

# Afterthought on silence : towards a poetics of self-communication

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*Position Paper*

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AFTERTHOUGHT ON SILENCE: TOWARDS A  
POETICS OF SELF-COMMUNICATION

A study of the communicative nature of silence, these pages extend the model of autocommunication to the practice of meditation aided by a millenary technique. The model of autocommunication, proposed by Yuri Lotman in *The Universe of the Mind* (1990), adds a new dimension to Roman Jakobson's classic communication model—a third semantic value that goes beyond the general linguistic and poetic values, and one which serves a function in the transformation of the artist's personality. By describing the communicative processes that take place during the act of meditation, self-communication takes the model to one of its logical ends. The study builds bridges between disciplines and practices: the language of description is western semiotics; its object, an eastern metaphysical technique. It concludes with a reflection on the dialogic nature of self-communication and its function in the context of argumentation. Chess, a game of contingencies, serves as frame and metaphor.

*Keywords:* semiotics, Jakobson, Lotman, autocommunication, dialogue, meditation.

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...soñó con un largo ajedrez.  
Borges, "El milagro secreto"

Semiotics studies the production of meaning in sign systems. And although silence is a necessary element in the production of meaning, semiotics has had relatively little to say on the subject. Take Winfried Nöth's *Handbook of Semiotics* (1990) as a point of departure. Its index contains two references to silence: the first, not surprisingly, remits the reader to the chapter on sign language; the second is a reference to the chapter on "Chronemics: [or] the Semiotics of Time", which is "a relatively recent branch of semiotics" (415). Silences in communicative processes make noticeable the passage of time, which is a subject as old as philosophical inquiry. Reflection itself requires silence, and the inquiring mind seeks to distance itself from the tumult of the world.

Silence is, in fact, an elementary component of every process of the production of meaning - the zero in the cybernetic code of signification. It often has an active rather than passive value. In every system of communication, regardless of the sensory channel it may solicit - be it verbal, visual, audible, gustatory, tactile, or olfactory - the semiotic notion of silence can be understood as a meaningful absence: a significant pause, the informative empty space within a system of expectations, deferral of an anticipated element: desire's generator.

The concept of system itself can be understood in terms of silence; system implies only the *possibility* of signification. Any particular expressive instance of a given semiotic system is meaningful; in contrast, the system itself affords only the potential for meaning. This is true of any communicative system, be it verbal or visual, musical or intersemiotic. Considering the production of meaning in natural languages, the great Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure established the fundamental distinction between *langue*(language), the abstract system of relations that makes communication possible, and *parole*(speech), any manifestation of that system, that is, the actual speech acts of a community of speakers. In his *Course in General Linguistics* Saussure also distinguished between *synchrony*, "the system of values considered in itself" (80), and *diachrony*, a given phase in the system's evolution. And he used the game of chess as a metaphor to illustrate this difference: "a state of the board in chess corresponds exactly to a [synchronic] state of the language. The value of the chess pieces depends on their position upon the chess board, just as in

each language each term has its value through its contrast with all other terms. Anyone who has followed the whole game has not the least advantage over a passer-by who happens to look at the game at a particular moment" (88).

Thus, each move in a game of chess can be compared to a change in the linguistic system over time, that is, with an evolution of a language. Although these modifications of the system are sometimes wrongly confused with the speech acts that take place "at a given linguistic state" (88), the concept of system itself is radically different from both. "The system," observed Saussure, "is only ever a temporary one. It varies from one position to the next. It is true that the values also depend ultimately upon one invariable set of conventions, the rules of the game, which exist before the beginning of the game and remain in force after each move. These rules, fixed once and for all, also exist in the linguistic case: they are the unchanging principles of semiology" (88). Moreover, all complex modes of generating meaning spring from an abstract system of differential values in which signification is latent. The system of values of poetry, cinema or chess have nothing to say until they gain expression on the white page, screen or playing board. Any text may be compared to a meaningful speech act that manifests and perhaps renews the language. The system itself remains silent.

Silence has not passed unheard: it has been the subject of inquiry of many a philosophical and artistic tradition from both East and West. In the West, perhaps no one has done more to bring silence to our attention than the American composer John Cage. Ironically, what he wanted us to notice by "performing" a silent piece such as *4' 33"*, in which Cage sat at the piano without intentionally producing any sound, is that "there is no such thing as silence. Get thee to an anechoic chamber and hear there thy nervous system in operation and here there thy blood in circulation".<sup>1</sup> In effect, as Peter Wollen writes in the recent issue "*on silence*" of the journal *Point of Contact*, for Cage "silence" became yet "another type of sound which was beyond the control of the composer" (52).

By questioning the existence of real "silence" in the context of our sensory system, Cage heightens our awareness of the phenomenology of perception and questions our customary notions of what constitutes art and what remains outside its borders. We cannot completely stop the functioning of our senses during wakeful consciousness; we never really stop

<sup>1</sup> Quoted by Peter Wollen, "Silence" (52).

seeing, feeling, smelling, or tasting. Close your eyes in a dark room and you will still see shapes, light, and color. And if we take this observation a little further we notice that perception never comes alone. Not only is it accompanied by a seemingly endless flow of thoughts and feelings, it also comes imbedded in longings to belong and to understand. We know that we cease to perceive in deep, dreamless, sleep; consciousness and perception become silent - the system that gives us the awareness of ourselves and of the world we live in is still there, but remains in restful latency. We know, too, that sound sleep is framed by dreams - those partial miracles - and that when dreams have come and gone we wake up every new day to a rich perceptual world that in time becomes for us something of a customary miracle. Yet we do not know why this happens, why it all began and why it will cease to be. And when we go out in earnest search for answers we are often guided to search within ourselves. As the Christian theologian Raimon Panikkar puts it in the lead article of "*on silence*," "I don't know why I see, hear, taste, smell, or feel, but I know that I perceive something and that I am aware of it. And I also know that my perceptive faculty goes beyond these fields of awareness, that there exists something beyond perception through the senses and understanding through reasoning, something that the ancients of East and West have called the third eye or the third ear" (4).

This silent *something* can also be understood as a signifying *nothing* that is as much in words and actions as it is in solitude and contemplation. "The connection between silence and word," explains Panikkar, availing himself of the language of Vedanta, "is Advaita, Non-Dual" (6). In the quest for truth our mind takes us to a zone beyond opposites about which much has been written. I am thinking, for instance, of Heidegger's reading of the notion of truth among the ancient Greeks: nothing can reveal itself except on the condition of hiding; and I am also thinking of the path of Zen that requires an undisturbed flow of effortless effort. I do not wish to add here modes of expressing these philosophical considerations; rather, I would like to describe the process of autocommunication that takes place during the practice of a particular *kundalini* yoga meditation: the "meditation in self-performed solid state" as taught by Yogi Bhanan in Española, New Mexico, on June 14, 1999.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> The meditation is available from Golden Temple Tapes, Box 13, Shady Lane, Española, NM 87532, U.S.A.

What inspired me to attempt a semiotic description of meditation is Yuri Lotman's model of *autocommunication*. In *The Universe of the Mind* (1990), Lotman proposed a model of autocommunication that adds a new dimension to Roman Jakobson's classic communication model - a third semantic value beyond the general linguistic and poetic values, and one that serves a function in the transformation of the artist's personality. What Lotman does, in effect, is to turn Jakobson's model inside out and focus on the effect that poetic or, more broadly defined, artistic principles, have on the sender of the message. Poetic messages are messages sent to someone else, but they are also messages, rich in supplementary codes in which the primary addressee, albeit sometimes unconsciously, is the addresser himself. We know that the creative act changes the artist. Lotman puts it in technical terms: by introducing new codes into the message, the actual personality of the artist is transformed since "the essence of a personality may be thought of as an individual set of socially significant codes [that are changed] during the act of [auto]communication" (22). Lotman's notion, although not developed at much length, strikes me as a rather overlooked aspect of the Jakobson's communication model. In another essay, "Memory's Flexible Frames", I applied it to the study of the art form of memoir.<sup>3</sup>

It seems to me that meditation is a form of autocommunication *par excellence*, and one that often results in self-transformation. Yet the field of semiotics has had even less to say about meditation than what it has had to say about silence. This does not mean that meditation must forgo language. Yogic meditations often make use of a chanted mantra, the rhythmical repetition of a word or series of words. The generative and transformative power of the word is not at all foreign to Western tradition: "At the beginning there was the Word," writes John in the New Testament; and what empowers the word, as Panikkar reminds us, is the receptive silence of "the loving-listening person, the attentive person" (8). The meditation in self-performed solid state does not ride on mantra. Instead, by a series of techniques, it leads the practitioner to experience a restful balance of mind and body that can be described as a kind of emptiness, or silence. In what follows, I will need to switch and bridge Western and Eastern codes in order to describe a different approach to the question of silence.

<sup>3</sup> "Memory's Flexible Frames: Autocommunication in the Art Form of Memoir." Forthcoming in the next issue of the *Interdisciplinary Journal for Germanic Linguistics and Semiotic Analysis*.

The meditation's key elements are a relaxed sitting posture with the spine straight; a specific hand gesture, or *mudra*; a fixing of the sight on the tip of the nose; and a breathing technique, or *pranayama*. The total time of the meditation is about twenty-one minutes. A particular characteristic of this meditation is the alternation of very powerful and very light breathing. Powerful deep inhalations and exhalations are used for the first two thirds of the time (approximately fourteen minutes), and long, slow, light breathing for the last third (about seven minutes). The effect of this sudden alternation is to steady the body and quiet the mind. The intellect keeps producing thoughts, but in the last segment of the meditation the remaining thoughts can be more easily observed and abandoned. With the stabilization of conscious thoughts, the unconscious mind opens to the flow of love and to the faculty of intuition. In the depth of meditation the teacher asks us to "separate the mind from the body," a notion that Westerners may find hard to accept since we have become habituated to identify the mind exclusively with physiological processes for which many a cognitive philosopher have found an empirical sanctum in the brain. Other Western philosophers, however, and I am thinking of phenomenologists such as of Henri Bergson, have replied "Ah, no!" to the "strict and complete parallelism between the cerebral and mental life" and have developed quite convincing arguments.<sup>4</sup> One of the main effects of technique under discussion is to heighten awareness of the separation of mind and body - a balanced and restful meditative phenomenon which could also be described a being in a zero state or in deep silence.

What I would like to advance here is that this meditation itself can be described as a complex communicative act. I shall start by placing this technique in the context of Jakobson's famous analysis of the factors that are present in any speech act (*Linguistics and Poetics*, 1959). In speech an "addresser [or sender] sends a message to the addressee [or receiver]" (19) in a code that is fully or largely known to both. In meditation or, as Lotman points out, in any act of autocommunication, the sender and receiver of the message are one and the same. To distinguish these two

<sup>4</sup> *Mind-Energy* (51). "A close examination of the life of the mind and its physiological accompaniment leads me to believe that common sense is right and that there is infinitely more, in a human consciousness, than in the corresponding brain. This, in general, is the conclusion to which I have come. For the detailed argument which has led me to this conclusion I must refer to *Matter and Memory*, principally the second and third chapters" (52).

systems of communication Lotman calls the former the 'I - s/he' channel and the latter 'I - I' channel. Meditation resembles the system of auto-communication in that the sender and the receiver are the same person. One further distinction should be made, however. In meditation the sender of the message may be better defined as the "individual self" (s) while we may call the receiver of the message the "universal self" (S). Thus, in what follows I shall refer to the 's - S' channel, and call the process *self-communication* to distinguish it from Lotman's broader notion of autocommunication.

The philosophy of yoga teaches us that although the sender and receiver are really one and the same, the individual self is separated from the universal self - which is beyond time and space, separation and distinction - by a veil of ignorance, or *maya*.<sup>5</sup> This illusion of separation from our original, true self, which is the indivisible source of all, is perpetuated by the grip of past impressions, or *sanskaras*, that are accumulated over the course of the evolutionary and involutionary processes.<sup>6</sup> The final evolutionary state from the original manifestation of consciousness in the universe is the human being; the final involutionary state is the self-conscious identification of the individual with the universal self. This full circle may very well be the subject of cosmogonies and myth, but cosmogonies and myth articulate polysemic answers for the fundamental questions that give pause to astronomers: whence do we and the universe come and whither shall we go? And it is curious to note that some of the most sound answers come not from people who looked outward but turned inward in their search. Throughout the span of recorded history and the wide scope of diverse traditions, humanity has been told that it is not only possible but a high and lasting value to strive to go beyond the limits of our personal ego. But we find this most difficult to do. The obstacle, to put it in equational terms, is the dash that stretch-

<sup>5</sup> It is interesting to note that the Greek word for truth is *aletheia*, to unveil. In his *Philosophies of India*, Henrich Zimmer points out the chronological coincidence of the Indian Vedas with the Achaean migrations into Greece during the second millennium B.C. and the resemblance between the gods, system of beliefs, and observances of the Homeric and Vedic ages. He notes some of the parallels between "the Greek age of philosophy, which began with Thales of Miletus and culminated in the dialogues of Plato and the works of Aristotle," and the Indian period of the Upanisads "which culminated in the century of the Buddha" (8n-9n).

<sup>6</sup> For a description of these processes see Meher Baba's *Discourses*. "Sanskaras," writes D. E. Stevens, are the habit patterns and unconscious motivations remaining from previous actions in this and in past lives (*Listen*, 97n).



es between the 's - S' in the channel of self-communication, and it is that distance separating us from our true self which meditation tries to bridge.

In *The Universe of the Mind*, Lotman refers to the 'I - I' channel in the system of autocommunication but doesn't describe it in great detail. I think it is important, however, to consider the nature of the channel in the act of self-communication. It is certainly not as easily discernible as are the various channels we use to communicate with others by means of, say, speech, e-mail, gestures, or film. The classical 'I - s/he' model requires what Jakobson calls a contact that consists of "a physical channel and a psychological connection, between the addresser and the addressee" (21). Self-communication requires a physical channel, the human body, but the internal contact that is established goes beyond the merely physical or psychological. During meditation a connection is established between the conscious and unconscious, the known and unknown faculties of the self, and although the sensory system has been stimulated, the practitioner becomes absorbed in the mental realms.

It is instructive to attempt to establish correspondences between the system of self-communication and three remaining elements in Jakobson's model of communication - the context, the code, and the message. We cannot identify the context of this particular type of meditation because it calls for no specific linguistic object of concentration; furthermore, the technique precludes the mind from getting attached to any kind of systematic thinking. We can identify a code, however. In the meditation in self-performed solid state, the code, at a primary level, is the technique itself, since dedicated practice is necessary for the results to be achieved. The meditation technique can also be understood as a supplementary code that is added to the ordinary contemplative mind in order to aid it in the act of introspection. We have arrived, then, at a fundamental question: what is the message in the system of self-communication?

At a primary level, we can say that the message in the act of self-communication is a meaningful absence, which we may call silence. After shifting from powerful to very light breaths, the mind becomes restful, quiet; it feels alert and refreshed. The body has been oxygenated by means of the breathing technique - we should note, however, that the effect of this *pranayama*, the systematic intake of *prana*, or vital energy, adds more than oxygen to the body.<sup>7</sup> A balance has been achieved. After

<sup>7</sup> The notion of *prana*, which is mentioned in the title of many classic Buddhist philosophical texts, dates back to the prehistoric philosophy of Jainism. See, for instance, Zimmer's *Philosophies of India*.

the hard work of sustaining the powerful breaths the body effortlessly becomes very still, reposing in a “solid state.” This quieting acts as a minus device, the habitual flow of thoughts has been noticeably altered, and its absence becomes meaningful. With every wink of the eye, says the yogic aphorism, the intellect produces one thousand thoughts, some of which become conscious and others unconscious desires. In the depth of self-communication this productivity slows down sharply, at times it even seems to temporarily stop. It may be argued that the very act of witnessing a state of pure thoughtlessness is evidence of the presence of a thought, but the awareness of experiencing or having experienced silence can also be an *after the fact* observation, an afterthought on silence. An afterthought, too, because self-communication is a transitory trance. Everlasting freedom from duality, which may be humanity’s final destination, has been reserved, so far, for the few seers that the world has seen.

I have subtitled these reflections “towards a poetics of self-communication” because they are an effort to describe the phenomenology of a creative act and that brought to mind Gaston Bachelard, but I was first of all thinking about semiotics. The semiotic field of “poetics,” wrote Jakobson, “deals with problems of verbal structure” (18). We have noted the human intellect’s amazing capacity to produce a myriad of thoughts; it is these thoughts, some of which tend towards iconicity, that are the primary source for verbal structures. We should also note that the history of the study of linguistic structures is a study of systems of oppositions. From the structuralist advances in such fields as psychology, mythology,<sup>8</sup> and paradigmatics, to the post-structuralist opposition between speech and writing, and the endless and slippery play of differences, the study of the production of meaning confirms that we live in a world of oppositions: the living or the dead, harmony or cacophony, sweetness or bitterness, high or low. Art has often played at balancing these opposing systems: take a look at El Greco’s *Burial of Count Orgaz* or at the composition of Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, for instance. Call it chiaroscuro, counterpoint, or irony, art has made a rather ductile subject of the dual aspects of the world wherein we have been cast.

The art of self-communication responds to duality in an akin but differing manner. By altering the rhythm and tenor of our processes of

<sup>8</sup> Let me mention here two relevant examples: Lévi-Strauss likened the structure of myth to the semantics of music and Ernst Cassirer’s observed that both myth and art are configurations towards being.

thought, meditation dehabitualizes our modes of knowing and renews them. After abandoning the short-lived zero or near zero state, the succeeding flow of thoughts and thought processes is noticeably different from the one that accompanies us in our daily routine. A secondary, reflective operation takes place: we watch ourselves thinking and are able to quietly observe our thoughts - this can be compared to Jakobson's metalingual function, to which we will return below. One may even get lost in the altered flow of thoughts, but these have been displaced from their usual context. The semantic field surrounding a source of worry or concern, for instance, easily dissipates and its psychological roots can be observed with added detachment. But self-communication is not a passive act. The will remains active: aided by the effects of the technique and guided by philosophical considerations, the self opts to let go of lingering thoughts and to focus on separating the mental from the physical body. Fortune, too, has a hand at it. Sometimes, in the most silent of times, when the mind is lost in self-reflection and the body remains perfectly still, meditation opens the channel between the conscious and the unconscious, between the known and the unknown, for the flow of love. And it is this secondary level of signification that leads us to reconsider the function of both code and message in the system of self-communication.

To help us understand this additional complexity it is helpful to refer to Lotman's reformulation of Jakobson's model of communication. Jakobson's model, we may recall, privileges the message. It is, after all, an orientation towards the message, a focus not as much on *what* is being said as on *how* it is being said, that is at the heart of the poetic function. What makes a given message poetic is the introduction of rhythmical syntagmatic structures - and this includes the frustration of expected patterns - into its semantics. An orientation towards the code, in Jakobson's model, results in the metalingual function. According to Jakobson, this function generates reflection and commentary on the nature of signifying systems but he gives little consideration to its effect on the poetics of the text. In his study of autocommunication Lotman shifts to the code some of the orientation of the poetic function. What takes place during autocommunication, he argues, is precisely the introduction of a new code or a series of new codes. Here, autocommunication has much in common with poetic operations, for, what is a syntagmatic pattern but an aspect of the code? "Poetic texts," writes Lotman, "are evidently formed from a peculiar 'swing' of structures: texts created in the 'I - s/he'

system function as autocommunication , and vice versa; texts become codes and codes messages” (33).

I have called love the secondary level of signification that flows through the ‘s - S’ channel of self-communication during some fortunate times. I will not try to define it here other than to say that, like silence, it is beyond duality but restlessly and creatively fulfilling. It is at these times that we get the feeling that the message has been received and answered, that a contact between the individual and universal mind has been made. Silence has not been replaced, but it now acts as a conduit and a code between the separating and unifying aspects of the self. Thus, the message at a primary level, silence, becomes a code for a supplementary message at a secondary level; silence becomes the key that opens the channel of communication between the individual and universal self.

Poetry, as Lotman shows, can be understood as message sent to oneself that results in the transformation of the artist’s personality. Self-communication, too, is a message sent to oneself in a code of silence, a message that bridges the conscious and unconscious aspects of the self. It is a metaphysical swing from the individual to the universal self aided by millenary techniques. Self-communication, which belongs to every culture and to every tradition, is at once an elemental and culminating form of dialogue. It is also a relevant factor in the pragmatics of argumentation because it has the logical virtue of placing every argument in the context of the relativity of all systems of oppositions.

In some of Lugano’s many outdoor public spaces one can see chess being played with big wooden pieces, a few of which, especially knights, are tattered and discreetly bandaged. Black or white may win a given game, but it is an insignificant victory in the context of the game of chess itself. At night, the pieces are retired into big chests that from morning to late evening serve as benches for people passing by who wish to sit and watch a game. When all the particular games of the day are over, the game of chess remains as system, as a sleeping set of rules, of unchanging semiotic principles: the silent but latent possibility of seemingly countless signifying transformations.

I am grateful for the fortune to end this text in Switzerland with a metaphor that Borges liked so much. Polyglot Switzerland, certainly a hotspot for semiotic activity, must be a metaphor too. Borges chose it as a place to live and die. In silence.

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