally, prior to utterance. The mother does not cause her child, but her existence constitutes a necessary condition for its birth. Similarly, silence cannot generate sound. Silence is causally prior to speech when silence becomes so unbearable that speech—any speech—becomes welcome. This unbearable silence phenomenon becomes noticeable when someone claims, "The silence is deafening," or "The silence is oppressive." In this condition, silence retains negative value; speech must overcome quietness. Silence as sound's mother, however, suggests that sound somehow arises from pre-existing silence.

We speak of 'pregnant pauses', as silence often appears as a "fecund negative" inviting speech (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, p. 263). Utterance occurs within silence (Ihde, 1976, p. 186; White, 1978, p. 68). Heidegger considers silence ontologically prior to utterance and warns that speech cannot be fully understood unless conjoined with silence (Heidegger, 1962, p. 208; White, 1978, p. 43). The poet assumes the task of formulating linguistic understanding of extralinguistic realities. Poetry represents transferring consciously perceived objects (e.g., a yew-tree) into sensible verbal sequences (the poem "Yew-Trees"). Wordsworth (1936/1984) claims, "A Voice to Light gave Being," but he entertains the possibility that "Man's noisy years" might be "No more than moments" in silence's life ("Power of Sound," lines 209, 217-218).

Silence carries a wide array of cultural and contextual meanings, making it a valuable topic for communication research (Müller, Tavares, & Simão, 2024). Contemporary phenomenological approaches to literature have expanded this understanding. Recent scholarship exploring ecological themes among Romantic poets such as Wordsworth engages with the challenges of rendering the tangible but often ephemeral physical environment into verbal form. From an ecocritical perspective, breaking silence requires moving beyond traditional metaphoric representations toward more embodied engagements with physically experienced environmental conditions (Boyson, 2022).

In the beginning was the Word, but before and between words lies silence. Silence comprises the ontological background from which utterance emerges (Harries, 1979, p. 88). Herein lies one positive aspect of silence, since "originary and fundamental silence is not the contrary of language. Rather than being that which thwarts language,

silence is that which opens the way for language's potency" (Dauenhauer, 1980, p. 119). Ihde (1976) summarizes silence's primordiality: "[T]he beginning of man is in the midst of word, but word lies in the midst of silence" (p. 186). Although Wordsworth casts his lot for earth's "stay" with the Word, he rejects silence as it might make utterance lose importance. In this sense, Wordsworth wants his inscription poems to be "free-standing" poems able to articulate 'origin-al' silence (Hartman, 1970a, p. 208).

Primordial silence indications appear frequently in Wordsworth's (1936/1984) poetry. The "timely utterance" in "Intimations of Immortality" (line 23) occurs after two stanzas containing entirely visual imagery. The utterance interrupts visualization and inaugurates a stanza overflowing with sounds: cataracts blowing, Echoes in mountains, and a plea for the Shepherd-boy to shout. The timely utterance enacts 'breaking silence'. The expression that speech 'breaks silence' treats silence as a phenomenon existing before verbalization, and the timely utterance ruptures primordial silence. If "Our noisy years" are "moments in the being / Of the eternal Silence" ("Intimations," lines 158-159), then utterance is superimposed on silence. Human speech breaks silence ("The Excursion," II.383, VI.1069, VII.299), and the cuckoo's call breaks half-consciousness's silence ("Cuckoo and Nightingale," line 90).

Wordsworth employs other images illustrating silence's primordial nature. Silence appears as "deathlike fetters," reinforcing the silence-death connection ("Descriptive Sketches," line 56). Utterance breaks fetters, as if spoken words reverse a state in which people find themselves. Silence binds with chains "loosened only by the sound / Of holy rites chanted in measured round" ("Descriptive Sketches," lines 57-58). Music bursts from silence's arms ("Ecclesiastical Sonnets," 3.44.9), and this sudden emergence carries generative connotations of silence as sound's mother. Wordsworth's imagery maintains the sense of sound emanating from or superimposed on silence. Silence "yields reluctantly" even to sounds not made as intentional responses to quietness ("Hermit's Cell," II.3).

The phrase 'keeping silence' renders silence as a natural state that can be reclaimed during reticence. One who keeps silent prizes such quietness ("The Excursion," VI.105). The notion of keeping silence recalls 'keeping faith' or maintaining traditions. When people keep silent, they maintain the silence in which they dwelled before speaking. The existential state of being 'in silence' has no corresponding grammatical form of speech (one cannot be 'in speech', but only performing speech), which reveals a sense of situatedness in silence. Activities such as musing or reading can occur in silence ("The Excursion," II.371), so silence is experienced as a way of being that contextualizes activities. The question remains, however, how the 'origin-al' silent context of utterance makes the transition from foundational phenomenon to mode of action.

Dwelling in Silence:

Experiences associated with silence reveal silence's inherent tension. Each silence mode discussed in this section addresses common experiences, such as death, attentiveness, and emotional depth. Despite these phenomena's recurring nature, they retain otherworldliness, as if dwelling within these conditions might somehow draw us away from familiar life. For example, death and mortality define the human condition; death accompanies life, yet the dead body horrifies.

Ambivalence pervades confrontations with silence. When the Idiot Boy becomes silent, it encourages Betty, because it signifies dedication to his task ("Idiot Boy," lines 92-93). Silence, however, is foreign to Johnny, and silence puts Betty in a sadder quandary when she cannot hear her son's incessant burring (lines 282-283). Betty's greatest fear is that Johnny "never will be heard of more" (line 216), since silence retains close association with separation, especially death. Similarly, people attest to utter unfamiliarity with someone else by claiming 'never to have heard of that person'. On the other hand, silence remains inescapable, infiltrating utterance in quietness preceding speech and in 'pregnant pauses' lending utterances expressiveness. The absence of pauses between words makes the Leech-gatherer's speech unintelligible ("Resolution and Independence," lines 107-108), so silence can render the strange understandable. In this instance, silence would be welcomed.

Silence and Death:

The expression 'deathly silence' conveys understanding of silence as akin to non-existence. In many religious faiths, however, death signifies departure from one world and entrance into another. Death, like silence, does not simply erase meaningful activity or significance. Silence and death kinship reappears in the phrase 'grave silence'. Trees can be "silent as the graves beneath them" (*The Borderers*, line 576), and everyone is familiar with "the perpetual silence of the grave" ("Chiabera," II.18). The dual sense of 'grave' as burial ground and as seriousness or profundity

evokes a sense of 'grave silence' as departure from ordinary experience (speech, mobility, etc.) toward more contemplative or meaningful experiential modes.

Juxtaposing silence with death imagery makes further silence connotations less surprising. Death and depth share phonetic similarities, and grave-digging depth lends additional senses to 'deep silence' as expression of the death imagery lurking in 'grave silence'. Nature's reclamation of Wordsworth's Lucy gives her "the silence and the calm / Of mute insensate things" and leaves "This heath, this calm, and quiet scene" ("Three years she grew in sun and shower....," lines 17-18, 40).

Wordsworth preserves silence and death kinship in his depiction of silence accompanying repose. The prone positions of a poet musing silently while lying on a couch ("I wandered lonely....," lines 19-20), ghostly Shapes (Wordsworth's capitalization) in "mute repose" listening to nature sounds ("Yew-Trees," lines 31-33), or a poet lying on grass listening to a cuckoo ("To the Cuckoo," lines 5, 25-28) mirror corpse posture. Not only are the positions similar, but reclining subjects' passivity subjugates the individual to surrounding sounds. This inactivity recalls Lucy's subjection after death to "earth's diurnal course," her inability to resist natural processes resulting from her insertion into earth's depths ("A slumber did my spirit seal....," line 7).

Silence and Depth:

The death-depth connection points toward more profound understanding that becomes accessible during silence. Powerful emotions often render people speechless. When the poetic character Leonard learns of his brother's death, shock deprives him of speech ("The Brothers," line 408). Silence can seem "deeper far than that of deepest noon" ("The Waggoner," l.6), and silent prayer in religious ceremonies represents the moment of closest communion with divine power (van der Leeuw, 1967, pp. 423-433). Prayer "mid silence deep, with faith sincere" brings worshippers closer to the Holy One ("Thanksgiving Ode," line 231). Vows made in silence seem to bind participants more firmly than public oaths, recalling silence's more frustrated tone as chains broken by utterance. Silence can also consecrate activity, as suffering borne silently elevates agony to heroism or martyrdom (1850 Prelude, l.205). The Christmas carol "Silent Night" begins "Silent night, holy night," noting that hushed conditions signify and facilitate appreciation of religious power.

Silence's association with death helps explain why silence and water intermingle in Wordsworth's poetry. The adage 'Still waters run deep' highlights the connection between depth and lack of apparent activity. Deep water stillness can mystify and terrify, as its opacity obscures contents. Deep water inhabitants are "monsters of the Deep" which "there in ghastly silence sleep" ("To Enterprise," lines 74, 76).

Quietness's ambivalence is perhaps most pronounced in silence's linkage with water. Water represents foreign realm where humanity never feels entirely comfortable. Nonetheless, deep waters may conceal great rewards. This hope is nurtured by recurrent tales of rich treasures lying in sunken ship hulls. Wordsworth's mariners, like Leonard in "The Brothers," live dangerously, braving unpredictable seas. Waters "sleep in silence and obscurity" ("A Complaint," line 16), so silence's depth and water's depth are difficult to penetrate (1850 Prelude, IV.256-275). Deep waters also provide resting-places for tumultuous streams ("Song for the Wandering Jew," lines 3-4) similar to the rest the dead find in earth's depths.

Silence and Attentiveness:

In Wordsworth's poetry, silence frequently links with repose and tranquility, states fostering heightened awareness. When individuals lie down, relax, and 'be still', they become more perceptive of subtle occurrences that might otherwise pass unnoticed. Silence is essential for attentive listening, as incessant chatter would overpower what needs to be heard. Silence contrasts with frivolous conversation or idle prattle (Heidegger, 1962, p. 208). Wordsworth (1936/1984) comments: "Strongest minds / Are often those whom the noisy world / Hears least" ("The Excursion," l.92-94), and the concept of noise obscuring meaning applies to both nature and poets.

Dover's "strange release" "From social noise" enacts a silence "elsewhere unknown," a state of being in which a Spirit can impart its message that would otherwise be drowned out by clamor ("At Dover," lines 6-8). In *The Borderers*, Marmaduke orders his companion, "[I]n silence hear my doom," emphasizing silence's necessity for understanding speech (line 2339). Cacophony precludes attentiveness, and anyone who enters "all this mighty sum / Of things for ever speaking" ("Expostulation and Reply," lines 25-26) has to learn that such disarray must be sorted out by reclaiming silence.

Research on affect and ecology in Romantic studies reveals how Wordsworth's attention to silence functions within what contemporary critics term "Green Romanticism," initiated by Bate's (1991) influential work linking Wordsworth's poetic themes to contemporary environmentalism. Wordsworth's emphasis on passive attentiveness—silent observation without interference—anticipates contemporary understanding of how environmental awareness emerges through embodied, affective engagement rather than purely rational analysis (Ottum & Reno, 2016).

Wordsworth (1936/1984) recognizes passivity as prerequisite to perceive obscured messages:

there are Powers
Which of themselves our minds impress;
That we can feed this mind of ours
In a wise passiveness. ("Expostulation and Reply," lines 21-24)

To truly appreciate natural phenomena, one must allow them to manifest on their own terms. It is fitting that Wordsworth lets Imagination come to him while reclining ("The Excursion," I.260-261). Futile attempts to force Imagination arise because Wordsworth does not remain passive enough to let experiences envelop him.

As observant listener, the child surpasses adults insofar as adults understand the world analytically, never appreciating the whole. Science represents a "false secondary power / By which we multiply distinctions" (1850 Prelude, II.216-217). More succinctly, we "murder to dissect" ("The Tables Turned," line 28). Adults strive to make nature conform to human notions of rationality. Wordsworth advises, "Let Nature be your teacher," adding:

Enough of Science and Art;
Close up those barren leaves;
Come forth, and bring with you a heart
That watches and receives. ("The Tables Turned," lines 16, 29-32)

Wordsworth proposes that children "are blest, and powerful; their world lies / More justly balanced" ("Personal Talk," lines 23-24) than the adult world because child-like world perception does not depend on subjecting nature to human control. The infant is not separated from its surroundings. The absence of subject-object dichotomy in children merges them with their environment, making each child "An inmate of this active universe" (1850 Prelude, II.242-244, 254). The child is an inmate with nature, bound by biological impulses. The boy who passed away before age twelve (1850 Prelude, V.381-390) can remain silent and listen to "the voice / Of mountain torrents" (lines 383-384).

Even children, however, must learn not to completely merge with nature to preserve any hope of making natural phenomena comprehensible to humans. The solitary figure in "Lines Left Upon a Yew-Tree" illustrates that appropriating nature to indulge egotistical melancholy only widens the chasm between individuals and the human community from which they feel estranged. Life limited to nature is reproachable, as such self-confinement never allows the individual to become spokesperson for nature and communicate its messages to the rest of humanity. Distance enhances sweetest melodies' sweetness ("Personal Talk," lines 25-26), so poets should avoid the myopic belief that nature can narrate its own story. The learner must quieten the urge to analyze and recognize how much remains beyond mortal grasp.

Wordsworth's aborted journeys toward Imagination tend to force encounters with surroundings. Valley mist is "to awful silence bound" ("Descriptive Sketches," line 410), but Wordsworth occasionally fails to appreciate that silence can be 'awe-ful', that natural phenomena warrant reverence and attentiveness impossible in active searching for natural wonders. Wordsworth reproaches himself for making rather than finding what he beheld (1850 Prelude, III.515-516). This impetuosity nearly allows Mount Snowdon's moonrise to pass unobserved (1850 Prelude, XIV.1-62).

Silence's importance emerges in Wordsworth's genius loci poems when travelers must decelerate to allow nature to reveal its messages. An ash-tree's

seeming silence makes
A soft eye-music of slow-waving boughs,
Powerful almost as vocal harmony
To stay the wanderer's steps and soothe his thoughts. ("Airey-Force Valley," lines 13-16)

Secluded spots' silence provides travelers opportunities to slow their pace and discover what they otherwise might have overlooked ("Hermit's Cell," lines 1-4). The attentiveness silence allows, however, requires an object. The following section explores silence as part of phenomena toward which attentiveness can be directed.

Silence as Destination:

Wordsworth encapsulates his poetic quandary when portraying the tension between silence and articulation necessary for public understanding or poetic expression:

I crossed the square (an empty area then!)
Of the Carousel, where so late had lain
The dead, upon the dying heaped, and gazed
On this and other spots, as doth a man
Upon a volume whose contents he knows
Are memorable, but from him locked up,
Being written in a tongue he cannot read
So that he questions the mute leaves with pain,
And half upbraids their silence. (1850 Prelude, X.55-63)

The Carousel's physical emptiness mirrors its expressive void. The physical scene cannot speak for itself, leaving the poet an ultimate interpretive challenge. The issue is translation: How can the poet transform actions into verbal articulation? Without a system akin to translating one language to another, how does any poet proceed to "wrest new land from the vast void of the unexpressed"(Waismann, 1962, p. 116)?

The central question, as Merleau-Ponty (1968) poses it, is how to convert silence's realm into the articulated world. Jonathan Wordsworth (1981) contends that the poet reclaims nature's power by traversing the unarticulated: "If his work is truly to become 'a power like one of Nature's' (1805 Prelude XII.312), he must find the colors and words hitherto unknown to man—a barrier must be broken down, a border crossed" (p. 74). The poet does not view this quandary as insurmountable, feeling only "as doth" the interpreter facing untranslatable text. Wordsworth half reproaches the silence, acknowledging that the silent text's unfamiliarity is essential for it to provide new insight. The challenge Wordsworth confronts by approaching silence lies at the core of poetic expression.

When everything cannot speak for itself, how can the poet transform silence into speech while staying true to original encounter with a poetic subject? Comprehending silence now appears crucial for understanding the poet's or any communicator's task. If Imagination is partly translation of silence into articulate expression, then Wordsworth's passive attentiveness includes attentiveness to natural silence.

Contemporary ecocritical scholarship examining Wordsworth's environmental consciousness reveals how this translational challenge connects to broader questions about human-nature relationships in the Anthropocene. Recent work demonstrates how Wordsworth's poetry "unabashedly raises questions regarding how to orient one's self in a world without clear markers for orientation, without an indication of one's dominant (or subordinate) status, or a path leading one beyond any foreseeable horizon"(Ottinger, 2023). Rather than insist on superimposing human meaning on nature, Wordsworth's approach conveys more receptivity. The fundamental question then becomes how to render nature verbally by expressing this condition of being-with. This interpretive challenge assumes particular urgency in our current ecological crisis, where traditional markers of environmental stability have dissolved.

Wordsworth consistently associates silence with nature. This natural silence should not be mistaken for impotence, as nature is "powerfully inarticulate"(Hartman, 2018, p. 24). A chestnut grove's interwoven branches create a "purple roof of vines" that "silence loves"("Descriptive Sketches," line 88). The "Majestic Duddon" flows silently over sand bars ("River Duddon," XXXII.8). Forest silence touches Wordsworth (1850 Prelude, VII.36-37), and even the silent worm merits mention (1850 Prelude, VII.39).

Natural silence exhibits circularity, as silence constitutes utterance's primordial source and the state to which nature returns when interpositions have departed. Human structures decay, blending with natural objects' silence: "O silence of Nature, how deep is thy sway, / When the whirlwind of human destruction is spent, / Our tumults appeased, and our strifes passed away!"("Fort Fuentes," lines 18-20). Sounds of boys playing, barking dogs, and bleating sheep qualify as chatter or "uncouth noise" that disrupts "Nature's quiet equipoise"("River Duddon," lines 7-10, 13).

When nature speaks, its unintelligible utterances resemble silence. Waters murmur (“Yew Trees,” lines 32-33), rocks mutter (1850 Prelude, VI.630), hills emit “an alien sound of melancholy” (“Influence of Natural Objects,” lines 43-44). Natural sounds’ incomprehensibility necessitates translating sound into articulation. Wordsworth does not let natural objects speak for themselves. If they could, they would render the poet’s mediating voice irrelevant. Even if nature could speak through the poet, the result would be lallation, as natural force still must be brought into human comprehension (van der Leeuw, 1967, p. 432). It is crucial that “the Poet sing / In concord with his river murmuring by” (“To the Spade of a Friend,” lines 13-14). The poem’s words can harmonize with their subjects. Poetry neither sings for the river nor settles for murmurings.

Natural silence comes readily to the attentive. Natural objects’ harmony coexisting in silence need not be pursued in pilgrimages seeking the spectacular. However, achieving attentiveness demands effort. The effort required to achieve receptivity might explain Wordsworth’s characterization of his work as “studious leisure” (“When, to...,” line 2). The Wanderer’s host expresses the connection between silence, natural objects, and wise passiveness in his depiction of a storm raging between two mountains:

Nor have nature’s laws
Left them [the peaks] ungifted with a power to yield
Music of finer tone; a harmony,
So do I call it, though it be the hand
Of silence, though there be no voice;—the clouds,
The mist, the shadows, light of golden suns,
Moonlight’s motion, all come thither--touch,
And have an answer--thither come, and shape
A language not unwelcome to sick hearts
And idle spirits... (“The Excursion,” II.708-717)

Natural objects coexisting and interacting as music is not human vocalization, but silence into which voices enter and to which they return. This silence remains unintelligible; nature must be “smoothed by learned Art” (1850 Prelude, VI.674) to be brought into human understanding as poetry. Wordsworth nevertheless recognizes that art must remain subordinate to nature in a world where poetic and, later, technological artifice often overwhelms nature.

Conclusion:

Wordsworth’s poetic endeavor to connect with nature through silence evokes Heidegger’s claim that silence is essential for genuine understanding:

To be able to keep silent, Dasein must have something to say—that is, it must have at its disposal an authentic and rich disclosedness of itself. In that case one’s reticence makes something manifest, and does away with ‘idle talk’. As a mode of discoursing, reticence articulates the intelligibility of Dasein in so primordial a manner that it gives rise to a potentiality-for hearing which is genuine, and to a Being-with-one-another which is transparent. (Heidegger, 1962, p. 208)

The silence to which Heidegger alludes, and which Wordsworth pursues, differs from solipsistic withdrawal into oneself associated with reclusiveness. Geoffrey Hartman concurs that treating poetic language as “the voices of silence” does not necessitate transforming poetry into entirely personal, mystical experience (1970b, p. 343). Wordsworth’s silence reclaims the community of Dasein, or historically situated human existence, with its surroundings. Attentiveness to silence simultaneously recognizes Dasein’s situatedness in the world, particularly as participant-observer of natural processes. In Wordsworth’s context, the potentiality-for-hearing offers the opportunity to attend to nature rather than attempting to analytically dissect natural events and objects to become nature’s physical or intellectual master. Silence ‘dis-closes’ Dasein by preventing total self-absorption. Reestablishing human contact with silence uncovers and recovers “the requisite mode of existence for all entities capable of being spoken about” (White, 1978, p. 48). Just as the deepest interpersonal relationships often require the least to be said (Ott, 1967, p. 210), the most intimate communion with nature and with self resides in silence.

This phenomenological understanding of silence resonates with contemporary developments in multidisciplinary silence studies. Classics research on ancient Roman poetry notes that “acts of silence are inherently polysemic in that they can express both positive and negative messages in an array of interactive contexts” (McNeill, 2010, p. 70). Current scholarship emphasizes that silence “is not just the absence of speech: the absence of speech is what makes silence more apparent, just as silence is what makes speech more apparent” (Guillaume, 2018) This view challenges Western assumptions that equate communicative authority exclusively with vocalization. These insights

illuminate how Wordsworth's poetic attention to silence anticipates contemporary recognition of silence's active, relational dimensions.

This essay's conception of Imagination as translating silence into meaningful utterance does not preclude other interpretations. Rather, converting silence to speech constitutes a necessary component of any specific manifestations of Imagination. Paradoxically, silence forms at least part of the environment in which utterance occurs, the condition the poet seeks to understand, and the means of achieving that understanding. Thus, silence permeates the beginning, method, and objectives of Wordsworth's poetic experience—and potentially of poetry itself.

Articulating silence assumes that silence in any form can be articulated (Ihde, 1976, p. 166). Perhaps this belief that the unsaid is not unsayable sustains not only Wordsworth's poetry but also fuels poets' desire to keep writing and readers' desire to keep interpreting. In poetry, there is no final word and no absolute silence.

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