

Significant Absences: Wittgenstein's Philosophy of Silence and Joyce's Poetics of the Unspoken

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This paper discusses an important phase in Ludwig Wittgenstein's analytic philosophy through a comparative examination of the profound correspondences that exist between his concept of silence and the poetics of another crucial authorial figure of the 20th century: James Joyce. Based on the hypothesis that there are striking resemblances between their early works, that is, between Joyce's realistic short-story collection *Dubliners* and Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, the article employs mostly close-reading, analytical-interpretative and comparative methods. It argues that silence was an intentional intellectual, aesthetic and ethical choice of both these authors, their way to preserve the autonomy of metaphysics and to honour the beauty of the unspoken.

Starting from their common critical treatment of the habitual and largely alienated speech, the discussion connects Wittgenstein's philosophical attitudes regarding the imprecision and inadequacy of every-day language and Joyce's notion of 'spiritual paralysis' of the city-life, which he saw as the main motive for writing his collection about *fin-de-siècle* Dublin. On the grounds of their shared views about the limits of words, behind which there are worlds that cannot be properly uttered, the idea of silence – or the highly significant narrative absence – grows to permeate the work of both. In the case of Wittgenstein, it is a call for a new philosophy, or anti-philosophy, which in negating metaphysics in effect preserves its independence from a discursive speech which cannot express it, whereas in the case of Joyce, correspondingly (and almost simultaneously), it is a quest for a new literary mode that will foreground a particular Modernist allusiveness, rhetoric of omission and deliberately incomplete, gnomonical narrative structures.

Keywords: Wittgenstein, Joyce, language, reality, silence, narrative absences, metaphysics, poetics

INTRODUCTION

Two major intellectual figures of the first half of the 20th century, a Viennese philosopher who became synonymous with the Anglo-Saxon analytic philosophy and an Irish writer who became an emblem of the modernist Anglophone literature, L. Wittgenstein (1988–1951) and J. Joyce (1982–1941) have both been continually surrounded by a fame (or notoriety) of ‘difficulty’, ‘inaccessibility’ and indifference towards a wider audience. The affinities between them, however, are by no means exhausted by their similar reputation. Striking correspondences between their ideas have often been ascribed to a particular early 20th-century cultural climate and frame of mind.¹ More specifically, similarities between Wittgenstein’s philosophical views on language and its imperfect relationship with reality and Joyce’s simultaneous trust and mistrust in the power of language to express the innermost psychological experience have been the subject of many papers, mostly written with the aim of reading the great writer’s famous novels with the lamp of the philosopher’s logical methods. Thus, as early as in mid 1970s, D. White stated that observing and understanding Wittgenstein thoughts on language ‘we become equipped with conceptual and critical apparatus to approach and understand what Joyce was trying to do with language in the cycle from *Portrait* through *Ulysses* to the *Wake*’ (White 1975: 295). Similarly, and also analysing Joyce’s movement through different stylistic phases that characterise *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (2016), *Ulysses* (1922) and, finally, *Finnegans Wake* (1939), R. McNutt tackles the problem of representation, that is, the link between things and their ‘signatures’,² that troubles Joyce’s novelistic hero, Stephen Dedalus, in a way that strongly resembles Wittgenstein’s dichotomy of facts and propositions (McNutt 1988). A recent article by D. Green (2021), entitled “‘It’s Meant to Make you Laugh’: Wittgenstein’s Joke Book and Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake*”, argues that it is Wittgenstein’s theoretical concept of the ‘language game’, and not ‘silence’, as McNutt suggested (9), which practically works in Joyce’s last novel.

The present paper, however, focuses not on the already discussed parallelism between the Wittgensteinian analytical concepts and Joyce’s well-known novels, but on the remarkable matching between the philosopher’s notion of silence and its most convincing narrative embodiment when it comes to Joyce’s fiction: his short-story collection *Dubliners* (2014). L. Wittgenstein’s much quoted *limits of language*, articulated in his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1921, first translated into English in 1922), and the literary devices employed in *Dubliners* offer an abundant material for the comparative and close-reading approach that forms the basis of this study. By this, we aim at creating a more inclusive and comprehensive platform for reading both authors, since *Dubliners*, albeit occupying a very important place in Joyce’s oeuvre, has been largely left out when it comes to applying Wittgenstein’s philosophical theses to the artistic quest of one of the most influential writers of the 20th century.

¹ Cf. *Wittgenstein and Modernism* (2016). Also, Thomas Singer, in his comprehensive essay ‘Riddles, Silence and Wonder: Joyce and Wittgenstein Encountering the Limits of Language’ (1990) compares Joyce’s and Wittgenstein’s methods with, among others, those of Duchamp, locating them in the particularly Modernist aesthetic context which highlighted the ‘missing parts’, since ‘Duchamp’s art shines in the space between his objects’, inviting the active participation of the readers/spectators and mirroring the movements of their own thoughts (Singer, pp. 474–475).

² Cf. ‘Signatures of all Things I am here to Read’, Joyce, *Ulysses*, 34.

ALIENATED LANGUAGE AND PARALYSIS OF A CITY

Wittgenstein's early philosophical project, his logical atomism, which is closely related to his linguistic sensitivity, as articulated in the *Tractatus Logicus-Philosophicus*, resembles in many aspects Kant's negation of metaphysics through metaphysics, and his idea of *metaphysica naturalis* as a natural disposition of mind (Kant 1990). For him, as well as for Kant, the source of metaphysics lies in the tendency of mind to break free from its own boundaries, to cross them. Both philosophers try to disclaim metaphysics by pointing toward continual illusions and disillusions, imprecision and inadequacy, verbal 'disguise and categorical mistakes contained in the human attempt to speak of the unspeakable' (Black 1964: 54). The origins of these errors are natural, they exist in the mind and in the language by which we try to say what cannot be said. Wittgenstein argues that this kind of metaphysical thinking results in an alienated function of language, which eventually generates non-sense. The alienation of language is a product of various metaphysical categorisations which, having developed a whole network of noumenal concepts, have covered and hidden the essence of being. Thus, in order to make the essence and truth re-emerge, Wittgenstein felt obliged to use a whole new methodology. For him, the ultimate truth is unspeakable. It can be experienced as a spiritual phenomenon, but cannot be expressed through verbal forms. The last paragraph in the *Tractatus* – 'What we Cannot Speak About we Must Pass Over in Silence' (Wittgenstein 2002: 89) – is the categorical imperative: it is a demand to refrain from simplified interpretations of the great secrets of being, as they are best protected and preserved when we do not make an attempt to put into language what cannot be put into language.

James Joyce's tersely yet explicitly stated intention for writing his only short-story collection resounds with a similarly strict imperative and critical undertone: 'My intention was to write a chapter of the moral history of my country and I chose Dublin for the scene because the city seemed to me the centre of paralysis' (Joyce 1975: 83). What Joyce perceived as the 'soul of that hemiplegia or paralysis which many consider a city' (ibid. 22) included psychological, social, political and cultural repression that characterised the Irish capital of the *fin de siècle* – and any city, for that matter, which is evident in his use of the indefinite article – implying inevitably the alienation from authenticity of being and the authenticity of language capable to express the being. The stories in *Dubliners* portray frustrated, inhibited, deluded and in multiple ways limited characters, catching some crucial and revelatory moment in their lives in which the depth of that limitedness, often framed by décor of the institutionalised religion, becomes obvious. But, ironically, it becomes obvious to all but the characters themselves, who mostly remain imprisoned in their own psychological and conceptual blindness, with neither their language nor their actions being able to articulate the confinement of their situation. Thus, in a style of the Flaubertian realism, and even naturalism, Joyce chooses to present the spiritual paralysis of his characters by means of their own language, which is reduced and impoverished, or misleading and false, and, all in all, utterly incapable of touching the real meaning. Whether they become literally speechless in the face of any prospect of change, like Evelyn at the end of the fourth story when she turns her pale face 'passive, like a helpless animal' (Joyce 1993: 26), or mindless and dumb as Jimmy Doyle in 'After the Race' after he loses everything in gamble, or when they sink into their own viciousness and repeat the same empty phrases as the two 'gallants' in the eponymous story, the protagonists fail to transcend their common boundaries and are denied ethical, aesthetic or spiritual insight that could play a transformative role.

According to Wittgenstein, the unspeakable is the region of the ethics, aesthetics, logic and philosophy of religion. All these experiences are absent from the lives of Dubliners that Joyce depicts in this collection – with the exception of the last story, ‘The Dead’, and to some extent ‘Araby’, in which the main characters experience an epiphany that transcends and transforms their perception, expression and, in a certain way, their narrative and ontological status.³ The last paragraph of the *Tractatus* can be interpreted as a negation of the capacity of discursive thinking to decode the secret of being, as well as an affirmation of intuition as a tool for apprehending the essence. By means of intuition we know that the unspeakable cannot be spoken. We cannot speak about that which we cannot objectify conceptually and discursively. The failure of Joyce’s characters in *Dubliners* can be categorised as a failure of intuition, a failure to apprehend the truth, as well as a failure to objectify themselves and their context: their perception and self-perception is restricted and restrictive, their discourse is suppressed and limited from the inside and from the outside, because they are both the victims and the makers of the habitual, mechanical and alienated patterns of speech, and patterns of living.

Both Wittgenstein and Joyce were aware of a paradoxical situation in the history of philosophy and the history of literature when it comes to their traditional endeavours to promote a limited mind that tends toward the absolute. Critical of tradition and dissatisfied with its established and ossified practices of approaching the unknown realities with the old discourses, both authors believed that the ultimate stage of spirituality should imply silence: a highly significant silence. Hence, while Wittgenstein resentfully rejects any absolutisation of discursive thinking as a sort of intellectual violence, because the mere thinking aggressively imposes itself on that which is thought, Joyce, likewise, develops specific narrative and poetic strategies that foster a rhetoric of silence as the only adequate aesthetic and ethical response of the artist in times suffused with false and hypocritical, or oversimplified and reductive narratives. That is why both of them worked on new methods and created what become a paradigm of Modernist allusiveness – in short, they managed to show, if not to tell, in Lyotard’s words, ‘the sublime relation between the presentable and the conceivable’ (Lyotard, in Brooker 1992: 148) through their specific philosophy and poetics of silence, which are, in effect, their massive tribute to the great and uncharted area of the unspoken.

‘ANTI-PHILOSOPHY’ AND GNOMONIC STRUCTURES

Even though it has often been interpreted in a superficial manner, the appeal contained in the proposition that ‘we must keep silence about that which we cannot speak of’ encapsulates the greatest secret of the *Tractatus*, as it suggests that, in terms of a conceptual system, metaphysics is impossible; it is possible only as a symbol of a spiritual experiment, manifested in silence. By his insistence on silence, Wittgenstein in effect attempts to de-throne the conceptual from the position of primacy, to give primacy to the being, thus ‘preserving the autonomy of metaphysics’ (Tejedor 2011: 33). Since we are prisoners of language, it is actually silence that secures metaphysics its axiological throne. Wittgenstein’s silence is supposed to absorb in itself all the great philosophical themes that could not have been thought in the history of philosophy. Our thinking about the world could not be an epistemic process, but a mystical,

³ For a detailed discussion and elaboration on the narrative and ontological status of these characters, who grow to become observers of their own situation and thus start sharing the position with their own author, ‘authoring’ and ‘writing’ themselves, see: Vanja Vukićević Garić, *Vidovi interakcije autora i teksta u prozi Džejsma Džojlsa (Forms of Author-Text Interactions in James Joyce’s Fiction)*. 2020. Podgorica: Univerzitet Crne Gore (University of Montenegro).

emotional event which favours the experience and not the knowledge of it.⁴ Both ethics and aesthetics are transcendental, whereas all the philosophical propositions are possible only in this world, in which all things exist as they are, independent of each other and without a system of values to relate them to. When stating that

‘My propositions serve as elucidations in the following way: anyone who understands me eventually recognizes them as nonsensical, when he has used them – as steps – to climb up beyond them. (He must, so to speak, throw away the ladder after he has climbed up it.) He must transcend these propositions, and then he will see the world aright’ (Wittgenstein 2002: 89),

Wittgenstein alludes to the propositions of the empirical sciences – these are the propositions that should be overcome because they reflect only what *can* be thought. This idea strongly resembles Joyce’s definition of ‘the classical temper’, which he praised and adhered to, that ‘ever mindful of limitations, chooses rather to bend upon these present things and so to work upon them and fashion them that the quick intelligence may go beyond them to their meaning which is still unuttered (Joyce 1984: 74). Joyce’s early realism, his Scholastic respect for the given, corresponds to Wittgenstein’s logical atomism not only in the sense that it acknowledges the independence of things as they are, but – crucially – in the ‘mindfulness of their limitations’ and the necessity to ‘go beyond them.’ Only when we reject the ladders (of the uttered) which have brought us outside, into the open, are we able to breathe in the fresh air of the (unuttered) secret of being. Going out into the open perhaps implies an attempt to overcome the three-dimensional space along with the determinism postulated by the Euclidian mindset. To throw away the ladder means to reject absolutisation of the metaphysics of reason. The rejection and negation take place through silence that is the ultimate stage on the voyage towards meaning and significance. It opens the door for a new metaphysics: the metaphysics of silence. Silence is what secures and preserves the autonomy of metaphysics, what keeps it safe from the dominance of (the traditional, habitual) mind and discursive thinking.

Just as it can rightfully be said that silence is the main topic and the central notion behind *Tractatus*, its essential vein and perhaps the main principle of its form, so can we assert that a specific rhetoric of absences and poetics of the unspoken have permeated Joyce’s fictional worlds from the beginning of his writing career. His particular textual strategies of de-personalisation are closely related to his conception of the Modernist artist who, if he wants to achieve his ideal of integrity, should remain ‘within or behind or beyond or above his handiwork, invisible, refined out of existence, indifferent, paring his fingernails’ (Joyce 1996: 245). In his early work, the obvious narrative devices which secured autonomy and invisibility of the author-figure implied, in addition to a reserved and detached style and the total absence of any commentary, the intentional omissions and textual gaps. Joyce’s calculated choice of ‘scrupulous meanness’ (Joyce 1975: 83) meant adherence to realistic details, their careful selection, and also their cold dissection and reductions to ‘logical atoms’, to use Wittgenstein’s concept, but in a way which allows the atoms and items of Dubliners’ reality to speak about themselves.

⁴ Cf. 6.432 How things are in the world is a matter of complete indifference for what is higher. God does not reveal himself in the world.

6.4321 The facts all contribute only to setting the problem, not to its solution.

6.44 It is not how things are in the world that is mystical, but that it exists. To view the world *sub specie aeterni* is to view it as a whole – a limited whole.

6.45 Feeling the world as a limited whole – it is this that is mystical (Wittgenstein 2002: 88).

Furthermore, this 'mean' narrative itemisation is often subtly performed through withholding of information. In that sense, one of the three 'enigmatic' words⁵ which haunt the narrator of the first story in *Dubliners* can be taken as a highly appropriate explanation of this textual principle: it is *gnomon*, a concept from the Euclidean geometry, which represents a figure that is formed when a smaller parallelogram is removed from two sides of a larger parallelogram (Gifford 1967: 30). *Gnomon* is, thus, an incomplete structure, an unfinished or deficient shape that lacks something very important to be considered 'full' and understandable.

The gnomonic structure of the stories in *Dubliners* is achieved through variety of formal choices, apart from the free indirect speech, which makes the protagonists' limited and deprived idiom and alienated point of view the dominant narrative voice and perspective. Unfinished sentences, punctuation that suggests absence and concealment of a significant information, such as three dots, dashes left 'hanging' and elliptical phrases – all belong to Joyce's elaborate poetics of purposeful exclusion. For example, in the story that opens the collection, 'The Sisters', the absences are even visually conspicuous: blank spaces are placed in the most important parts of the text, precisely in those which are expected to reveal the crucial thing in the narrative:

'No, I wouldn't say he was exactly ... but there was something queer ... there was something uncanny about him. I'll tell you my opinion...'

<...>

'I have my own theory about it', he said. 'I think it was one of those ... peculiar cases ... But it's hard to say ...' (Joyce 1993: 1).

What was 'uncanny' about the deceased priest is never revealed and the entire story, like every other in its own way, is structured around this missing information. Readers never find out what was the old pervert in 'An Encounter' actually doing that left the boys so upset, or what 'a soft wet substance' (ibid. 75) in the story 'Clay' represented. Yet, all that is interesting about a gnomonic figure is contained in that absent part – the little omitted parallelogram draws the greatest attention and creates the deepest tension. It delineates and determines what is present and visible, just as the Wittgensteinian idea of the unspoken gives significance to the spoken. Thus, the story titled 'Ivy Day in the Committee Room' is completely pervaded by the ghost of an Irish national hero, around which all the dialogues circle never mentioning him by name, whereas the most dominant and the most passionate absence, the one which symbolically and narratively transforms the final story in the collection, 'The Dead', is that of a long gone lover: a remainder that perhaps all great stories, like all great loves, are driven by the missing part(s).

In Badiou's view, Wittgenstein, just like Nietzsche, cultivated a certain contempt for metaphysics (just as Joyce cultivated his ironic and often derisive disapproval of the romantic style, as opposed to the classical), which led him, as he put it, towards a counter-philosophy, or anti-philosophy (Badiou 2011: 81). Nevertheless, the anti-philosophy is not an antipode to philosophy. Quite the opposite: it is philosophy in the most essential sense of the word. According to Badiou, all anti-philosophers, such as Pascal, Rousseau, Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Wittgenstein and Lacan, are masters of language. Their mastery is evident in their 'taste for confession' (Badiou 2011: 89). They are devoted to solitude and they want to show it, since an anti-philosopher lives

⁵ The first page of the collection introduces three words which, according to many critics, symbolise key concepts for understanding Joyce's 'chapter in the moral history' of his country. These are the following: paralysis, *gnomon* and *simony*.

his anti-philosophy. From that standpoint, anti-philosophy inverts classical values and *replaces truth with significance*. In addition to removing truth from the very nucleus of philosophy, anti-philosophy is also characterised by a removal of theory from the position of primacy in philosophy, as well as by deliberate neglect of past philosophical doctrines.

Similarly, Joyce's 'plotless' stories in *Dubliners* which have puzzled generations of readers due to their deliberate scarcity and 'scrupulous meanness' – in terms of style and content alike – radically challenge traditional forms when it comes to short fiction. Being structured through intriguingly silent or 'muted' rhetorical and poetical devices, they actually point to that large uncharted area that starts only where the boundaries of our hitherto familiar language end. With an evolved artistic consciousness, Joyce exuberantly explored that area in his later monumental novels, revolutionising fictional prose. Yet, the core of this artistic quest is to be found in his earliest fiction, in *Dubliners*, and that is precisely the quest for the answer to the essential question that Wittgenstein proposed in *Tractatus*: How can we define the limits of the significant language? The limits are unstable and movable, which was demonstrated by both Wittgenstein's and Joyce's subsequent shift towards multiplicity of answers to this question, as well as towards the multiplicity of linguistic forms that articulated those answers. In their early and formatively crucial periods, however, silence was a unique way to preserve and honour the beauty of the unspoken and the autonomy of metaphysics.

CONCLUSIONS

Examining the implications of Ludwig Wittgenstein's concept of silence, as expressed in his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, and analysing James Joyce's narrative techniques in *Dubliners*, this article sheds light on the ways in which Joyce's only short-story collection unmistakably illustrates the philosopher's views on the limits of significant language and his underlying criticism of the traditional metaphysics. *Dubliners* is a text which has been largely neglected when it comes to comparative studies of Wittgenstein and Joyce, as well as when it comes to considering Wittgenstein's analytic philosophy within the broader literary and intellectual context of Modernism. The close-reading of formal, structural and auto-poetic aspects of Joyce's style in these stories, which thematically focus on the depiction of psychological and linguistic paralysis, points to his deliberate choice of the rhetoric of silence, which strongly echoes Wittgenstein's criticism of the discursive thinking and the related alienation of the language that we usually use to speak of the unspeakable. Just as the philosopher, in his acknowledgment of the inadequacy of the common language, develops a certain metaphysics of silence, or an 'anti-philosophy', to preserve the autonomy of metaphysics, so does the writer, recognising various restrictions of the social and literary tradition, creates deliberately incomplete narrative structures to support his poetics of the allusiveness and thus preserve the significance of the unsaid. Based on the comparative analysis of the ideas that underlie *Tractatus*, on the one hand, and the main motifs and narrative methods used in *Dubliners*, on the other, this paper shows that for both Wittgenstein and Joyce silence was a way to protect the secret of being from the ordinary, imprecise and inadequate, worn out and overused, restricted and restrictive discourses.

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DARKO BLAGOJEVIĆ, VANJA VUKIĆEVIĆ GARIĆ

Reikšmingi nebuvimai: L. Wittgensteino tylos filosofija ir J. Joyce'o neišsakyto poetika

Santrauka

Straipsnyje aptariamas svarbus Ludwigo Wittgensteino analitinės filosofijos etapas, apimantis tylos sampratą, palyginti su kita svarbia XX a. figūra Jamesu Joyce'u. Remiamasi hipoteze, kad tarp jų ankstyvųjų darbų, t. y. tarp J. Joyce'o realistinio apsakymų rinkinio „Dubliniečiai“ ir L. Wittgensteino „Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus“ yra stulbinamų panašumų. Straipsnyje taikomi atidaus skaitymo, analitiniai-interpretaciniai ir lyginamieji metodai. Teigiama, kad tyla buvo tyčinis intelektualus, estetinis ir etinis abiejų šių autorių pasirinkimas, būdas išsaugoti metafizikos autonomiją ir pagerbti neišsakomą grožį. Abiem būdingas kritiškas įprastos ir iš esmės susvetimėjusios kalbos traktavimas. L. Wittgensteino filosofiniai samprotavimai dėl kasdienės kalbos netikslumo ir neadekvatumo sietini su J. Joyce'o miesto gyvenimo „dvasinio paralyžiaus“ samprata, kurią jis laikė pagrindiniu motyvu parašyti savo kūrinį apie Dubliną. Dėl bendros nuomonės apie žodžių ribas, už kurių slypi pasauliai, apie kuriuos negalima tinkamai byloti, tylos idėja arba reikšmingas pasakojimo nebuvimas persmelkia abiejų autorių kūrybą. L. Wittgensteino atveju tai yra kvietimas į naują filosofiją arba antifilosofiją, kuri, paneigdama metafiziką, iš esmės išsaugo savo nepriklausomybę nuo diskursyvosios kalbos, o J. Joyce'o atveju atitinkamai (ir beveik tuo pačiu metu) tai – naujo literatūrinio režimo ieškojimas išryškinant tam tikrą modernistinę užuominą, nutylėjimo retoriką ir sąmoningai neišsamias pasakojimo struktūras.

Raktažodžiai: Ludwigas Wittgensteinas, Jamesas Joyce'as, kalba, tikrovė, tyla, pasakojimo nebuvimas, metafizika, poetika