

Silence as Form: Absence, Withholding, and Resistance in Contemporary Political Poetry

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Abstract

This paper examines silence not as the failure of political poetry to speak but as one of its most deliberate formal strategies. In contexts of censorship, surveillance, and state violence, poets have long used omission, blank space, redaction, and unfinished syntax to register what direct statement cannot safely or adequately convey. This paper builds a critical vocabulary for reading these strategies, drawing on Sontag's account of the aesthetics of silence, Said's writing on culture under conditions of domination, and Foucault's analysis of discourse and power.

The paper argues that silence in political poetry operates on two registers simultaneously: as a protective strategy that allows a poet to gesture toward forbidden content without stating it outright, and as an aesthetic argument that the scale of certain historical violence exceeds the capacity of direct language to represent it. These two functions are not separate motivations but a single formal choice, since the poem that withholds direct statement under conditions of repression often thereby also performs, in its very withholding, an argument about the limits of representation.

The paper concludes by proposing that silence should be treated as an active formal resource within the study of political poetry, rather than as a gap to be filled by biographical or historical context, since the meaning of the silence lies precisely in its refusal to be filled.

Keywords

Silence, Resistance Poetry, Censorship, Absence, Political Aesthetics

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INTRODUCTION

Political poetry written under conditions of censorship or state violence faces a persistent difficulty: the more directly it names the abuses it opposes, the more likely it is to be suppressed, and the poet along with it. Across many literary traditions, poets writing under repressive conditions have developed formal strategies of indirection, silence, omission, fragmented syntax, deliberate blank space, that allow the poem to register what cannot be stated outright. This paper treats these strategies not as compromises forced on poets by circumstance but as a distinct and studiable aesthetic mode, one in which withholding functions as actively as statement.

The Aesthetics of Silence

Sontag's essay on the aesthetics of silence argues that certain art, faced with subject matter it considers too vast, too painful, or too sacred for ordinary speech, turns toward silence as a mode of

seriousness rather than a failure of nerve. Silence, in this account, is not the absence of meaning but a heightened form of it, a way of signaling that the available language is inadequate to the weight of what it would need to describe. Sontag's framework, developed primarily in relation to modernist art and literature, applies with particular force to political poetry written in the aftermath of state violence, where direct description risks either understating the horror through the very act of rendering it in ordinary sentences, or exposing the poet and the poem's subjects to further harm.

This aesthetic register of silence should be distinguished from silence as mere absence of content. The silence Sontag describes is a positioned silence, one the reader is meant to notice as a choice, framed by enough surrounding language to register as a deliberate withholding rather than an empty page. Political poetry

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frequently constructs exactly this kind of framed silence: a poem that builds toward a moment of direct naming and then swerves away from it, leaving the reader to register the swerve as itself the poem's most significant gesture.

DISCOURSE, POWER, AND THE UNSAYABLE

Foucault's analysis of discourse as inseparable from power offers a complementary vocabulary for understanding why certain content becomes literally unsayable under repressive conditions, not merely unwise to say. Foucault argues that every social order produces its own regime of what can be spoken, by whom, and in what register, and that this regime is enforced not only through explicit censorship but through subtler mechanisms that make certain statements unthinkable within the available discourse before they are ever punished. Political poets writing under authoritarian conditions often work at precisely this boundary, testing what the prevailing discourse will permit to be said and finding, in silence and indirection, a way to gesture at what lies just beyond that boundary without crossing it outright.

Said's writing on culture and domination extends this analysis to the specific situation of colonized or occupied peoples, where the very language available for political expression has often been shaped by the dominant power whose actions the poet seeks to resist. Said's account of culture as a site of contest, rather than a neutral medium, clarifies why silence can function as resistance in these contexts: it withholds content from a linguistic and discursive system that the poet has reason to distrust, refusing to translate suffering into terms the dominant power has already prepared to receive and neutralize.

Reading the Withheld

A recurring temptation in the criticism of political poetry is to treat silence and omission as gaps to

be filled by biographical or historical research, as if the poem's true meaning were the censored content the poet was prevented from stating and criticism's task were simply to recover it. This paper argues for a different approach: the silence itself carries meaning that direct statement would not have carried, and filling the gap with reconstructed content, however historically accurate, risks erasing the formal argument the poem is making through its refusal to speak. A poem that withholds a name, a date, or a direct accusation is not simply hiding information; it is making a claim about what language under these conditions can and cannot safely or adequately hold.

Reading for this claim requires attention to the shape of the silence as much as its content: where in the poem the withholding occurs, how much surrounding language frames it, and what syntactic or structural cues signal that an absence is deliberate rather than accidental. This mode of reading treats the poem's blank spaces, unfinished sentences, and evasions as compositional choices as consequential as its explicit statements, and asks what argument about power, danger, and representability those choices make.

HISTORICAL PRECEDENTS: POETRY UNDER CENSORSHIP

The strategic use of silence and indirection in political poetry has a long history that predates any single twentieth or twenty-first century context, and situating contemporary examples within this longer history clarifies what is genuinely new about current practice and what continues an established tradition. Poets writing under state censorship across many different historical moments have converged, independently, on remarkably similar formal solutions: allegory that displaces political content onto historical or mythological settings distant enough to escape direct censure, address to an

ambiguous or absent listener that leaves the poem's target unspecified, and abrupt formal disruption, a broken line, an unfinished stanza, that signals content has been withdrawn rather than never composed. The recurrence of these strategies across otherwise unconnected literary traditions suggests that they are not idiosyncratic responses to particular censorship regimes but something closer to a shared formal grammar that emerges wherever poets face serious constraints on direct political speech.

This historical continuity matters critically because it warns against treating any single poet's use of silence as purely personal or biographically specific. A poem's fragmented syntax or its refusal to name a perpetrator directly should be read first against this broader tradition of censorship-era formal strategy, and only secondarily against the individual poet's particular biography. Reading in this comparative register also reveals how the meaning of a given silence shifts depending on genre expectations; the same withheld name that would read as coy or evasive in a poem written under conditions of free expression reads as a serious formal argument about danger and representability when the surrounding historical context makes the risks of direct speech legible to the reader.

SILENCE, TRANSLATION, AND THE LIMITS OF TRANSMISSION

A further complication arises when political poetry that relies on strategic silence circulates in translation, since translation itself is a process that tends to resolve ambiguity rather than preserve it. A translator faced with a deliberately unfinished sentence or an intentionally ambiguous pronoun must often choose a single resolved meaning in the target language, even where the source text's power depended precisely on leaving that meaning unresolved. This creates a persistent risk that politically motivated silence, designed to

protect the poet and to make a formal argument about the limits of say ability, becomes flattened in translation into simple obscurity or stylistic vagueness, stripped of the historical context that would allow a target-language reader to recognize the silence as a considered choice rather than a translation artifact.

Adorno's famous and much-debated remark about the difficulty of writing poetry after historical atrocity, offered initially as a provocation about whether art could adequately respond to mass violence at all, is frequently invoked in discussions of this translational problem, though Adorno's own later writing complicated and partially retracted the claim's more absolute readings. What remains useful in Adorno's broader argument is the underlying insight that certain historical experiences place real pressure on the adequacy of aesthetic form, a pressure that silence in political poetry registers directly. When such poetry crosses linguistic borders, criticism has a responsibility to make this pressure visible to readers who might otherwise mistake formal withholding for simple untranslatability or authorial vagueness.

CONCLUSION

Silence in political poetry is neither a failure to speak nor a simple placeholder for censored content waiting to be recovered by historical research. It is a formal strategy that performs two functions at once: protecting the poet and the poem's subjects under conditions where direct statement carries real danger, and making an aesthetic argument that certain historical violence exceeds what ordinary language can adequately represent. Treating silence as an active formal resource, rather than an absence to be filled, opens a more precise vocabulary for reading political poetry written under repression, one attentive to the shape and placement of what a poem chooses not to say.

This vocabulary also carries obligations for criticism operating across historical distance and linguistic translation. Reading political poetry's silences responsibly means resisting both extremes, the temptation to reconstruct a single hidden meaning the poem supposedly conceals, and the opposite temptation to treat silence as mere aesthetic obscurity disconnected from the material conditions that produced it. Between these extremes lies the harder but more accurate task this paper has proposed: reading withholding itself as a considered formal choice, one that continues to carry meaning precisely because it refuses to resolve into anything more explicit.

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