

Describing the Indescribable: How Do We Navigate the Limitations of Language?

Many phrases in language are the result of our attempts to communicate that which is beyond description. From “there are no words” being used to describe unutterable tragedies, to being rendered “speechless”, we subconsciously make space for the knowledge that words can only take us so far. Something actively avoided in light of its sheer significance adopts a presence so overwhelming and almost physical it is referred to as “the elephant in the room”. In ceremonial grief, we engage in a deliberate and formal detachment from speech through “a moment of silence”. Whether a result of culture or instinct, situations of emotional upheaval push us away from the verbal. We use these words - or lack of words - to empathise, communicate overwhelm, or pay respect. They function as an extended invitation towards a mutual understanding of severity in hopes that which is too abstract to grasp can somehow be conveyed.

Silence as a mode to register grief, trauma, and the finality of death has its roots in linguistics’ inability to define the psychological toll certain emotions take on ourselves and our perspective on life. The instinct to abandon the technology of spoken language in the midst of an intensely emotional event can be attributed to the initial shock of what has happened but, with the passage of time, becomes something more than merely the result of a freeze-response. Many studies of trauma prove this tendency towards silence continues to dominate in the aftermath; as we lose faith in words as a means through which we can adequately communicate our experience, we lose faith in the hope of being understood by anyone other than those who experienced the same event. Dr Peter Capretto addresses failed strategies to comfort the bereaved in *Empathy and Silence in Pastoral Care for Traumatic Grief and Loss* (2014); “Like a flash of lightning that sets fire to an expansive electrical system, the event of trauma ruptures the capacity to respond because it changes the very landscape of a reply— linguistically, empathically.”¹ Meeting weeks after the events of 9/11, Giovanna Borradori’s *Philosophy in A Time Of Terror* (2003) documented

¹ Peter Capretto, *Empathy and Silence in Pastoral Care for Traumatic Grief and Loss*, (New York; 2014) (p. 349)

dialogue between German philosopher Jürgen Habermas and French-Algerian philosopher Jacques Derrida in their attempt to quantify the capacity of trauma to destabilise the mind. Together, they conceded that the traditional approach to trauma - empathizing, caregiving, talking through it - was ultimately futile when the overwhelm experienced is indescribable. “What remains ‘infinite’ in this wound is that we do not *know* what it is and so do not know how to describe, identify or even name it.”²

Directly opposed to trauma on the spectrum of human emotion and yet arguably quite comparable in its lasting effect is the experience of love and infatuation. In the realm of psychology, the study of the ‘overwhelm’ an individual is faced with in this scenario is approached with classification, just as with attempts to grasp grief; “More than with more psychological constructs, considerable energy has been devoted toward developing a taxonomy of love— for example, Rubin’s early distinction between liking and loving, Sternberg’s tripartite model of passion, intimacy and commitment, and Lee’s systematic classification of various love constructs...”³ Introducing the formulaic to the discussion of love clashes with philosophy’s take, however. As Dora Zhang argues in *Naming the Indescribable* (2014), the ‘rapture’ of such emotions can only be addressed abstractly – in this case, through ‘qualia’.⁴ Referring to “the way things seem to us” and famous for its “explanatory gap”, qualia describes the transcendentalism of perceptual experiences, bodily sensations, reactions, passions, moods. “No matter how deeply we probe into the physical structure of neurons and the chemical transactions which occur when they fire, no matter how much objective information we come to acquire, we still seem to be left with something that we cannot explain.”⁵ By virtue of being unique to the lived perspective of each individual, these experiences exist outside the technology that we use to make sense of them. In Jane Austen’s *Emma* (1815), George Knightly perfectly demonstrates this sentiment in his clumsy attempt to piece together a sentence that

² Giovanna Borradori, *Philosophy in a time of Terror*, (University of Chicago Press, 2003) (p. 94)

³ Harry T. Reis, Arthur Aron, ‘Love: What is it, why does it matter and how does it operate?’ in *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, Vol. 3 part 1 (p. 82)

⁴ Dora Zhang, ‘Naming the Indescribable: Woolf, Russell, James and the Limits of Description’ in *New Literary History*, vol. 45. (Johns Hopkins University Press; 2004) (p.53)

⁵ Michael Tye, “Qualia”, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*
<<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/qualia/>> [accessed april 7th]

justifies the extent of his inner turmoil: “I cannot make speeches, Emma. If I loved you less I might be able to talk about it more.”⁶

The weight of the unsaid is felt almost physically. An undeniable presence of something yet to be addressed is referred to as “the elephant in the room.” Definition acts as a clutch through which we establish control over our reality. In *Culture, Communication and Silence* (1968), S. N. Ganguly states that objects acquire significance through naming. Through identifying previously undefined aspects of life we exert a sort of dominance over the fragility of our existence. “Giving names to things thus gives us a strange sense of security... things appear less cruel and powerful. This primitive awareness in us instilled, in the very beginning of our culture, almost a magical power in the heart of words.”⁷ In finding a way to collectively address our experience on Earth, we rise above the boundaries of our singular perspective. Faith in the truth and clarity of language serves as a salve through which we can soothe the innate fear of being misunderstood. As playwright Arthur Miller puts it, “The very impulse to write springs from an inner chaos for order, for meaning.”⁸ And yet, Ganguly elaborates, the architecture of language when faced with something ineffable - love, mortality, injustice - ultimately collapses in on itself. “The tension that we suffer from our desire to express is not accidental or temporary, but intrinsic to the language-orientated culture that we have... The conflict is between our desire to express and the failure of expression.”⁹

Many of our most admired poets, playwrights and essayists, all hailed for their supposed capacity to fit the enormity of life into a sentence, find themselves ultimately at odds with the restrictions of their own expertise. T. S. Elliot in ‘*Burnt Norton*’, the first poem of *Four Quartets* (1941), writes, “Words strain,

⁶ Jane Austen, *Emma* (John Murray; 1815) p. 389.

⁷ S. N. Ganguly, ‘Culture, Communication and Silence’ in *Philosophy and phenomenological Research*, Vol. 29, (1968)

⁸ Arthur Miller, Matthew Charles Roudané, ‘*Conversations with Arthur Miller*’, p.287, (University Press of Mississippi, 1987)

⁹ . N. Ganguly, ‘Culture, Communication and Silence’ in *Philosophy and phenomenological Research*, Vol. 29, (1968)

crack and sometimes break, under the burden, under the tension, slip, slide, perish, decay with imprecision.”¹⁰ *A Street Car Named Desire*’s Tennessee Williams, worshipped for his lyrical dialogue, on the weight of the unsaid over the expressed; “Under what we say to each other is the much more articulate silence of what we don’t say... a storm of things unspoken, reserved, appointed, ticking away like a clock attached to a time-bomb.”¹¹ James Baldwin, in discussing artistry, admits its essence is something no wordsmith has ever been able to adequately describe; “that funny terrible thing which every artist can recognise and no artist can define.”¹²

David Mamet, filmmaker and author of *‘On Directing Film’* (1996), addresses writing in a similar vein to Tennessee Williams; “The key to writing a great script is not what is said, but what is not said.”¹³ Relying on direct communication over demonstration through the intricacies of human behaviour is ill-advised when the confines of language limit expression. Instances of the instinct to opt for silence over dialogue as characters navigate the incomprehensible can be found in every corner of film; in *JoJo Rabbit* (2019), 10-year-old JoJo, ignorant to the reality of Hitler’s regime, finally registers the severity of war when he finds his mother, Rosie, hanging in the street. We recognise Rosie by her shoes, and we recognise the extent of JoJo’s innocence as he tries in vain to tie them. The brutality at play here is established through visualisation rather than words. In a scene completely void of dialogue, the audience registers Rosie’s death at the same speed as JoJo and, as we match the pace of the boy before us instead of being spoon-fed something to the tune of “Your mother’s dead,” the capacity for what we see to resonate is freed from the predetermined pathways of interpretation speech paves for us. Similarly, in *Mulan* (1998), an abandoned doll is found among the ashes of a burnt village. Rather than lamenting the realisation that not even children were spared in the conflict, Mulan silently clutches the doll to her chest, and the scene is

¹⁰ TS Elliot, *Burnt Norton, Four Quartets* (Harcourt Brace & Co, New York; 1943)

¹¹ Tennessee Williams, ‘A Separate Poem’ from *The Collected Poems of Tennessee Williams*, (New Directions, 2002)

¹² James Baldwin, *The Cross of Redemption: Uncollected Writings*, (Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group; 2010) p. 45

¹³ David Mamet, *On Directing Film* (Penguin Books; 1996), p. 23.

subsequently made all the more powerful as the audience understands the gravity of the violence without having some blatant proclamation stare them in the face. Continuing the theme of love and loss in animation, the first 10 minutes of *Up* (2009) consists of a completely silent and famously heartbreaking montage depicting Carl's relationship with his now-deceased wife as it blossoms and decays. Set to Michael Giacchino's instrumental 'Married Life', there is not a lyric nor line of dialogue featured.

T. E. Hulme's 1911 essay '*Romanticism and Classicism*' argued for the advent of a new form of description that favoured accuracy and precision. Hulme's creation would, in theory, afford us the ability to conquer the "indescribable" and allow us to communicate the true nature of severe experience. Stubborn in his efforts and yet ultimately coming to the same conclusion as S. N. Ganguly, Hulme states, "Language is by its very nature a communal thing; that is, it expresses never the exact thing but a compromise— that which is common to you, me and everybody. To get out clearly and exactly what he does see, he must have a terrific struggle with language."¹⁴ Hulme's conclusion, though seemingly disheartening, ultimately advocates for embracing the mysticism this struggle enables. In our attempt to bridge the divide between our mind and another's, in our attempt to find a middle ground among the unique receptors that govern our individual experiences on Earth, all that can be guaranteed is the projection of a diluted version of what it means to you. But that does not negate the potential for beauty that lies in the act of attempting, regardless.

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¹⁴ T. E Hulme's, *Romanticism and Classicism*, Poetry Foundation, published Feb 15 2010, accessible at <<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/69477/romanticism-and-classicism>> [accessed March 22]

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