

Words fail us: The crisis of language

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Abstract: Modernity has ushered in an increasing detachment from life; a divorce of sorts is taking place between the individual and the cultural context. Given certain thoughts and feelings, words fail us. It seems that we fail to communicate, to understand, to carve significance beyond the text. I write this manuscript as a feature of contemporary Zeitgeist, as a response to modern uncertainties about humanity. My belief is that the contract between language and reality is broken; thus, we lost our only hope to make contact with reality.

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“it is in words and language that things first come into being and are”
(Martin Heidegger)

“language lies at the heart of all knowledge”
(Michael Dear)

“what an artist talks about is never the main point”
(Thomas Mann)

The story of the tower of Babel is a very old one, but it takes on new meaning in the context of modernity. *Babel* clearly illustrates the loss of a common language and the ensuing breakdown in human communication, which lies at the heart of this manuscript. After all, I am after one only question: is communication possible? Scholars and artists felt language being untrustworthy or meaningless; hence, their writing became an attempt at founding a pure language. This crisis implicates various aspects of language, from its communicative potential to literary figuration. These attempts may end in the ultimate

purity of silence.¹ Mrs. Dalloway seems to be talking only to herself, Antoine Roquentin lives in the center of nothingness, and Godot says nothing at all. Stephen Mallarmé declares that all languages are “imperfect insofar as they are many; [...] the diversity, on earth, of idioms prevents anyone from proffering words that would otherwise be, when made uniquely, the material truth” (1982: 51). Symbolism, then, ushers in modern linguistics. There is in Mallarmé a clear anticipation of Saussure’s preoccupation with the nature of the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign, the artificial relation between signifier and signified, a discourse that always fails to express the object. It is the language crisis.

Fearing the lack of words is no less important than any other issue related to the human condition. Can life be truly expressed? Do we really understand when we understand? Can language describe the experience? It is to answer these questions that I write these pages. While I will be dealing with philosophy, writers and theorists at the heart of the canon of continental literary theory, I do not aim at dismantling continental philosophy. My interest lies in our changing relationship with language. The manuscript is structured into two main parts. I trace the history of thought about language, beginning with early modernist ideas that paved the way for the 20th-century postmodern turn. However, I read this turn as an ongoing crisis that spills from language to the phenomenal reality. I seem to conclude that a rejection of language is equivalent to a rejection of all meaning. In this sense, my narrative has romantic undertones, perhaps nostalgic for an age in which reality could be conveyed, the world was ‘penetrable,’ and the human condition more recognizable.

Instead, the twentieth century began with grandeur and decadence. The sense of cultural crisis resulting from a loss of trust in the idea of historical progress had led to mistrust toward language. In this sense, the entire modernist experimentation, from the avant-gardes to its literary expressions, has to be read as attempts at inventing a new language. Indeed, *make it new*. The general sense of skepticism and the particular one toward language—the belief that it fails as a tool for communication and instead obstructs our access to reality, something to be dismantled rather than relied upon—does not stem solely from

¹ A must-read text for those interested in the topic is Shane Weller (2018). The text maps the development of a distinctive strand of European literary modernism that arose from a radical reconsideration of late nineteenth-century skepticism toward language. Beginning with an examination of the literary and philosophical roots of this skeptical tradition, it goes on to trace the diverse expressions of linguistic negativism found in the works of interwar and postwar European classic writers such as Franz Kafka and Samuel Beckett. Language is incapable of articulating what, in Beckett’s words, is a “humanity in ruins” (1955: 278)

literary or philosophical sources. Rather, it is a crisis that can only be fully understood in light of the socio-political conditions from which it emerged. The Great War had a formative impact on the representation of reality and the way we conceive language: "The war was a crisis not simply for the subject-matter of fiction-heroism and bravery, the value of individual life and social history-but for its very power of representation" (Bradbury 2001: 143). The pessimism brought on by the two world wars was intensified by a growing distrust in the fundamental beliefs that had defined earlier centuries. The brutal truths of trench warfare, the Holocaust, and the bombing of Hiroshima shattered the notion that humans are inherently rational, that technology necessarily promotes human well-being, and that a benevolent God directs the universe. It is hardly surprising, then, that the events of the early twentieth century undermined faith in moral absolutes. The sense of estrangement from God and from reason produced a condition of anxious withdrawal that took different names: nihilism, alienation, absurdism. Of course, the arts were compelled to move into a new direction. A world characterized by disorder and uncertainty, where the human form had lost its coherence, the individual no longer felt a natural connection to the universe, and language had become estranged from truth. Culture seemed fragmented into isolated parts, and history no longer unfolded in a clear or progressive direction.

What keeps the modern and postmodern turn together is mistrust toward language's ability to comply with its decoding function. The twentieth century's use of language probes the limitations of language both as a means of communication and as a vehicle for the expression of valid statements, an instrument of thought. Where there is no certainty, there can be no definite meanings - and the impossibility of ever attaining certainty is one of the human conditions. Paradoxically, I am trying here to communicate the incommunicable. Such an undertaking may be a paradox, but it makes sense nevertheless. I aim at challenging the shallow complacency of those who think that simply identifying a problem is the same as solving it, or that the world can be neatly controlled through tidy categories and formulas. I reject easy answers and prepackaged interpretations. I do not mean to introduce despair, but to mark the beginning of a new kind of awareness. And because language is imperfect, of course, my premises must be vague and uncertain.

The Crisis of Language

The notion of language crisis is not a theme entirely modern. Poets have experienced, at one time or another, a sense of inadequacy of established poetic idioms, and felt, for personal or broader cultural reasons, the urgent need to develop fresh means of harnessing the resources of language. I think, for example, of William Wordsworth's (1770–1850) *Lyrical Ballads* (1798) in which the poet attacks the popular style of his time by preferring simple language to verbal conventions. Wordsworth wants a poetry that has its own source in the common life, written in an empathic form, with a language that “has been adopted (purified indeed from what appear to be its real defects, from all lasting and rational causes of dislike or disgust)” devoid of “social vanity” so to “convey their feelings and notions in simple and unelaborated expressions” (2006: 35). Wordsworth redefines the status of poetry and the relationship between the poet and the poetry. Poetry reflects the interaction between the poet and himself, not the poem and the reader. Poetry is less about nature itself than it is a contemplation of nature from the side of the poet. In other words, the feeling determines the action. Somewhere along the lines, Charles Baudelaire (1821–1867) demanded a pure poetry and rebelled against the didactic verse of the Victorians. Poetry needs to be freed from description and narrative, and made, instead, of direct statements, symbols indeed, to suggest broader meanings. Not surprisingly, *Les Fleurs du mal* (1857) took shape. T. S. Eliot (1888–1965) later wrote of Baudelaire that he “gave new possibilities to poetry in a new stock of imagery of contemporary life” and that “his verse and language is the nearest thing to a complete renovation that we have experienced” (1953: 32). However, both Wordsworth and Baudelaire seem to ignore a lesson that the twentieth century made rather clear: language is never “simple,” never “pure.” In contrast, language is misleading, socially constructed, simply not enough.

Indeed, modern statements sound more desperate. The existentialist philosopher Martin Heidegger (1889–1976) claimed that language had undergone ‘a process of deformation and decay,’ and put forward a diagnosis of historical decline to which not a few modern writers could have given their assent:

The spiritual decline of the earth is so far advanced that the nations are in danger of losing the last bit of spiritual energy that makes it possible to see the decline [...] The darkening of the world, the flight of the gods, the destruction of the earth, the transformation of men into a mass, the hatred and suspicion of everything free

and creative, have assumed such proportions throughout the earth that such childish categories as pessimism and optimism have long since become absurd (Heidegger 1968: 38).

While being a sweeping generalisation, the hidden elements of Heidegger's stated position are *intuitively* felt elsewhere. The feeling that existing linguistic forms could no longer adequately express the intense and fragmented experiences of modernity. Hence, the rebellion called modernism began.² How to represent the external reality? Painters began to violate traditional canons of representation by disrupting the continuity between ordinary perception and the canvas. In a similar fashion, novelists were abandoning the linear sequence, reliable narrator, and consistency of narrative mode through which nineteenth-century 'realists' seemed to mirror the external world. Instead, modernism introduced techniques to heighten the discontinuity between the text and everyday reality: stream of consciousness, distortions of temporal order, limited or unreliable narrators, texts beginning *in medias res*. While wanting to bridge the gap between life and art by describing the inner life, poets like Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot increased the distance between the poem and ordinary life by disrupting accepted patterns of communication. Simultaneously, painters like Pablo Picasso and Edvard Munch transformed the canvas into a self-confession. In 1903, Mr. Kappus, an unknown poet and correspondent, asked Rainer Maria Rilke (1875–1926) to review his work. In the first of ten letters addressed to Mr. Kappus, Rilke replied:

Things are not so comprehensible and expressible as one would mostly have us believe; most events are inexpressible, taking place in a realm which no word has ever entered, and more inexpressible than all else are works of art, mysterious existences, the life of which, while ours passes away, endures (1962: 17).

Rilke admits that he experiences doubts and misgivings with language. Life, or part of it, exists in a realm beyond language, and art, in its mysterious nature, is even more difficult to convey. Its meaning transcends our ability to articulate it, while it continues to signify long after we are no more. The young Austrian poet Hugo von Hofmannsthal (1874–1929) confessed a similar experience. At seventeen, he composed poems which were compared with those of Goethe

² I suggest two books of (quite) recent publication on the modernist language rebellion: Ben Hutchinson (2011) and Marjorie Perloff (2000)

and Hölderlin. Then, he suddenly stopped writing. A few years later, in 1902, he wrote a somewhat odd letter, *The Letter of Lord Chandos*, in which he tried to explain the reasons why he was unable to keep on writing.³ He describes the reasons for his silence not in terms of some psychological difficulty; he is not the victim of a neurotic condition. Instead, there is something that has to do with his inability to use language to express his total view of the world.⁴ How to express the inner reality of life? The entire language used therein became infected, a disease impossible to name, manifesting itself only in brief moments. A sudden confusion sparked in his mind, an inexplicable condition of void and an inner stagnation:

[b]ecause the language in which I might be able not only to write but to think is neither Latin nor English, neither Italian nor Spanish, but a language none of which I do not know even one word, a language in which inanimate things speak to me and wherein I may one day have to justify myself before an unknown judge (1995: 20).⁵

Hofmannsthal's letter suggests a real pessimism about the possibility of re-vivifying the language. And until this language is found, the only possibility is not writing at all. From a historical perspective, Hofmannsthal struggles to reconcile creativity with the shifting landscape of society and culture of modernity. He recognizes a cultural disconnection—both in terms of the artist's ability to create meaningful work and in the audience's ability to emphasize with the artwork in the same way it was understood in the past. As art, in its traditional sense, could no longer thrive as it once had, the iconoclastic tendency of modernism will usher in new doubts. Hence, Hofmannsthal's sense of exhaustion, particularly as a poet, aligns with broader anxieties proper to the modernist discourse about the 'end of art' or the 'crisis of reason.' Language is

³ Written by a fictitious young English nobleman, Philip Chandos, the letter is addressed to the philosopher Francis Bacon (1561–1626), one of the founders of the empirical natural sciences.

⁴ Interestingly, Donald Daviau (1971: 34) refers to Hofmannsthal as a depressed personality: "Indeed, he was a hypochondriac of the spirit, a tendency inherited, by his own admission, from his mother. He measured his happiness mainly in terms of his literary productivity, and since, as mentioned, he did not complete many works, he became depressed, a state which in turn kept him from writing." Daviau's account is not in contradiction with mine. I downplay the biographical approach because I do not consider Hofmannsthal's crisis rooted in his personal issues but concerned with a more profound and overstressing insufficiency of language.

⁵ The translation of *The Letter of Lord Chandos*, which I have used here, is the Italian edition.

then inadequate to map out reality because language suppresses differences, it ignores singularities. Thus, the writer's experience is less about creativity than it is about one's relationship to language.

A similar sense of pessimism about the possibility of revivifying language runs through the writing of William Butler Yeats (1865–1939). In *The Nineteenth Century and After* (1921), Yeats confessed a world in fragments:

Though the great song return no more
There's been delight in what we have:
The rattle of pebbles on the shore
Under the receding wave (1908: 243).

Yeats mourns something that has been lost; the “great song” of the past has faded, no language can reproduce it. What remains is the persistence of human destructiveness, pebbles on the shore. Likewise, Eliot ends *The Waste Land* (1922) by shoring a few arcane fragments of language against the ruin of the present: “These fragments I have shored against my ruins” (1998a: 51). What are the fragments? The three Hindu imperatives (“Da”), those are the three words that hold the promise of salvation. If they are followed, the wasteland would have alleviation. Perhaps the ‘fragments’ is a reference to literature from the past or maybe the wasteland itself. “I have shored” is to unify. Eliot tries to find meaning but what remains of European culture after WWI is “my ruins.” Chaos, therefore, is what remains, a society fractured by war, clashing values, and cultural turmoil. Meanwhile, the contradictions of modernity give rise to a new kind of hero—alienated, withdrawn, and self-focused—seeking personal redemption amid widespread social and cultural decay. Eliot is at home in the company of his characters: Prufrock and the other Hollow Men, they share the same belief that the message cannot be conveyed. The theme of the failure of communication between a man and a woman in the *Love Song* is rendered by Prufrock's never-asked question. Properly, B. Rajan (1966: 369) argues that “Prufrock's love song is never sung; [...] his inability to sing is not simply ironic but part of the specifications of failure.” At the tea party, which he seems to be observing from the outside, Prufrock intends to talk to one of the ladies talking about Michelangelo.⁶ If we consider the anxiety his question bears, perhaps he intends to propose. While we are not given to know what the question is about

⁶ The reference to Michelangelo triggers the image of Michelangelo's “David,” whose masculine beauty clearly contrasts with Prufrock's aging body.

(“Oh, do not ask, ‘What is it’” (1998b: 6)), it is clear that the question is the source of his anxiety. He has been thinking about it for a significant time, but he has never been able to summon up the courage to do so: “Do I dare disturb the universe?” (1998b: 7). He rehearses his proposal, but to no avail; no words are ever spoken. Prufrock’s central problem is modernist in its roots: the failure of language to communicate the feeling itself. In a reality that after the positivist collapse and the discoveries of Quantum physics, has become fragmented, there are thoughts that cannot be expressed, for words are mere evasions but never the feeling itself. In hermeneutic terms, it is the failure of the language. As I wrote elsewhere: “Words become empty abstractions as long as they cannot describe the truth; thus, truth and reason float disconnected becoming sceptical and almost esoteric” (Castelli 2026a: 92). Hence, Prufrock falls silent.

The malady of silence constitutes the modernist’s hell. Albert Camus (1913–1960) notes the “unreasonable silence of the world” (1959: 20) confronting human needs. In the end, our alternatives are to accept the fact that we are living in a Godless universe—or to become a revolutionary. Camus has chosen rebellion: “When the throne of God is overturned, the rebel realizes that it is now his own responsibility to create the justice, the order, and the unity [...] Then begins the desperate effort to create, at the price of crime and murder if necessary, the dominion of man” (1956: 25). Søren Kierkegaard’s (1813–1855) Abraham, the knight of faith, believes “by virtue of the absurd” (1954: 46) but moves beyond the absurd by choosing to believe. Kierkegaard says of Abraham that he “cannot talk” (1954: 70). In *Nausea* (1938), Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–1980) has Roquentin struggling hopelessly with words, trying to say what earlier he thought “on things, with things” (129).

This obscurity results in part from a historical environment that seems to be inhospitable and has become a constant when psychology began to dismantle the unified image of the individual. Eliot termed self-consciousness “the cancer that eats away at the self” (qtd. Allen 1979: 601). Franco Moretti, in reading the twentieth century, refers to a “disrupted unity of the Ego” which leads to having “the language of self-consciousness out of work” (1987: 244). Eliot, Yeats, and Rilke seem, like Hofmannsthal, to be intent on preserving the sense of eternity which inhabits the few fragments left to them by the past, and without which, they suggest, all would be blackness, boredom, and despair. Modernist authors, by and large, felt that the given structure of language was arid, repressive, only superficially impressive. This goes together with a general condition in which the achievement of reason and progress are dubious, “After such knowledge

what forgiveness?”⁷ and aesthetic expressions are permeated by a sense of decay. Famously, it was Verlaine to coin the *fin de siècle* motto: “*Je suis l’Empire à la fin de la decadence.*”

Writing, therefore, ceases to be a luminous vehicle for self-expression, as the romantic nineteenth century had suggested, or a mere means of communication, and turns into an endeavour more oppressive and opaque. Franz Kafka (1883–1924) voiced a similar despair: “What I write is different from what I say, what I say is different from what I think, what I think is different from what I ought to think and so it goes on further into the deepest darkness” (1970: 42). That which links thought with language, language with the external world, and individual with individual has disappeared. Kafka condemns writing for its dependence on life. In his diary, he condemns literature for being a mere substitute for life: “The dependency of writing. Its dependence on the maid making the fire, on the cat warming itself by the stove, even on the poor old person warming himself. All these are independent, autonomous activities; writing alone is helpless, does not dwell in itself; it is a joke and a despair” (1958: 88). Literature is then ineffectual in real life because language is not enough. In the famous letter to his father (1919), written at the age of thirty-nine, Kafka reflects on the painful development of his personality. When he was about three years old, he complained one night that he was thirsty. His father warned him to stop or face punishment. After Kafka persisted, his father silently carried him outside and left him there for the rest of the night. Kafka later saw this event as a key source of his deep sense of self-loathing: “This incident almost certainly made me obedient for a time” he remembered, “but it damaged me on the inside.” His father’s action meant for the young Kafka a definite judgment: “I meant so little to him,” and shaped the persistent “feeling of powerlessness which still regularly overcomes me” (2008: 23). How to express this ‘nothingness’? A few years later, in a letter dated June 1921, Kafka would confess to his editor and friend Max Brod: “I cannot write. I haven’t written a single line that I can accept, instead I have crossed out all that I have written—there wasn’t much—since my return from Paris. My body puts me on guard against each word” (1970: 70). In this non-action, there is the same element already found in Hofmannsthal; Kafka laments the obstacles he encountered in the use of his own language, he refers to impossibilities: “the impossibility of desisting from writing, the

⁷ I borrow this verse from “Gerontion,” a poem which T.S. Eliot was working on during the last months of WWI. “The Waste Land” seems to be the answer to the question posed a few years before.

impossibility of writing in German, the impossibility of writing differently; one could add a fourth impossibility: the impossibility of writing at all" (1958: 337–338). In spite of these difficulties, Kafka wrote by use of symbols and metaphors to establish a link between writing and life. Hence, Gregor Samsa is ready to perform.

In the second section of *The Metamorphosis* (1915), after the calamitous rejection by his family members, Gregor seeks to reestablish his relationship with them. He concludes "that for the time being he would have to lie low" and be "patient" (1972: 17). His passive resignation in favor of patience and consideration, however, is undertaken more for his own convenience than to mend a ruptured social tie. Being locked in his bedroom by his family is actually reassuring: he feels gratified that there will be no frightening intrusions. Meanwhile, the gap is widening between them, physically and verbally. Although Grete maintains regular contact with Gregor, Grete and the family fail to reestablish a familial personal relationship with him. "If Gregor," the narrator says, "had only been able to speak to his sister and thank her for everything she had to do for him, he could have accepted her services more easily; as it was, they caused him pain" (22). Thus, for want of communication and a reciprocity of relations, Gregor's position in the family disintegrates and his sense of self erode, giving start to a gradual process of depersonalization. It is as if Kafka wished to suggest that lack of communication is even with the loss of all significance. And he presents this condition as the loss of the human form. In other words, the body is the speech that Kafka uses to express despair.

The concept echoes in Samuel Beckett, who, in a private letter, shortly after his return from a six-month trip to Nazi Germany, wrote: "And more and more my own language appears to me like a veil which one has to tear apart in order to get to those things (or the nothingness) lying behind it" (2009). Beckett and the modernists' belief was that language was (is) an obstruction to the inner world. In this vein, while the writer's task is to shatter the veil created by language, modernism toils with what cannot be fully expressed, striving to capture a more complex reality. The inner life, indeed. Not surprisingly, this effort frequently leads to greater confusion and a strange incoherence. As paradigmatic examples of language crisis, Lord Chandos' struggle with language, Prufrock's silence, Kafka's mental block, are all moments of a struggle with conventionality, an attempt to smash the limitations of conventional vocabulary. However, accepting the idea that language cannot adequately elucidate the richness of the human experience is not to invoke the collapse of rationality but to recognize that there are dimensions that words cannot quite capture. Artistic imagery,

therefore, ventures to express what is essentially inexpressible. Modernism, indeed, rejects all notions of art as description or mimesis. The 'real' world is felt to be 'fallen' to questionable ends; hence, the task of art cannot be to reproduce this fallen world or manufacture a beautiful 'surface' (as Romanticism did) with a language which is equally suspect. In contrast, the task of the modern artist becomes the creation of a redeemed, visionary world of language. Conventional language must be attacked, dismantled, recreated.

Within this sceptical panorama, the sense of loss of control over rational human development was properly crafted by the Theatre of the Absurd. This is a theatre that must confront the audience, and the reader alike, with harsh truths in order to capture the overwhelming complexity of human existence. The plays of Samuel Beckett, Arthur Adamov, Eugène Ionesco, Jean Genet, and Luigi Pirandello share the same message: genuine communication between people is nearly impossible, and the world will always remain fundamentally unknowable. Absurdist plays contain no traditional dramatic conflict. In a world where meaning is fixed, conventional clashes of character or power depend on a stable hierarchy of values. Hence, Antigone will always clash against Creon and Willy Loman will always die. But when the social order and external reality themselves lose meaning, such conflicts become irrelevant. The Theatre of the Absurd strives to express the senselessness of the human condition and the inadequacy of the rational approach by the open abandonment of rational devices and discursive thought. Thus, we are given to watch, or read, meaningless actions within meaningless dialogues. Ultimately, strange and seemingly nonsensical events are meant to expose the irrational nature of human existence and the illusion of what we take to be a coherent, logical order. If the dialogue in these plays is filled with empty clichés and repetitive, mechanical phrases, this is because our daily life is made of meaningless expressions, and stock phrases. It exposes the emptiness of stereotyped language; "what is sometimes labeled the absurd," Ionesco writes, "is only the denunciation of the ridiculous nature of a language which is empty of substance, made up of clichés and slogans" (1959: 172). Language has withered; it no longer conveys anything living or vital, and has instead been reduced to a set of empty conventions—a mere token of communication that masks real meaning and feeling. This is the reason why in the Theatre of the Absurd the dialogue becomes divorced from reality, disconnected, contradictory; it is a tragic undertaking to renew the language of drama and to expose the barrenness of our dialogue.⁸ The language seems

⁸ On the relation between the Theatre of the Absurd and language, see Esslin Martin (1960) and Eugène Ionesco (1960).

to be limited, incapable of conveying ideas between people and in expressing reliable, meaningful truths as a tool of thought.⁹ In *Waiting for Godot* (1953), Lucky's wisdom is a jargon of incomprehensible statements, while in *The Killer* (1958), death does not have a rational explanation. The Theatre of the Absurd has renounced arguing about the absurdity of the human condition; it merely presents it in its being by instinct and intuition rather than by conscious effort. And, of course, the dissolution, devaluation, and relativization of language (theme of much of present-day linguistics) goes together with the enigma of life. Life offers no definite answers, clear-cut solutions must disappear. The fundamental mystery of our existence persists—still complex, inscrutable, and full of contradictions.

This is what Virginia Woolf would term “thoughts without words” (1969: 49). Also, rather fitting is the description given by Shane Weller, who, while recalling Beckett's “literature of the unword,” refers to the protagonists' silence. A narrative that is “less a flight from than a critique of modernity” (2018: 6), a silence “increasingly shaped by a skepticism” (10) and characterized by “unconditional negativity” (8) in the face of an upcoming European catastrophe. According to Weller, this “linguistic negativism serves a subordinate purpose” (2018: 5). Next to the desire for new linguistic forms, there is the need to “articulate a crucial distinction between two forms of language – the human and the divine” (6). While modernism is marked by a certain nostalgia, as individuals are compelled to live without God in a state of nothingness, what ultimately emerges is the negative experience of modernity. Modernism was generated in a condition of crisis but could not articulate it beyond its powerful yet vague images. One may argue that modernism did not keep its promise to give us a language that might speak the final word. Too obscure, iconoclast, experimental. In the attempt to change the language, it ridiculed the language, it destroyed the conventions of grammar, it slaughtered linearity, hence, making communication virtually impossible. Postmodernism, on the other hand, with its ‘isms’ and less pretentious endeavour, will be capable of placing Prufrock's and Godot's silence into context. Silence is generated by the breakdown in the relation between words, and between the word and the world.

⁹ A side note: whenever he was in Paris, Beckett made a point of visiting Joyce. Both men were drawn to silence, and their conversations frequently took the form of shared, wordless exchanges—each tinged with melancholy: Beckett's largely for the world at large, Joyce's more for himself. On a few occasions, as Joyce's eyesight deteriorated, he dictated sections of *Finnegans Wake* to Beckett. This routine likely gave rise to the persistent claim that Beckett once served as Joyce's personal secretary.

The Postmodern Turn

The relation between modernism and postmodernism is one that has been discussed for a few decades. In “Answering the Question: What is postmodernism?” Jean-François Lyotard (1984: 79), for one, cannot distinguish the difference when he writes that the postmodern “is undoubtedly a part of the modern” but he also adds that “postmodernism thus understood is not modernism at its end but in the nascent state, and this state is constant.” I wrote on the topic and my position is more radical: “Modernism, because it is a crisis of consciousness, carves a frame larger than life. [...] Postmodernity, on the other hand, is the world after Auschwitz and postmodernism is a depthless response to the inevitable” (Castelli 2026b: 76). After the avant-gardes destroyed the figure, literature upset the flow of the discourse, music went from atonality to noise, postmodernism replies with irony to the sombre tone of modernism. As the twentieth century reached its halfway point, progress in scientific theory was just as important: atomic physics, which reshaped humanity’s understanding of the universe, was as revolutionary for the twentieth century as metallurgy had been for the fourth millennium BC. Yet while metallurgy helped give rise to civilization, atomic science—by opening the door to the nuclear age—placed that very civilization in jeopardy. The Hiroshima Peace Memorial (Genbaku Dome) stands as a reminder that we are always seconds away from total annihilation.

The postmodern infrastructure is one of daily life, one flirting with:
the transitory and the contingent,
the constant changes in circumstances,
the fragmented and fragmentation,
obsessed by the incessant spectacle of the new,
the fleeting forms of consumption and
the illusion of commodity fetishism,
one that destroys what modernism had created:
originally, depth, and an aesthetic of sublime;
one caged by a Kafkaesque bureaucracy
jaded by rationality and the iron-cage of Weberian memory,
atomized and atrophied,
decentered and deconstructed,
in love with, conquered, washed away by
technologies and numbers,
market and power,

meaningful in iPad, iPhone, facial recognition, digital economy;
shockingly insignificant,
different and the same as
the hypermodern,
the automodern,
the digimodern,
the antimodern,
the metamodern.
In fact, the postmodern.

‘Post’ does not imply better. The postmodern era is characterized as a time in which the means of mass production have long since replaced written culture. There is nothing complex in it; it is merely a crisis of representation. As a result, we encounter an arrangement of words that is grammatically and semantically unconventional, with their visual placement on the page often implying a non-linear—or more accurately, a multi-linear—way of reading. As much as modernism had done, postmodernist works express the same anxiety about the foundations of knowledge. Michel Foucault is sometimes thought of as the philosopher of the French Structuralist movement, the philosophical counterpart of Claude Levi-Strauss in ethnology and Jacques Lacan in psychoanalysis.¹⁰ They all share an interest in the deep structures of human consciousness, a conviction that the study of such deep structures must begin with an analysis of language. In the second half of the twentieth century, we became aware that what we think is conditional on the structure of the language in which we think. For Ihab Hassan (1971: 248), the literature of Stéphane Mallarmé, Franz Kafka, and Samuel Beckett—what he terms “anti-literature”—is fiction devoted to a

¹⁰ The boundaries between structuralism and post-structuralism are blurred. Scholars associated with structuralism, such as Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault, are also considered part of post-structuralism because they focus not on finding stable structures of meaning, but on examining how discourse shapes reality. Foucault’s post-structuralist approach, for example, focuses on the genealogy of power and how discourses of power are historically formed. Here, a note is due: Foucault never liked being labeled as a post-structuralist: “I do not understand what kind of problem is common to the people we call post-modern or post-structuralist” (205). Instead, he considered himself a critical historian: “the question I asked myself was this: how is it that the human subject took itself as the object of possible knowledge? Through what forms of rationality and historical conditions?” (qtd. Gérard 1983: 202). For more, see Paul Harrison (2006) and, of course, Foucault’s interview with Gérard Raulet: “Structuralism and Post-Structuralism” (1983).

distinctive form of silence: “the negative echo of language, autodestructive, demonic, nihilist.”¹¹ In contrast, postmodernism speaks of everything but it does so by invalidating the language and the author along. The starting point is the idea that “the signifying chain” (Derrida 1978: 280) is broken.¹² The signifying chain is the assumption that there is a one-to-one correspondence between a sign (word), and the object to which the sign refers. Famously, Derrida explains that the sign does not refer to a singular object but to possibilities among “a system of differences” (1978: 280). In other words, that which the sign refers to is not perceived directly, but in relation to other signs which differ from it. Same logic as ‘I am me because I am not someone else.’ In “The Purveyor of Truth” (1975), Derrida argues against Lacan’s psychoanalytic reading of Edgar Allan Poe’s story “The Purloined Letter,” a seminar in which Lacan asserts that “a letter always arrives at its destination” (1975: 65), just as repressed material in the unconscious mind inevitably makes its way to the surface.¹³ On the contrary, Derrida notes that truth is not a fixed point, but rather a ‘letter’ constantly in transit, and, therefore, a letter might not arrive at its destination: “not that the letter never arrives at its destination, but part of its structure is that it is always capable of not arriving there” (66).¹⁴ Derrida’s concepts of deferral and the disruption of traditional interpretations of the semiotic code suggest that the letter travels to many destinations, most of which are not intended by the sender. Metaphorically, Derrida writes: “The letter is held but never possessed. Never, neither by its sender nor by its addressee” (1975: 42). It moves unpredictably and becomes the possession of various readers (or characters), much like texts are shaped by and subjected to their readers’ interpretations.

¹¹ Hassan refers to the iconoclastic modernist forms and their seemingly inexpressible content in this term: “Silence creates anti-languages. Some are utterly opaque, others completely transparent. These languages transform the presence of words into semantic absence and unloosen the grammar of consciousness. They accuse common speech” (1971: 13).

¹² Ironically, reading Derrida’s long labyrinthine writing, one receives a full sense of a meta-language, one in which meaning is always hidden, as if there was something confined beyond the mere presence of words. All one is left with is a veiled explanation.

¹³ Poe’s detective story comes indeed with a letter (message) that is never opened. Thus, we have a signifier (the letter) without a signified (its content). Yet, the whole story moves around this unread message.

¹⁴ I do not read Lacan’s comment as deterministic. When Lacan states that a letter always reaches its destination, he does not have in mind some original, absolute truth, but any truth. That is, wherever a letter arrives, that becomes the destination. The idea is already in Barbara Johnson (1988: 7): “A letter always arrives at its destination since its destination is wherever it arrives.”

The letter is lost, stolen, hidden, or misread, reflecting Derrida's idea that meaning is dispersed, delayed, lost, and transformed. "The letter apparently has no owner. It is no one's property. It has no proper meaning, no proper content which bears on its trajectory" (1975: 42). Likewise, each interpretation of a text is, to some degree, distorted, making meaning unstable and fluid, constantly in flux. Similarly, Derrida refers to a former presence of meaning, something that was once there but is no longer. All we can do is trace the letter's journey, follow its trail. Otherwise stated, we continuously run after significance.

The concept, of course, had already been expressed by the father of modern linguistics, Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913), in *Course in General Linguistics* (1916). Language is a self-contained sign system in which each sign (word) is made of a signified (the mental concept) and a signifier (sound, word). By way of example, the signified is the concept of tree, and the signifier is the sound, word, the image of a tree.

From here, a few consequences can be drawn. Words do not have an inherent meaning; the meaning is arbitrary. The meaning of the word 'tree' is *arbitrary*, pre-decided by the community of reference: "The arbitrary nature of the sign [...] dominates all the linguistics of the language" (68).¹⁵ At the traffic light, red means stop, green means go; we invented it and today we share the same mental structure, we have a common understanding. Meaning is not only arbitrary but also relational. We define a word by knowing what it is not. I know that this is a chair because it is not a table. In de Saussure's words: "language is a self-contained system whose interdependent parts function and acquire value through their relationship to the whole" (1959: xii). For example, to understand an individual word such as 'tree,' one must also understand the word 'bush' and how the two relate to each other. The meaning of a sign depends on its relation to other words within the system. Aware or not, we choose a language (words) to convey a certain meaning. If I say 'terrorist,' I imply a negative vision; if I say 'freedom fighter,' I imply a positive version of the same person. Yet, they are both subjects paid to kill. To choose one word or the other is to betray a world view that is given to me by external realities: environment, economic condition, hereditary characters, mass media, and so on. One must conclude that the language is socially constructed. De Saussure's account is representative: "language never exists apart from the social fact for it is a semiological phenomenon. Its social nature is one of its inner characteristics" (1959: 74).

¹⁵ A personal note: if language were not arbitrary, we would all be speaking only one language.

In sum, language is a means to an end. Language is not a transparent medium that connects one directly with a ‘truth’ or ‘reality’ outside it but rather a structure or code, whose parts derive their meaning from their contrast with one another and from the connection with an outside world. Consequently, the romantic idea that language is the medium through which we grasp the book of nature is no longer valid. We have reached a point at which we are aware that language no longer has the ability to reflect reality. The direct and immediate connection between language and experience is a thing of the past. Instead, verbal meaning is lost because language is arbitrary and volatile. Language assumes meaning via relationship between signs, but it is never an expression of the actual experience. According to Jean-François Lyotard:

The social subject itself seems to dissolve in this dissemination of language games. The social bond is linguistic, but is not woven with a single thread. It is a fabric formed by the intersection of at least two (and in reality an indeterminate number) of language games, obeying different rules (Lyotard 1984: 40).

The result is a sort of linguistic relativism which makes the intellectual inquiry into language even more necessary. With Marshall Berman (1982), things today are much less solid than they once were. Because language is imperfect, the meaning is suspended. “The postmodern challenge is to face up to the fact of relativism in human knowledge, and to proceed from this position to a better understanding” (Dear 1998: 271). With reference to the lack of a fixed, stable meaning, Derrida argues against the ‘metaphysics of presence,’ that is, the illusion of an immediate relationship between signifier to signified. Concepts are never defined once and for all but constructed through history and difference. Therefore, Derrida asks, how can we talk about structures if there is no center, a fixed principle, a solid foundation? The lack of center is the notion that marks the shift from the era of structuralism to the reign of post-structuralism, a style of thought which embraces the deconstructive operations of Derrida, the work of Foucault and Lacan, the writing of the feminist philosopher and critic Julia Kristeva. They all have different positions, yet common features can be identified. They all work with language and forms of communication.¹⁶

The question of whether one point of view can claim privileged status over another is answered by Michael Dear: “The essence of the postmodern answer

¹⁶ A peerless text on the history of structuralism and its transition into post structuralism is Francois Dosse’s two-volumes work *History of Structuralism* (1991 and 1998).

is that all such claims are ultimately undecidable” (265–266). From the viewpoint of fiction, it is a shift from seeing the text as a closed entity, equipped with definite meanings, which is the critic’s task to decipher, to seeing the text as irreducibly plural, an endless play of signifiers which can never be finally nailed down to a single centre, essence, or meaning. A text is a free play of meaning for a word recalls many meanings in our mind. To identify those meanings is to do deconstruction. Michael Payne suggests that deconstruction involves the close examination of the structure of a text, in order to identify how the “text points to a way beyond itself” (16). In terms of language, we can never be sure that we convey the intended meaning because language, as any other human construct, is flawed, biased and prone to misunderstanding. Expressions such as “if you know what I mean,” “by way of speaking,” all betray this uncertainty. The same view can be extended to art and culture. Due to the contingency of meaning, the openness of the system, poststructuralist theorizations believe that there is no objectivity, no universal truth. (By contrast, structuralism assumes that there is a universal truth within a system that is fixed, embedded in the collective mind, for example, Marxism, institutions of power, which are a source of meaning). The same novel, the same TV show, the same painting have different interpretations, much depending on the reader’s background. In Terry Eagleton’s words: “The reader or critic shifts from the role of consumer to that of producer. It is not exactly as though ‘anything goes’ in interpretation, [...] but literature is now less an object to which criticism must conform than a free space in which it can sport” (1996: 119). The shift is so radical that facing the same reality, one no longer asks ‘what is the meaning’ but ‘what am I experiencing?’ Hence, Roland Barthes’ (1915–1980) lesson remains unmatched. In the well-known essay “The Death of the Author” (1967), Barthes writes:

[the] explanation of the work is still sought in the person of its producer, as if, through the more or less transparent allegory of fiction, it was always, ultimately, the voice of one and the same person, the author, which was transmitting his “confidences” (Barthes 2006: 1256).

This is an approach that, according to Barthes, is outdated. Trying to read the text only by focusing on the author’s intention is to ignore the rich, meaningful possibilities of the text itself. The author is not the prime source of the work’s semantic content; a text does not have an ultimate meaning. Instead, a text overflows with possible interpretations, the meaning is always postponed.

After all, Barthes goes on, if language is imperfect, how can the author ever communicate his intended meaning?

At this altitude, the author is nothing more than the one who writes. Hence, Barthes replaces the author with the scriptor.¹⁷ The author feeds the book “he lives before it, thinks, suffers, lives for it; he has the same relation of antecedence with his work that a father sustains with his child.” In contrast, the modern scriptor “is born at the same time as his text.” His is more a work of recording than interpretation; writers are basically just antennas transmitting all of the countless bits of information that pass through them day by day. We know now that a text consists not of a line of words, releasing a single ‘theological’ meaning (the message of the Author-God), but of a multi-dimensional space in which are married and contested several writings, none of which is original:

the text is a fabric of quotations, resulting from a thousand sources of culture. The writer can only imitate an ever anterior, never original gesture; his sole power is to mingle writings. The writer who wants to *express* oneself knows that one is using an already-made lexicon, thus, a book becomes a tissue of signs, endless imitation (Barthes 2006: 1257).

By so doing, the text’s meaning does not depend on its origins, that is, the author’s intention, but on its destination, that is, the reader: “The birth of the reader [*requires*] the death of the Author” (1258). As postmodernity meets its structuralist, post-structuralist ramifications, the silence of modernism becomes language mistrust. Language as a social construct that shapes rather than represents our world, language as a vehicle of hidden propaganda, language as ideology, and the author as a victim of an invisible, unstable, and unconscious structure. And if language cannot be reinvigorated, then it has to be destroyed. In *a coup de grace*, Barthes is able to claim that the very ‘contents’ of the text are related to the reader’s own method of analysis (Marxism, feminism, new criticism, psychoanalysis and so on). Clearly, the criticism is that Barthes’ view,

¹⁷ In “The Purveyor of Truth” (1975), Derrida formulates a similar idea distinguishing between the scriptor, the author and the narrator: “Once distinguished from the author and thereafter from the scriptor, the narrator is not merely the formal condition of the narration [...]. He intercedes in a specific way, at once “too selfevident” and invisible” (53). That is, the meaning of the text is never inherently fixed by the characters (the Queen, the Minister, Dupin) or Poe, the author. Rather, its meaning is determined by its position in an endlessly shifting of significance, like a ‘mimesis without origin.’

poststructuralism at large, relies more on scholars or readers than the authors in order to assign a meaning to the text. On a more sympathetic view, Barthes frees the text from the author's background, that is, we no longer need to know the writer's life in order to understand the novel, and can simply focus on the text on front of us. In other words, we do not need to know Fitzgerald's life in order to understand *The Great Gatsby*. In alternative, language has to be deconstructed, dismantled, taken apart, by analysing single passages, verbs and adjectives, searching for narrative conflicts rather than motifs.¹⁸ By destroying the text, alternative meanings are generated. If language influences the discourse of meaning, if language is a tool of dominance for total structures, by taking the text apart, then history can be shown in its contingency, hidden ideology can be revealed, language is unveiled with all its prejudicial intentions.

A meek conclusion

Modernist characters crave for life, but they cannot express it. Language is no longer able to grasp the feeling, and this does not happen, as Peter Gay (2008: 189) suggests, because "the modernist novel is an exercise in subjectivity" but because the twentieth century's reality acknowledges the relative. Modernism does not produce absolute truth but general effects. It is no longer concerned about the attainment of absolute beauty but rather with a vague mood and fleeting introspections. And just as the new Quantum physics introduced cryptic terminology such as 'indeterminacy,' 'complementarity,' and 'uncertainty,' so modernism mapped fragmentary realities of selfhood using an enigmatic experimental discourse. This is the reason why Impressionism has found expression in painting as the free verse did it in poetry. They size the transitory element of life where silence becomes the speech.

Modernist works share a deep, often skeptical engagement with language itself. The increasing loss of faith in the power of the word in the second half of the twentieth century finds its articulation within the net of postmodern theory. In the decades that followed, structuralist and post-structuralist critics continued to explore this preoccupation with the limits and potential of linguistic expression. Modernist silence becomes miscommunication, misunderstanding,

¹⁸ Such a view was embraced by Derrida, who in *Grammatology* (1967) famously wrote "there is nothing outside the text," and by New Criticism with W. K. Wimsatt Jr. and M. C. Beardsley in the famous essay "Intentional Fallacy" (1946).

forcing the reader to postpone the meaning. The so-called “crisis of language” thus persisted in the theoretical writings of figures like Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, Paul de Man, Dorrit Cohn, and others. Its meaning changes across different thinkers, yet it consistently hovers at the edge of consciousness. It represents a key concept in twentieth-century intellectual life, especially for those concerned with the semiotic relationship between words and images, words and the world. We often go about our days assuming that what we *see* and what we *say* are two realities that overlap seamlessly. On the contrary, this is a false logic triggered by our human instinct to ‘read’ associations between text and image. In the end, language is a treachery of words. *Ceci n’est pas une pipe*.¹⁹

With this manuscript, I meant to place the crisis in context. Beyond the application of linguistic theory to objects and activities other than language itself, to establish a language crisis becomes a way to think about us and the way we perceive reality. The unspeakable has become a category of thought. At this altitude, we must have realized both that language is grossly inadequate for articulating what is significant about the human experience and that we are never completely in control of our language. In essence, language is a time-based medium, and literary art is a time-based form of expression—its nature depends on the sequence of events or words unfolding over time. Throughout this century, literary artists have sought to transcend or overcome the inherent limitations of this temporal medium. Both modernism and postmodernism intended to reduce the distance between life and art. It seems clear by now that both have failed. Modernism, by describing the abyss of one’s consciousness, had produced a language made of silences and extreme subjectivity. Hence, incommunicable. Postmodern productions have abolished the ritual: “all trace of a ‘rite’ in the handing out of cultural and aesthetic nourishment by the mass media (radio, tv, magazines, cinema) has been lost” (Gillo 1970: 30), thus, depriving the work of art of that Benjaminian aura of mystery and sacredness which once had it. The loss of the rituaistic dimension has resulted in a sense of indifference in the observer when faced with the sight of reproduced images. And when the literary medium ceases to be a medium, literature has travelled toward self-destruction. Excessive experimentation has severed the patterns of communication, making language another deceiving tool rather than an element of communication. With Hassan, “Silence creates anti-languages [...]

¹⁹ I am clearly alluding to the surrealist painter René Magritte and his painting “The Treachery of Images” (1929).

when ordinary discourse ceases to carry the burden of meaning” (1971: 13). Words have alienated themselves from the reader by shaping meaning in absence. “The Language of silence conjoins the need both of autodestruction and self-transcendence” (Hassan 1971: 12). I am not sure the century of Twitter and Bitcoin still longs for transcendence of sorts. Rooted in the atrocities of the twentieth century, the crisis of humanism, the loss of individuality, the influence of modern nihilism, the dehumanization of the arts and our behaviors, language skepticism and linguistic negativism emerge as an effort to discover how we might begin to reconsider the human condition amid dark and troubled times. If communication is not possible, we are all strangers in a cell of total isolation. On the other hand, if language speaks, then it does so as a monologue.

However, despite the subtitle of this last section, I do not want to conclude this manuscript with resignation. Defeat is not a scholar’s job. Language is not a self-sufficient art object that transcends the time and place in which it is spoken or written. Language illustrates the spirit of the age that produced it; language is a cultural artifact that can tell us something about the interplay of discourses, the web of social meanings, socio-political structures/episteme, operating in the time and place in which it is proffered. I certainly do not reject its importance in the production of meaning. But I believe that language is never enough. And more often than not it is misleading. We need to approach both the text and life aesthetically. In *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872), Friedrich Nietzsche explains that art, and not morality, was the essential metaphysical human activity of the ancient Greeks. Nietzsche repeatedly suggests that life can be justified only as an aesthetic phenomenon: “only as an aesthetic phenomena are existence and the world eternally justified” (1999: 18). Again, in *The Gay Science* (1882) Nietzsche portrays life as an aesthetic experience, encouraging individuals to learn from artists, “we want to be the poets of our life” (1974: 240), hence, shaping one’s existence into a unified artistic whole that makes life both bearable and joyful. And in *The Will to Power*, published posthumous (1901), Nietzsche assumes an almost decadent tone by declaring: “art as the real task of life” (1968: 453). Living one’s life as a work of art is a way of “becoming more beautiful” (420) and the response to nihilism. Nietzsche’s final confession paves the way outside the language. Knowledge and language are not enough to motivate actions, to make life more bearable. Knowing about genocide did not make genocide impossible. Beauty, instead, is for Nietzsche a moment of consolation in the face of tragedy;

beauty redeems the cruel nature of existence, thus making life worth living.²⁰ Therefore, let us approach life as an aesthetic experience and while accepting that meaning cannot be discovered, we shall remember that meaning can still be created. We cannot merely rely on the information given; we need to create an emotional personal relationship with the speaker and its text so as to unveil the deeper significance under which everything happens.

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²⁰ Much has been written on “life as an aesthetic phenomenon.” A philosophical and comprehensive explanation of it is in Stephen Halliwell (2018).

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