

The Other's Silence – between Complementarity and Distancing

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Abstract: Silence is an universal language. If there is anything that crosses multiple cultures, in ways that seem so familiar to anyone, this can be achieved by silence. The concept of silence does not need grammatical forms, declinations or accents, although it includes them on a subtle level, silence does not need, most of the time, translation, it goes without saying, because its peculiarities are predominantly emotional, and emotions are universal. Of course, there can be cultures of noise, just as, for example, there are cultures of silence, inclined towards an expression that includes to a very large extent the need for silence. In theatrical art, we cannot get rid of the “other” or the “others” – stage partner, audience, director, etc. The profile of a so-called “other” is a hypostasis that seems to offer a more intimate setting, a direct connection, without witnesses, that moment of wholeness to which a man, from time to time, aspires. The silent being attracts the being in need of an answer. Is “the other” a foreign, separate, culturally or metaphorically distanced formula? This study aims to x-ray moments where the other (either a character, a state, a world, etc.) meets another and decides to “complete” him, to adhere to each other's world, or, on the contrary, to cause him to distance himself and close himself in his own world. The gaze cast at the “other” is a glance thrown beyond the boundaries of one's own person – the gaze of one is silently linked to the gaze of the other.

Keywords: silence; body of silence; theatre; the Other.

The Other's silence still seems to be an insufficiently explored topic, or in any case it seems to be a commonplace subject matter for the collective mindset, since it is not necessarily considered a “phenomenon” one can relate to out of curiosity, or out of a need to discover what lies there *behind*, if there is any such place. We mean a silence beyond the borders of the self, which may trigger one's need to decipher the Other's mystery and secret, because silences come together with this load of the unknown. How much of the Other's silence do we understand and how much lies hidden and secret? Besides being a dialogue with one's own self, silence is also a relation, a dialogue with the Other. Its meaning is established according to the other factors that may accompany it: glance, gesture, sound, the direction of silence

being taken over by the body. In this study, I would also like to point out one of the aspects I will develop in my research, namely the means by which the word and silence are based on a technique; it is easier to perceive the technique behind the word than behind that of silence. More often than not, the actors' silences appear to us as authentic moments extracted from the reality of the present, and not as clear signs of a craft. In a way, we can have the *model* of the text's phrasing, but we seldom have a *model of silence*.

An analysis, a questioning of the way in which, through silence, either of gesture, of the body or the mere absence of the word, we relate to the Other, the *Other* hypostasis in whose mirror we see our reflection, by whom we often let ourselves be influenced, whether we want it or not, seems to be an analysis that risks to elude the concrete realm, since we are rather tempted to turn this silence into something abstract or to make our own assumptions with regards to it. *The other, the interlocutor*, with whom we are engaged in a dialogue, either verbal or non-verbal, on the stage, will always be the unknown or half-inferred path, taking into account that we cannot do without the *Other* in any possible way. The deep solitude itself often implies the following paradox: we experiment, in our own being, within our own self and in the closed intimate circle of our own person some kind of *other self*, an inner voice that we perceive as *another self*, another one who would do things differently, who would act in a totally different way, as if existence were a continual duality, either inwards or outwards.

At first sight, the word *Other* urges us to focus our attention, from the onset, upon something that seems foreign to us, something separate from us, as if two worlds were clearly outlined as distinct, and between them there might be a dialogue or not. As a rule, the supreme test two worlds are subjected to is exactly this: finding a common language, something to bring them close, but simultaneously this connection should occur by engaging the specific cultural background, something that confers them individuality and inevitably distances them at the same time. This is about a balance, a certain proportion of what belongs to us, what is outlined as unique and, at the same time, a proportion of what we can share and that belongs equally to me and to the *Other*. *Silence* either weighs towards an expansion of the space between the two worlds or, in our case, two characters, making them share the same language, which may eventually lead to a fusion of the worlds, where the *Other* becomes something much closer to me, because we have a tacit agreement, or, on the contrary, it determines the crude segmentation of the worlds, the strict demarcation, the impossibility of closeness, which leads to isolation, loneliness, estrangement, lack of contact, lack of understanding, of complicity, even of tolerance, and inevitably there is a deep lack of common language, a language that would familiarize us with each other, that would create a bridge between me and the *Other*.

Of course, in time, I have learned that the closeness with each other can occur through different methods, starting with learning a new language, getting in touch with countries whose culture is very different from ours, to adopting the customs, thinking patterns and even word loans from other languages. Theatre made no exception to the idea of loans. Many notions, tendencies and drama visions have underpinned the development of other perspectives upon the theatre performance – such as the famous example of *Commedia dell' Arte* for the classical comedy. So there have been various means by which worlds, and not only the worlds of art, have felt the need to migrate, travel, to cover the long or short road towards the *Other*, because this is what the *Other* means: a road, a process.

The numerous interconnections and migrations reveal a need of belonging, of safety and stability. This need is, paradoxically, doubled by another, which seems to keep the insides of the human being in a tense balance between an impulse to loneliness, detachment, dis severance, on the one hand, and their opposite – non-belonging, on the other. In this area, silence seems to feel more “at home” (because, obviously, there is this tendency of associating silence with some sort of mystery and intimacy of the self) than on the ground of fusion, completion, safety, belonging – notions partaking in the *social, socialization*, and the social means dialogue, speech, word, verbal entertaining of the *Other*.

In the theatrical act, the silence of the Other (which can be the characters' or the public's) may invite a very wide range of interpretations, including moments of complicity, tacit agreement, harmony, but also separation, overlooking, refusal, isolation, blockage, etc. (as they occur in the worlds of Chekhov's characters, where it is clear that the repeated use of “pauses” and “silences” indicates a discrepancy, a mental and emotional desynchronizing among the characters).

The moments when silence becomes an instrument that is complementary or completes another part – be it *another* silence or a word – are moments when the mirroring in the *Other* seems to be perceptible (I mention here the interdependence of Beckett's characters, where *silence as a kind of convergence* is more clearly outlined). Since silences are so global and universal, when two characters are silent this sense of *fusion-silences* is created, the effect being the illusion that they coalesce, in other words they are not clearly separated, nor do they obviously signal the identity of each silence, while the word has this capacity. The individuation of silence depends to a large extent upon the factors giving it direction – glance, gestures, body language in general, but also as a sonorous background – music having this extraordinary capacity of giving significance and meaning to silence. “The Power of Music and Film” documentary sets out this idea according to which the sonorous backgrounds have a determining role in the

subtle orientation and intensity of the narrative thread. This concept of the discreet relation between music and silence is intensely used in the art films, especially by Tarkovski.

On stage, the silences among characters cannot be exactly silences, we do not perceive them as a plurality unless they are interrupted by words, because they come together in a more ample silence that we would almost perceive as a *body of silence*, a third subtle and invisible character. Chekhov uses the sonorous dimension as a character that he introduces on stage through those moments of pause and silence. Thus, the sound is *another* that is manifested discreetly and in close connection with silence.

A facet of the Other's silence also refers to the Other's loneliness, to the moments of isolation and estrangement from the outside world. In Ingmar Bergman's *Persona* we encounter the formula of the Other's silence as distancing. The film opens a space between a character's verbal flux and the other's deliberate silence, which causes deep effects on both sides and in which communication takes place through glances that now speak of emotional agreement, now of a deep lack of agreement, small and repetitive gestures, tensions that manage to transpire among these moments and numerous moments of shared silence (*the Other's complementary silence*, i.e. the silent witness who completes my story, the silence, the words; here the Other's silence marks their capacity of turning their attention towards an interior monologue) and unshared dialogue (the Other's silence that is prone to isolation; the witness is, indeed, in this case, only a witness of circumstances, which they feel no need to alter); all these become the central axis of communication. Here silence is not just silence; the silent character in *Persona* uses *silence as a mask*, some sort of obstacle to any connection with the Other, but at the same time this silence assumed as a mask seems to open new possibilities of relating to the Other, of deep and intimate knowledge between two persons. The Other's silence estranges the *Other* and the others related to them. Thus, an aura of mystery takes shape, and that attracts like a magnet and intrigues the audience. The film's progress is essentially based on the individual's fierce need to alter things, each trying to control and to take command of a narrative that threatens to throw everything into havoc, either by excessive speech or by a deep and endless silence. In these two different ways of maintaining control there is a clash, the impact of the two characters that fluctuate in being close and taking a distance, in isolation and intimacy, each putting the Other's private space in jeopardy, or, conversely, ensuring a meeting space beyond what can be uttered.

The Other's silence is uncomfortable, and the longer it takes the more impenetrable the enigma grows, triggering chaos, dilemmas, uncertainty, imbalance. But is there always in the Other's silence only a permanent, unfluctuating dissociation in what concerns the relation with the others? At a

first stage, the Other and the Other's silences feel like signs of a voluntary and conscious act of revolt, which seems to emphasize a firm determination – a decision that reveals a closed, impenetrable and dour person. This can be rendered by many aspects – glance, gestures, body posture. In *The Man's Back*, George Banu mentions that “the back turned is associated with confession”¹, therefore we may suggest that there are moments when the word hides, while the silence exposes. In these cases, the Other's silence becomes revealing. Elisabet's silences in *Persona* seem to have two poles of manifestation – one of the silences, which acts like a veil for Alma's perception, i.e. the silences whose role is to block intimate knowledge, and one of *confessional* silences, i.e. that reference to spiritual, mental and emotional complicity. Through this type of silence-confession the characters complete each other, they become complementary. The *Other* becomes a support, and the silent and passive witness is now an active one. The Other's silences trigger here a circle of intimacy. Alma survives the Other's silence like Beckett's characters – through the word, through excessive verbalization, even when she is silent in the name of that unuttered complicity, this silence is disquieting; Paul Goodman calls it “confused silence” or “the silence of the peaceful agreement with other persons or of the communion with the cosmos”². Elisabet's silence is so much impregnated into the film narrative that it becomes a continuous discourse, perfectly overlapping other types of discourse in the film, blending the two characters in a natural agreement in the sense of a harmonious constellation that functions under its own parameters. In most of his films, Bergman captures the deepest aspects of human nature, amplifying and diversifying them in relations dominated by an unconscious dynamic. For Bergman, the Other is a mirror, the essence of all future actions and thoughts, as if the director wanted to ensure us of the whole and all-encompassing existence of *another* who dominates and guides our decisions, almost effortlessly. Therefore, silence is an appropriate filter for these interconnections and reciprocal influences to take place. One way or another, Bergman clearly emphasizes the fact that it is not by means of the word that one reaches the depths of the human being but by means of silence, especially the Other's silence.

After all, the different facets of human silences seem to be congruent; the circle of intimacy entails mooring in the apparently distinct poles of the same silence – the complementarity among characters or their distancing. Mirroring in the Other occurs in the relational flux as a kind of loan – owing a glance, a gesture, a sensation, a mood. In a way, the word separates, while

¹ George Banu, *Spatele omului, Pictură și Teatru* [The Man's Back, Painting and Theatre], translated from French by Ileana Littera, București, Editura Nemira, 2008, p. 100.

² Article *Paul Goodman on The Nine Kinds of Silence*, published in the “The Marginalian” magazine, 2015.

silence unites in the same way in which “the front individuates, and the back levels”³. However, both hypostases, that of the front and that of the *back turned*, are often confessions of the same mood, of the same instinct.

(Translated by Dana Bădulescu)

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³ George Banu, *op. cit.*, p. 149.