

Sarah Eaton  
Department of French, Italian and Spanish  
University of Calgary  
March 8, 1996

Gender Symposium, 1996

Silence and the New Science: Isabel Allende in a Quantum Age<sup>1</sup>

Isabel Allende's first novel *The House of the Spirits* (*La casa de los espíritus*) (1981) is a novel rich with family and political history, magic and spirituality, offering the reader intricately interwoven relationships among the characters which construct the fabric of Allende's narration. One aspect of these relationships which the reader might overlook at first glance, but which, nonetheless, upon closer examination proves itself an integral element of the characters' relationships (especially male-female relations) is silence.

In order to explore a phenomena such as silence, it is first necessary to define the terms used to discuss the argument. It is precisely the definition of silence that will be explored in this brief study with the basic

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<sup>1</sup> This study and its title were inspired by Margaret J. Wheatley's book on the structure of human organizations entitled *Leadership and the New Science: Learning about Organizations from an Orderly Universe* (Berret-Koehler Publishers, San Francisco: 1992.) Even though I have not cited directly from the book, Wheatley's work must nonetheless be accredited as having had a great impact on this study.

objective of not only arriving at a workable definition for the purposes of researching Allende's *The House of the Spirits*, but also developing one which could apply to studies of silence in other works as well.

References to the positive aspects of silence have existed for hundreds of years, as Leslie Kane notes in *The Language of Silence: On the Unspoken and the Unspeakable in Modern Drama* (1984):

Hermetic traditions such as Zen, Taoism, mysticism, and Hasidism have always placed a premium on silent communication, regarding the act of speech as human intervention, presumption, assertion, vulgarization, indeed, blasphemy. (21)

In the novel *House of the Spirits* a positive connection between silence and spirituality is recognized when silence is called a "Brahmanic refuge" (114).

The other side of the coin is that silence has also been viewed as a void, a nothingness that needs to be filled with words in order to be validated. In her book, *The Reading of Silence: Virginia Woolf in the English Tradition* (1991) Patricia Oudek Laurence maintains that there are three categories of silence identifiable in Woolf's work: the unsaid (something one might have felt but does not say); the unspoken (something not yet formulated

or expressed in voiced words) and the unsayable (something not utterable based on the social taboos of Victorian propriety or something about life that is ineffable.) (Laurence 1)

These same categories could be used to define various types of silence in any work, including that of Allende. It would follow that the keen observer would then note every instance of silence and subsequently label it according to Laurence's definition. This methodology finds little or no importance in the role of the observer (participant).

One could interpret this approach as corresponding loosely to a Newtonian reductionist vision of the world in which things must be broken down into parts, classified, and studied individually with the belief that comprehension of the individual parts is sufficient to understand the whole and, further, that the world is an object apart from its observers. Such an approach necessarily defines something as what it is not. This approach to reality tends to exclude the human interaction which occurs in the "measuring" (sensing) of the experience.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The concept of "measuring" something using numbers and aparati seems to be slightly foreign when we discuss literature, but the term "sensing" or "interpreting" will serve well for our purposes.

If we examine Laurence's categorizations of silence not in an impoverished reductionist sense, but rather in a quantum sense, then we thus must investigate the relationships between the various kinds of silence in respect to the characters in Woolf's work and the situations in which they are portrayed. But this in itself is not enough. Then, we must also consider Woolf's position as a woman and the relationship she, and most women, had to silence in the social and historical context in which she wrote. Finally, the reader's own relationship to Woolf's writing, as well as his perception of what Laurence means when she speaks about the "unspoken", the "unspeakable" and the "unsaid" is an essential element of a quantum interpretation. If we chose to view all of these relationships as inseparable, suddenly our study has expanded from a methodical, mundane categorization of silence(s) into a far richer exploration which may be explored on various levels - any one of which could greatly increase the reader's understanding of Woolf's use of silence while at the same time inviting her to actively and critically examine or re-read silence from her own viewpoint.

Thus, we can identify several relationships in these examples. First, we must have knowledge of the context in which the silence exists, therefore we

must have some kind of relationship to the situation. (In this case, that would be the relationship between the reader and the text). Secondly, we must understand the relationship between the silence and the people or characters involved. Finally, we can identify the relationship between the silence and our own knowledge, prejudice and cultural biases that will cause us to interpret it in a certain way. These same principles may be used when examining silence in Isabel Allende's *The House of the Spirits*.

As Alistair Rae states in his book, *Quantum Physics: Illusion or Reality?* (1986) "quantum physics leads to the rejection of determinism" (3). This is effectively illustrated by "The Copenhagen Interpretation" of quantum physics, which reflects the ideas of Danish physicist Niels Bohr. Bohr, was a contemporary of Einstein, but unlike his colleague, who questioned quantum physics and sought to reveal its inconsistencies, Bohr chose, as Rae states:

to accept the quantum ideas completely and to explore their consequences for our ways of thinking about the physical universe. Central to the Copenhagen interpretation is a distinction between the microscopic quantum world and the everyday *macroscopic* apparatus was use to make measurements. (48) (Rae's emphasis).

This approach is where science and literature can come closer together. If Bohr can extend his thinking from the microscopic world of photons, wave-particle duality and polarizations to everyday "macroscopic" objects such as billiard balls, cars or photon detectors (Rae 57), then students of literature could apply the same ideas to dialogue. Thus, dialogue is not simply composed of speech and silences, but that dialogue embraces the same "fundamental indeterminism" as quantum physics (Rae 49) and that the engagement of the reader in an intellectual interpretation constitutes the same process as the scientist who attempts to measure his quantum system.

Kane supports this assertion with the comment:

. . . expression such as innuendo, intimation, hesitation, reticence and ambivalent speech . . . implicit conveys more than it states. To adhere strictly to the commonly accepted, narrow definition of silence as the absence of speech would eliminate these diverse forms of implicit expressions as elements of a language of silence." (Kane 15)

Nowhere could the influence of silence be better employed than in modern drama, on a stage where the audience depends on the sensory input of only

sight and sound to understand and appreciate the work. What if we were to imagine silence not as an absence of sound, or discourse, not as an absence of anything, but as part of our entire communication process, one that exists in relation to sounds, discourse, and all the mental processes that accompany our understanding of that communication process? For example, the silence in the room where two people are praying would be vastly different from the silence in the room where two people were angry with one another. We understand the difference because we understand these people's relationship to the silence. If we did not, silence would in fact, be nothing more than a sensory void. A simple reductionist definition cannot make this distinction. It is because we can attach the cognitive activity of contemplation or the emotion of anger to silence that it exists as a presence, rather than an absence. The fact that we emphasize the observer in this view forces us to reflect on the complex motivations of the characters.

If we take a moment to explore two memorable episodes in the novel *The House of the Spirits*, we see that silence weaves itself into both of them. The first of these episodes takes place when young Clara del Valle, a principal

character, is witness to the post-mortem violation of her sister, Rosa, by the physician's assistant:

She could not move until the first lights of dawn appeared. Only then did she slide back into her bed, feeling within her the silence of the entire world. Silence filled her utterly. She did not speak again until nine years later, when she opened her mouth to announce that she was planning to be married. (39)

It is interesting to note that her first silence begins at dawn, the literal beginning of a new day and metaphoric commencement of a new life and of hope.

It could be argued that young Clara's muteness is the involuntary reaction of a child who is traumatized. If this is so, we must question how and why this first silence lasts nine years. The answer is to be found in a later reference to the same period in the character's life, "Clara was ten years old when *she decided* that speaking was pointless and locked herself in silence. Her life changed markedly" (73). (My emphasis.) It is evident that the subject chooses silence in favour of other forms of communication.

It follows then, that we must then examine Clara's relationship to the situation at hand. There are several factors to consider at this point. The



first is the loss of her elder sister and all the grief and sense of loss associated with such an experience create an emotional trauma that could leave anyone at a loss for words.

Secondly, the rape of Rosa must indeed be considered. Being witness to such an assault could negatively affect any observer, but then to add to the horror that it is one's older sister (associated with being both friend and role model) who is being violated, the experience becomes even more horrendous. Finally, when we add the disgust of necrophilia, the rape of Rosa becomes an experience that would be terrifying for any ten-year old to watch.

The third factor would be that witnessing a medical assistant, someone who is traditionally viewed as a trustworthy and authoritative member of society, transformed into a depraved criminal is certainly traumatic. This would further, destroy both an image that young Clara had of the doctor and any trust that she had in him.

After having examined the rape of her sister, we are led also to consider the violation of her home. The experience of witnessing both the autopsy and the rape in the private and otherwise safe environment of her home would shatter Clara's concept of home as a safe and tranquil place. Finally,

the guilt that would accompany a young child sneaking about her house during the night to watch something forbidden must also be considered.

Once all these factors are added to Clara's subsequent silence, the reader's overall impression and understanding deepens and then the silence becomes inseparable from the events that caused it, the character who adopts it and the reader who understands it.

Another factor to consider when we speak of the case of Clara is her life-long activity of writing, to note the most important things in life. In her article, "El mito y la magia femenina en *La casa de los espíritus*", Susan Lucas Dobrian calls Clara's silence "una potencialidad positiva" (a positive potential.) The idea of "una potencialidad positiva" is a crucial factor because it offers the possibility of a creative power which, in this case, is realized through writing. Clara inverts the traditional idea of silence as an external imposition relating to a lack of power, obedience and subservience into a form of inner dialogue in which she chooses to relate to the world around her in written form. Thus, for Lucas Dobrian, as for us, the space of silence, is closely connected to sexual politics. By choosing silence, Clara creates a dialectical space of her own, (with all references to Virginia Woolf

intended), one inside of herself, in which she can freely explore, create and express her own dialogue and her own text.

The second episode occurs years later when Clara is an adult and her abusive husband, Esteban Trueba, beats her during an argument, knocking out her front teeth, "Clara never spoke to her husband again. She stopped using her married name and removed the fine gold wedding ring that he had placed on her finger twenty years before . . ." (201).

Clara has discovered that not only can silence be used to create a safe mental/spiritual/emotional space in which she can write freely, but has further employed silence as a means of freeing herself from Esteban's power over her. He may batter her, but he may not force her to speak and enter his masculine/patriarchal realm in which he is the controller. One can further question that if Clara denies him power to her dialectical space, is she also symbolically denying him free access to other, more physical, feminine spaces? This would certainly appear to be the case, as Esteban explains a few pages before the episode in which Clara stops speaking to her husband forever:

One day, Clara had a bolt installed on her bedroom door and after that she never let me in her bed again, except when I forced

myself on her and when to have said no would have meant the end of our marriage. At first I thought that she had one of those strange ailments women get from time to time, or else her menopause, but when it persisted for several weeks I decided we'd better have a talk. She calmly explained that our marriage had deteriorated and that she had lost her natural inclination for the pleasures of the flesh. She had concluded that if we had nothing to say to each other, we would also be unable to share a bed, and she seemed surprised that I could spend all day being furious at her and then wish to spend the night making love. (179)

It is these episodes and the questions that emerge from them that have led to further exploration of silence within the novel.

In conclusion, once the relationships between reader, text and context have been established, the understanding gained because of them can never be undone. Thus, the reader - the subject who "measures", to use a scientific term, or who "interprets" to use a literary term - becomes a participant in the silence through the attempt to understand it. The reader must connect silence to all the other elements of not only discourse, but also

setting, history, cultural and social constructs and, finally, other characters and the reader cannot be satisfied to simply label, dissect and categorize in the traditional Newtonian reductionist manner that literary theorists so often strive to do, in an attempt to achieve a "true" (i.e. scientific) reading of that art which we call literature.

Furthermore, this quantum method of reading is in no way meant to reject or diminish other methodologies used in literary interpretation, such as Reader Reception Theory (Jauss or Iser, for example) or other "scientific" approaches to literature such as the field theories of N. Katherine Hayle. Instead, the idea of a quantum reading is meant to offer another model through which one can understand literature. Silence, like the quantum system, embraces the same fundamental indeterminacy and paradoxes simply by its existence. By acknowledging that each reader will interpret a text differently based not only on his or her experience, aesthetic appreciation and biases, we further acknowledge the indeterminacy of the text - and its silences - allowing it to exist beyond the boundaries of time, culture and geography, and, like the observer of a quantum system, the reader who interprets changes

the text forever upon examining it and attempting to understand and interpret  
it.

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