

Poetic Silence

Rae Armantrout: There is an aesthetic effect I am attracted by, interested in, which has been difficult for me either to explain or define. I felt it had something to do with empty space left in a work, or following one, a kind of palpable stoppage, a silence that was a gesture. I'm using the occasion of this talk to examine my feelings for what Max Picard called, "The gleam that surrounds the word enclosed in human silence."

There is little natural silence left in the world. There is the continual noise of engines, but beyond this there are constantly in our ears or memory the ghostly messages from television, radio, billboards, etc. These voices are a noise which requires no response, so it may be received subliminally. But, I think, the impulse to response remains. Somewhere, beneath consideration, are thoughts which are automatic, random answers to bits of the media barrage. Words no longer come from silence, but directly from other words. One finds oneself speaking, involved perhaps in a debate the terms of which are always already set. And there is the impulse to call a halt, the impulse to silence.

What are the types of human silence?

There is the silence which admits mistake.

The silence which concedes personal limit, or finitude.

The silence which indicates the presence of the ineffable. Heidegger says, "The earth appears as itself only when it is perceived and preserved as that which is by its nature undiscloseable, that which shrinks from every disclosure and constantly keeps itself closed up."

There is the silence which is silenced by the presence of another.

The silence which waits for an unknown response. Picard says of a poet he admires, "He leaves a clear space into which another can speak. He makes the subject his own, but does not keep it entirely for himself. Such poetry is therefore not fixed

and rigid, but has a hovering quality ready at any moment to belong to another."

There is the silence that occurs when someone you have been considering from a distance turns and stops you with their look.

Negative interpretations of deliberate silence can also be made. Silence can be used to inflate a subject with false grandeur; it can be the crutch of a weak argument; it can be a cloaking device used to discourage the reaching of a possible conclusion. And yet silence may also mark the legitimate bounds of certainty.

In this talk I intend to discuss poems in which I see silence as a conscious component and poems in which I do not. I've chosen all my examples from what I consider to be good work.

As we know, a new sort of long prose poem has developed and gained increasing influence over the last few years. I want to argue, not against this sort of prose poem, but for the value of the lyric format, and its greater potential for evoking silence.

To describe it simply, maybe over-simply, this new prose poem is most often composed of non-narrative, declarative sentences. The declarative sentence declares. Thus such poems tend to create a tone of certainty, of resolution and completeness which leaves little room for the experience of silence. The relations between these non-narrative sentences tend to be many, dense and problematic. After each period the reader is left more with a puzzle than a pause. How does this part fit the whole?

Before I begin to use examples, I want to say that I am characterizing work, not writers, since most of the writers I will quote could, in different instances, inhabit either of my categories.

My first example of this prose poem which makes less use of silence is a passage from Bob Perelman's *a.k.a.*

A man mows his lawn and you are there, or Richard Eberhart. No territory so neutral it doesn't hold thousands of the wrong dead. Obstacles doing time in myth emit a steady stream of words. A protein chain sounded like a good investment.

I choose this passage for two reasons: First because it says (in fact every sentence restates differently) that silence is no longer possible because each scene of our lives suggests conditioned verbal associations. The other, nonthematic, reason I chose this is because, in keeping with its meaning, the sentence breaks here do not invite silence. After each sentence, one makes a certain effort and then has the sensation, and satisfaction, of getting the point. And, at least for me, there is the experience of assent. Yes, he's right. Beneath the apparent discreteness of these sentences, there is a hubbub of surprising connections. One smiles, for instance, at the indirect characterization of Richard Eberhart as "one of the wrong dead."

My second excerpt is from Lyn Hejinian's prose poem "Dormer."

We drew trees from life, and I determined to draw each leaf, then resigned myself to drawing a semblance to "each leaf." Representation rather than imitation. "Clip clop" went the horse on the road; the hen said "cluck." A lizard 16.33 centimeters long withdraws into a hole in the ground. Movement in space is first perceived by its attack character.

As in the Perelman passage, every sentence here is a variation on a theme. Each shows a way in which representation is standardized, unequal to the world. Neither Perelman's or Hejinian's poem, by the way, deals with a single theme throughout. Rather themes seem to occur over sentence clusters, and then disappear, perhaps later to be echoed or recast. In the Hejinian passage one derives pleasure from the variety of sources from which she draws her instances: child's book, painting, scientific measurement, etc. The reader's activity lies in registering the cacophony of these sources, and in perceiving the relations between a sentence and sentences elsewhere in the text. Thus arrows point back and forth within a fairly lengthy poem. Nothing here is especially framed to point outside the system.

The third writer I'd like to mention in this context is Peter Seaton. His work is quite different from Perelman's and Hejinian's, and I admittedly know and understand it less well. Still I want to include a passage from "How to Read VI."

The mind does not need the idea of activity. The idea by which we discriminate between kinesthetic ideas is sometimes swamped in the vivid origin of remote existence. As he writes he has no anticipation, as a thing distinct from his sensation, of either the look or digital feel of the letters which flow from his pen. The words buzz in his mental ear, but not his mental eye or hand. Some people he writes were writers too. I have been asked to write war for the new masses.

In Seaton's writing, as distinct from the writers previously mentioned, sentence flows into sentence almost imperceptibly. Indeed, in mid-passage Seaton describes a certain sensual deprivation, the inability to visualize the words he's writing. The rather numbing smoothness of Seaton's work is created by his repetition of certain ordinary, general terms such as "idea" in the first part of the quote or "write" in the latter part. The way he uses these words tends to block not only the signification, but also consideration at any point. Thus the text produces a kind of white noise. It proceeds steadily and automatically, never threatening to derail the reader, or pull him up short.

Suppose a writer wants to make room in her work for silence, for the experience of cessation; how is this accomplished?

1. She may end a line or a poem abruptly, unexpectedly, somehow short of resolution.
2. She may create extremely tenuous connections between parts of a poem.
3. She may deliberately create the effect of inconsequence.
4. She may make use of self-contradiction or retraction.
5. She may use obvious ellipsis.
6. She may use anything which places the existent in perceptible relation to the non-existent, the absent or outside.

For instance, Williams begins several sections of "January Morning" with a dash and the word "and." Here's one such:

—and the sun, dipping into the avenues
streaking the tops of
the irregular red houselets,
and
the gay shadows dropping and dropping.

This uses several of the devices I listed. First, it begins with an ellipsis, pointing backward and outward to the unsaid. Secondly, this stanza is in a way inconsequential, that is, Williams has nothing much to say about these things; he only points to their being. Thirdly, the stanza ends on a note of irresolution, "dropping and dropping." It seems bottomless and points downward and outward toward an unknown future.

Robert Grenier's "Fall Winter Family Home," in *Series*, is a long poem in which each short section is isolated on its own half page. Connections between the segments, though subtle and tenuous, are numerous enough to warrant presenting them simply as stanzas of a long poem, separated by normal size stanza breaks. Instead Grenier chose to use shiny expanses of white paper as a presence in the work, signifying the finiteness and loneliness of the words. He makes striking use of the page surface in the passage which reads:

VOLUME MORNING

light

some
sort of a
futile joyous

WHITE SUN

"VOLUME" alone in caps on the top half page makes a kind of pun by making graphic the confrontation between being and non-being which it also mentions. The following segment, "Morning

// light," seems to contradict the one above, to dematerialize volume by turning it to light. The opening two lines of the opposite page, "some/sort of a," make a modest, tentative approach to expression. The third line, "futile joyous," though not exactly an oxymoron, is not too far from being one, and thus partakes of the silence of the confounded. The fourth line, "WHITE SUN," stands somewhat apart from its qualifiers, as a simple separate phenomenon—simple enough to disappear without having to disengage first from a complicated world. The word "white," here, reminds me not so much of sun, which is generally associated with yellow, as of the glowing whiteness of the surrounding page.

Larry Eigner also makes significant use of spacing as well as of line breaks. The following work appeared in *This* II:

the sunlight
 sideways slant grazing
 the keyboard
 beyond
 silent
 dust through the air
 while the wind sounds leaves
 the vine still
 lathing shadows
 the black, yellow-eyed cat

There are several ways a writer could use line break to open up a silence. Radical enjambments which leave the reader hanging might be one way. But this is not what Eigner does. His lines, however short or fragmentary, seem in a way self-contained. Eigner achieves a maximum autonomy for the elements of his poem by minimizing the grammatical connections between, or sometimes even within, lines. For instance, by not adding an apostrophe *s* to "sunlight," he gives a measure of independence to the subsequent noun "slant." Verbs, which usually serve to establish relation, are few here, and ambiguous, often doubling as nouns, like those in the line "while the wind sounds leaves." As things in this poem are scattered in unstated relation to one another, the lines themselves are scattered

unpredictably off the margins. Thus every presence in the poem, like the "black, yellow-eyed cat" (made especially substantial by assonance and emphatic rhythm), is a bit surprising as if it steps forward out of nowhere, from silence.

The preceding three examples are perhaps the clearest, coming from the work of writers who almost always include silence within their texts. But I'd like to proceed with four examples from the works of writers who, like most of us, sometimes do, though in ways perhaps less obvious.

Another example of silence as a component of poetry can be found in Bill Berkson's small prose poem "Domino" in *This* 5:

A mother and son playing Dominoes on the floor in
 the cool of late autumn afternoon sun, upstairs of the
 little country house they live in. It is very intent, like the
 eucalyptus. Two cats, male and female, turn and jell on
 the patchwork (Vermont) bedspread. This is Northern
 California. Every ten minutes or so, one of the players
 shouts out "Domino!"

This poem seems poised on some edge—the border I'd say between the significant and the inconsequential. And that interests me—the question of what's worth saying and of what can be said. As a kind of feat, Berkson holds our attention on things that would not normally hold our attention as readers. He does this in some simple ways, like the unusual choice of the word "jell" to describe cats, which, appearing at about the center of the poem, helps to make the scene set up, become solid and intent as Berkson says it is. Then there's rhyme between "so" and "Domino!" in the last line, which creates a kind of closure. But it is a false closure in that it encloses nothing, only a bit of silence.

A poem of mine called "Compound" (*Crawl Out Your Window* 11) also, I think, tries to straddle the fence between statement and non-statement, or consequence and inconsequence:

Flat
 destroyers drawn

on haze
beyond Convair's low roof,
and bare on-
ramps curling
up:
gray white
congruence near to
the invisible.
While in this
car the round
drumbeats of "Mona"
fill our chests.

The first sentence describes a military-industrial landscape in a generally negative way, using words like “flat,” “bare,” and “gray,” though there are terms here like “curling up” and “congruence,” whose positive connotations somewhat undermine a simple reading. Still when the reader arrives at the second sentence and sees that a more inner environment is being described, she is likely to expect that this sentence will make a definite contrast of some sort to the one above. The words “round” and “fill” seem, briefly, to fulfill her expectation. Then the mildly negative connotation of ending with the “chest” (instead of, say, *heart*) and the moan in “Mona” make themselves heard, and a balance point is reached, a conundrum of value, which amounts to silence. As Fredric Jameson says, “What can in the world be resolved only through the intervention of praxis, here comes before the purely contemplative mind as logical scandal or double-bind, the unthinkable and conceptually paradoxical, that which cannot be unknotted by the operation of pure thought” (*The Political Unconscious*).

Steve Benson's work sometimes addresses itself to another who is more than a structuring device, certainly not a rhetorical occasion for producing the poem you had in mind—but instead is more like the ever present possibility of contradiction. To illustrate I'll quote from a transcribed performance, "Blindspots."

You may want to go to bed
 You may want to have a
 really strong stare-down
 You may want to follow every gesture, every
 movement
 Or you might
 define a situation
 for instance with
 chairs or an activity.
 You may feel *responsible*
 How can I tell you there's no need to feel responsible?
 Thi You may've already *named*
 this being Well,
 There's something presumptuous in perhaps saying
 you have a
 choice—you may not s—I mean that may itself
 not be
 of any benefit

It's as if Benson wants to reserve a place for objection, or to create in the space the other might occupy a pivot on which to turn back and see things from a different perspective. Though Benson makes room for the listener thus, he doesn't trace her outline there. Note the almost arbitrary variety of things the other in this piece is projected to want. In this essentially empty reserved area, therefore, there is palpable silence.

Even long prose poems can, of course, incorporate silence. The beginning of Ron Silliman's *Tjanting* is tentative, full of retraction as well as major rephrasing.

Not this.

What then?

I started over & over. Not this.

Last week I wrote “the muscles in my palm so sore from halving the rump roast I cld barely grip the pen.” What then? This morning my lip is blistered.

Of about to within which. Again & again I began. The

gray light of day fills the yellow room in a way wch is
somber. Not this. Hot grease had spilld on the stove top.
Not that either...

I often feel overwhelmed by the likelihood of error, my apprehension of the inexactitude of thought, and the impulse comes to cross out and start again from scratch, wherever that is. Silliman makes this impulse his subject here. And beyond that, by foregrounding thus the arbitrary, revisable nature of the text, he suggests to the reader the radical premise that things might be otherwise, and points to the realm of unrealized possibility.

The six writers whose usage of silence I've discussed, each in their own way manage to empty a moment into which questions then rise. "What then?" Benson and Silliman used self-contradiction and retraction to this effect. Eigner used tenuous connections, isolating the elements of the poem grammatically and spatially to produce the silence of self-containment. Berkson and Williams used inconsequence; Williams used ellipsis and abrupt beginning and conclusion, to make us feel the weight to silence, and of the world. If the purpose of poetry is, as Eigner has said, "to find the weights of things," then surely all the great phenomena, including silence, must find place in this weighing.

Ron Silliman: You have a concept of silence almost as a state, rather than as being one end of the spectrum of sound. I'm curious as to the difference between those two ideas in your head. For me, it's very much more one end of the spectrum.

Armantrout: And so you see silence as more a deferral of speech.

Tom Mandel: It's true that you seem to be sometimes metaphorizing silence. You say that somebody's words seem to come out of silence, by which you mean that they come out of nothing. That seems to be a rather different notion of silence than the one that is a palpable silence.

Armantrout: There were different concepts of it, I think, in the talk. One of them has to do with coming to a recognizable end of you own thought, or recognizing that you've taken something as far

as you can and standing on the edge where it has to be something other than you that makes the next move, or the next statement, the next sound, so there's that break, which is a sort of silence.

Mandel: And you don't feel that, say, in Peter Seaton's text? You don't feel that phase you're calling white noise in Peter Seaton's writing might be a sort of similar boundary indicated in the text? Or do you?

Armantrout: Well, I felt funny about including Seaton, because I'm not really a great reader of him, and I could very easily be wrong. Always in this talk I was only talking about the passages I was talking about, not the person's work as a whole. In the passage I read, no, I don't *hear* any kind of break that might indicate a sense of the finiteness of the individual voice.

Carla Harryman: When you read that work, after the first sentence, I had no idea whether it was your writing or his writing. It was the most interesting moment in the talk for me. Also, it scared me and so I stopped listening. [laughter] At the same time, it was extremely judgmental, in a way in which it could easily change its mind. There was this kind of assertion although there were not declarative sentences.

It seems that the way you're talking about silence doesn't want to engage judgment. You seem to be interested in someplace where judgment doesn't exist. Whereas in Bob's work and Lyn's work and Peter's work there was some kind of judgment being made.

Armantrout: I guess there is a polarity that I was making. And I don't want to come down permanently on the side of non-judgment. The feeling I get after reading a sentence from a prose poem by Bob or Lyn is the feeling of measuring the truth of the statement. And usually I find the statements very apt, but there is that sense that they have taken a measure or a judgment off the world, and then I apply my critical faculty to the truth of that statement.

Mandel: But there is a tremendous amount of judgment, and therefore statement, often accomplished by silence, by what's left out, in your work. One of the chief functions of silence is the declaration of judgment, right? Silence can be a wall.

Armantrout: Well, that's true. I started out by saying all the different things I could think of that silence could be and also the negative as well as the positive things it could be.

Steve Benson: There's the poem where you describe a spider and then you say, "I'm not like that!" The description of the spider is these little phrases without capitalization in a short stanza and then there's a drop and it says, capital I, "I'm not like that!" That seems to come out of a silence. It's making a judgment, very immediately. The things you're talking about using silence seem to present judgment more as a process in which parts or aspects are isolated and brought out with a certain power and definition. When you say, "I'm not like that!" it's sort of like, Bang! It seems very impulsive.

Larry Eigner: Maybe it's not so much a suspension of judgment as a suspension of the world's way in which you write the judgment. Because a line break is a silence, more or less of a pause in the mind. You can't do it too much with your voice, maybe, but you can do it in the mind. It's a pause in the mind where you go back to the beginning of the next line, or you just drop a line. If you have a comma that's not as long a stop. A full stop is a period.

Barrett Watten: There's something you seem to identify silence with which is the line break or the termination of the poem, which is actually also being accomplished in the shifting of frame between any unit of writing. And in all the examples you read, in fact, it was really very well done. There was a definite displacement that was very much the same effect that you were looking for, only you weren't looking for it in that form. And so it doesn't seem like this distinction between the long prose text and the short elliptical poem is really where it's at, because the same kind of mental operation is being done, it's just being done formally in a different way.

But there are a couple of things on both sides that you didn't bring in. One was the question of irony. There's a use of silence in order to mask information or mask intention. Like, you're only going to get so much and *you* fill in the gaps, which immediately invites a power relationship between the ironist and the person who is without the total handle on the intentions of the speaker.

Harryman: It's sort of an institutional structure.

Watten: Withholding of information is an institutional structure, right? But there's also a sense of deliberate breaking of acknowledged frames, which I would call irrationality, which I think to some extent is implied by Peter Seaton's use of the form, where the idea is to irritate or to push back complicity with the framing.

Those are two aims that surround this question of silence. I think, actually, that the forms you were talking about, the long prose forms and the short poems, are more related.

Harryman: Also, I have to make a case for "The hen said 'cluck.'" When you get to "The hen said," you've already stopped. You have to go back. It's like there's a big empty place. And there's a silence, because it's like an idiom which is being made into an assertion. And so it seems there are different planes of silence in that one sentence.

And, in fact, I was thinking when you were reading Lyn's work that a lot of times I feel the potential for verse line in her prose. There's almost like this decision not to have made this verse, which gives you a sense of verse at the same time. It's like you're reading two texts. That's a very powerful spatial relationship that's made that way.

Armantrout: I feel like this has some bearing on what Barry was saying, and what you were saying, too, I hope. When I read some of these prose poems, as I read one sentence it sets up an expectation for what the next sentence may be like. And then there always is a relation between the following sentence and the preceding one, but it's never quite the relation you've been led to expect, it's always

something slightly askew. But there's never really a moment where there's not expectation, or when the weight of what's been said just sits there and you don't know exactly what to do with it.

David Melnick: One of the kinds of silence that you talked about was where you don't speak, and there is a great deal of language going on in your head that is waiting to be spoken. And then there is another kind where you think of the whole world of language and find that its horizon might be a total void. Casteñeda has a method that I'm sure everybody's thought of in grammar school, which is when you try to think of nothing a rush of thoughts comes in. But of course he gets beyond where most of us get to, to the point where that rush of the world can itself go away. And that's the peak of his void, which I sometimes see between the sentences in Ashbery, especially between the lines in a poem like "Europe."

Armantrout: I think certain poems can sometimes give me the brief effect of feeling that silence. Maybe it's an illusion.

Mandel: Thinking of silence as Ron characterized it as one end of the bell curve of language, that seems clearly to be something that is formally manipulable as an element in writing. And then, on the other hand, if we're talking about Heidegger, where silence is a metaphysical screen as large as the whole of language and set against it, or is something more like reality, that seems like something that can be indicated. Like when Wittengenstein says what we can't think about we must remain silent about, and that would be an indication. That's what I mean about Peter Seaton's work. A lot of it had to do with the limitations of an individual's language.

And Bob's work often accomplishes a very similar thing and can be a little bit like that silence which is another version of reality. A verb being used in place of another verb, a word being used in place of another word—it is itself, but it also functions as a counter for that other word, and therefore the silence of that, the non-presence of that. I think that is in Bob's work in a way, and maybe it is in all work insofar as one of the things that is done in writing is selection. One of the axes of language is selection, and one of the axes is combination.

Armantrout: Well, you're probably right. [laughter] This is why I never wanted to give a talk. [laughter] What I wanted to say is that I like this effect of silence. What I did not want to say is that I can drive a dividing line down the center of literature and put half the people over here and half of the people over there. That is not really what I wanted to say. [laughs]

Melnick: Tom, I think you're withdrawing the distinction Rae is trying to make. By that definition, Alexander Pope would be a poet full of silences, because his lines were witty and full of words that might have been different from what you would have expected in that place.

Robert Grenier: Ron said that you were more interested in what he called metaphoric uses of silence than in the physical, structural properties one might describe. Along those lines, it might be possible to say that silences in a work stand for silences in the world in a way that is more apt or more direct as a representational function than other kinds of representational usage. Do you think that's an illusion, or that there's an actual silence in the work in that sense corresponding to those one experiences in the world otherwise?

Armantrout: I think that's one reason I'm attracted to silence. I feel that there's a need to represent, as you say, or to indicate the space of the ineffable, perhaps, in the world. There's a need to point to it. Like there's a need to point to things. Don't ask me whether it's an illusion or not, [laughter] but it's something I'm interested in.

Grenier: The difference doesn't seem so apparent at first sight between the silence in the work and other silences as, for example, between "apple" and an apple, where the difference is so clear.

What do you think then, metaphorically, the uses of silence have been? Would that simply summarize what you've said otherwise? Do you want to do that?

Armantrout: Umm, I think I'll stand pat. [laughter]

Michael Palmer: It eventually becomes like asking, "But what about this question of being?" It's a major topic of thought in this century, both in this country and, strikingly, in France, ever since Mallarmé started spreading space between words and extending the junctures and having them acquire a kind of metaphysical weight.

But, as Cage points out, we actually literally have no silence, so it's immediately metaphoric at any point in our discussion, whether we're talking about it as a junctural function in prosody, or in the largest sense in which it can be talked about. We never get away from it as metaphor because, strictly speaking, it ain't there. So that it's hardly possible to propose that a silence could be literal.

Silliman: Well, having stood on the floor of Death Valley on a windless day, I have a really strong sense of what it is when you only hear your body systems functioning. There is that way in which it's always present.

One of the things that's interesting about Peter Seaton's work is the way in which, if you can create a work so tonally clear and affixed that the periodicity of the internal rhythms seems to recede, as it does, say, in the music of Steve Reich, there is a very different experience within that sound of something else clearly present, which I would identify as silence, although I'm not sure to what degree I am then metaphorizing silence. But it seems very clearly possible.

There are a lot of ways it can be played with. Two different examples from [Barrett Watten's] *I-10* would be "Statistics" and "Positions," where the periodicity of the periods is so radically different from the periodicity of the lines. So that you hear this really manifold structure, which in fact is not the same as what you see on the page. There seems to be this vast range of possibilities that's really interesting to focus on. It's not to disagree with you, it's to point out that Peter Seaton may, in fact, include silence.

Armantrout: Well, he may.

I really don't want to try to talk about absolute silence in an ontological way. What I'm interested in is the experience. For instance, you've been listening to a loud noise, there's been a television on, a stereo on, a factory going close to you, and suddenly it stops. Now

that's not to say that we now have absolute silence, I mean there's probably some birds singing and you can maybe hear your body, as Ron said, and there are sounds in the environment, but you have a relative sense of cessation. And you know how that feels when that happens to you. Suddenly, everything looks different, too. There's been this racket, and then there *isn't*.