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Literature and Silence: An Interview with Professor Kate McLoughlin, University of Oxford

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Abstract: The relationship between language and silence is not only an important issue in both Chinese and Western philosophies but also closely related to literary activities and daily life. During the author's visit to the University of Oxford as a visiting scholar from 2023 to 2024, an interview was conducted with Professor Kate McLoughlin on “Silence and Literature”. The interview explored the definition, nature, and various manifestations of silence in literature, analyzed the manifestations and commonalities of silence in different periods and different literary movements in the history of British literature, discussed the phenomena of silence among women and veterans in literature, the interaction among different silences in the context of postmodern literature, and the different viewpoints held by some writers and philosophers on the issue of language and silence.

Keywords: literature; silence; language

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题目：文学与沉默——牛津大学凯特·迈克洛林教授访谈

摘要：语言与沉默之间的关系不仅是中西哲学所关注的一个重要问题，也与文学活动以及日常生活息息相关。作者在牛津大学访学期间（2023-2024）对凯特·迈克洛林教授就“文学与沉默”进行了访谈，探讨文学中沉默的定义、性质及多种表现形式；分析英国文学史不同时期、不同文学运动中沉默的体现及共通性；讨论女性和退伍军人在文学中的沉默现象、后现代文学背景下不同沉默的相互作用，以及部分作家和哲学家对语言与沉默问题所持有的不同观点。

关键词：文学；沉默；语言

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Li Wang: Good afternoon, Professor McLoughlin. I know you are specialist in modern and contemporary literature with a particular expertise in war writing, and a trans-historicist. Could you please share a bit about your personal background and your educational journey? What motivated you to pursue a career in literary research and education?

Kate McLoughlin: Thank you. I will first say that I'm very honoured to be interviewed. I've loved literature ever since I can remember; I read and read as a child all the time – my favourite book growing up was *The Winter of Enchantment* by Victoria Walker - and so it was an obvious move to study literature at university. I was an undergraduate at Oxford University and did a master's in renaissance literature at Cambridge University. And then my career took a bit of a side-track as I qualified as a lawyer and worked for the UK Government Legal Service, with stints at the European Commission in Brussels and the Conseil d'Etat in Paris. But I never felt right as a lawyer; I always thought I was wearing 'borrow'd robes', to quote *Macbeth*. Eventually, I decided that my strengths lay in literary scholarship, so I came back as a mature student to Oxford to do another master's, this time in modern literature, and a doctorate. And since then, I've been lucky enough to have permanent jobs in academia, at Glasgow University and Birkbeck, University of London. I've been a professor at Oxford since 2014.

Li Wang: I noticed that in 2017 you held a knowledge exchange fellowship at the Oxford Quaker meeting, beginning to learn about spiritual silence and poetry. What initially drew you from the study of war writing to silence in literature?

Kate McLoughlin: It does seem a counter-intuitive route to go from war writing to silence, doesn't it! What happened was that I wrote a book about the war veteran in English literature as a figure representing anti-Enlightenment tendencies. The penultimate chapter was about veterans who talk too much, who talk on and on and on about the wars they've been in. The last chapter was about the opposite of that: veterans who can't or won't or don't talk about the wars

they've been in. That's often read as a symptom of post-traumatic stress disorder. But I was reading it more epistemologically as a sign of a failure in communication in the late Enlightenment. And when I was thinking and writing about my silent veterans, I suddenly had a light-bulb moment: *there's so much silence in English literature. This is now what I want to focus on*. So, the way from war to silence came through reticent veterans.

In the early stages of my thinking about literature and silence, I was lucky enough to be awarded a Knowledge Exchange Fellowship with the Oxford Quaker Meeting by Oxford University. For eight weeks, I attended Quaker meetings, which consist of everyone sitting in complete until someone feels moved to speak. Sometimes no one does! For many of the Quakers I met, silence was a profound part of their spiritual lives, and it was a privilege for me to share it and discuss it with them. My part of the 'exchange' was to put on four poetry workshops in which we talked about poems about silence. I came away feeling I had learned about silence from the masters.

Li Wang: Well, how do you understand silence in literature? Is it negative or positive in British literature, culture, and daily life?

Kate McLoughlin: I think it's both negative and positive. I use quite a broad definition of silence. Silence is defined in the dictionary both as an absence of sound, and as an absence of words. It's impossible for humans to experience absolute silence (except for some with specific hearing conditions): even if you're in an anechoic chamber you can still hear your own heartbeat. So, silence is a concept rather than an experience.

Following Wittgenstein and others, I also define silence as an absence of communicating words. If you meet someone and say, 'how are you?', you're not really expecting a detailed run-down of their current state of health. You're communicating, not that you're interested in their health data, but that you respect them and will observe conversational niceties with them. But you don't say that explicitly; it's communicated as a silent message. There are also silences—negative silences—in the forms of censorship and people's voices not being heard.

One of the most important silences in British life is the Two Minutes' silence that's held every Remembrance Day to commemorate the war dead. It's a very moving period, those two minutes when everybody falls silent; very powerful. The premise of my book is that silence is eloquent, it speaks to us and it speaks to us loudly.

Li Wang: Could you elaborate on Remembrance Day, what people do and feel during those two minutes of silence? Then how about in daily conversations? Can people tolerate a long period of silence?

Kate McLoughlin: For those two minutes on Remembrance Day, the nation falls silent and remembers the war dead. This happens, not only in Britain, but around the world. I can't say what other people are saying and doing but I'm thinking of the enormous sacrifices people have made and into my mind come thoughts of my grandmother's brothers who fought in the First World War and my grandfather who fought in both the First and Second World Wars. National

and personal remembrance are melded.

In other contexts, I think we're not necessarily very good at silence. We find silences quite awkward and rush to fill them. In the age of pings that we currently live in—instant notifications on our phones disturbing us all the time—we don't really have much silence left in our lives.

Li Wang: In both Chinese and English cultures there is a saying that silence is golden. The Chinese also say “day in xi sheng” (大音希声) which means great sound is verified, in another word, the great sound is actually silent. I'm curious about the traditional British perspective on relationship between silence and sound.

Kate McLoughlin: It's Thomas Carlyle, the great Victorian polymath, who's credited with saying that silence is golden. At the same time, he says that speech is silver. Sound in the form of words has, since ancient times, been associated with rationality, argument, literature. Silence has belonged to traditions based on wordlessness: mysticism and intuition. But I wouldn't overstate the binary: the two, silence and sound, are mutually constitutive.

Li Wang: So, silence and sound are not a binary opposition. Silence exists because there is sound, and sounds exist because there is silence.

Kate McLoughlin: Yes, they support each other. Sometimes, in silent scenes in literature when there's no human speech, the silence is actually accentuated if the writer also mentions something like bird song or the rustling of leaves on trees or the murmur of a mountain stream. Milton does this when describing the Garden of Eden in *Paradise Lost*, for example. Those very quiet noises seem to make the silence even deeper.

Li Wang: Yes, another example is that when people fall asleep, some white noise can facilitate a faster sleep onset. Wittgenstein said that whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent, then how do you understand his viewpoint?

Kate McLoughlin: As I understand it, he was saying that when we're saying things other than logically provable propositions, we are, in effect, silent. When we talk about things like metaphysics or aesthetics, which can't be proven, then he would say we're talking nonsense. We're not communicating provable propositions and (like the example with ‘how are you?’ I gave before) what we say is therefore silent. That's not to say it's meaningless.

Li Wang: Currently you are writing a literary history of silence. Could you please introduce your work?

Kate McLoughlin: Yes, of course, it is a trans-historical book; it's going to be a long book, 200,000 words, published by Oxford University Press. It's for a crossover audience, so it's not only for academics but also for general readers who are interested in literature and silence. I've tried to make it as enjoyable to read as possible. It starts with a 9th-century poem called ‘The Wanderer’ and it ends at the present day. On the way, it takes in a huge swathe of British literature,

including Shakespeare, Milton, Wordsworth, Austen and Tennyson. It only deals with British literature: I think that silence is culturally specific, and I only really feel qualified to talk about British silence. It covers poetry, fiction, drama and non-fiction: everything from medieval lullabies to romantic poetry to self-help books of today.

Li Wang: So, do you mean that silence is also culturally specific in the UK?

Kate McLoughlin: I suspect it is: I wonder if a British silence is the same as a Chinese silence? But that's something that I don't feel I have expertise to pronounce upon. It's something that I would love to research another at a later point.

Li Wang: Then in your study, do you think in the history of British literature, there is a phenomenon where writers from a particular historical period share commonalities in their depiction or presentation of silence?

Kate McLoughlin: I'm looking at both thematic and formal silences. One thematic silence is the idea of the divine as something that's beyond words. You have to silence yourself to approach it. That idea starts very early in literature. In today's mindfulness movement, you can see the same instinct to detach yourself from your thoughts. Being overwhelmed to the point of speechlessness by strong emotions is also constant throughout literary history. Grief can be very difficult to articulate, as can love. Humankind's relationship with nature often involves silence and that is written about over the centuries. And there are other, sadder silences now to do with extinction due to the climate crisis. The ways in which writers convey silence vary but have a consistency as well. There are rhetorical silences such breaking off, structural silences like secrets, silences created by paradoxes. There are also visual silences—blank space on the page—as well as censorship, self-censorship, repression: these are *silencings*.

I've spoken about forms and themes that crisscross the centuries; you also asked about period specificity. Over time, I've noticed a gradual secularization of silence. In the early modern period, silence is played with as authors write love-sonnets bemoaning their own speechlessness. In the nineteenth-century novel, awkward social silences come to the fore—Jane Austen is a master of them. The novel in that period is also interested in the silent regions of the mind, anticipating Freud's notion of the unconscious. In the twentieth century, you get experiments in form, including *mise-en-page*, which render silences disruptive and baffling.

Li Wang: Within various literary movements such as Modernism, Postmodernism, or Romanticism, do the writers or schools of writers during these periods share commonalities in their depiction or representation of silence?

Kate McLoughlin: Romantic poets are interested in the silence of the sublime, in what's beyond the power of reason to grasp. They convey it by writing about the fact that they *can't* convey it. By the time you get into the early 20th century, writers are interested in the silences that seem to characterize the nature of reality and the depths of the human psyche. Some writers are more

experimental than others in approaching these matters. So, for example, in *The Waves*, I think Virginia Woolf is actually trying to give voice to the profound level at which she thinks we perceive reality.

Li Wang: So, can I say that Virginia Woolf's novels of stream-of-consciousness is a kind of silent writing?

Kate McLoughlin: Well, in *The Waves*—which is my favourite novel by Woolf by the way! —there are six 'characters' and we're presented with what appears to be an ongoing conversation between the six. But I don't think that the characters are talking in the sense of talking aloud or to each other or even to themselves. It's what the region of their minds that perceives reality deep, deep down would be saying if it could speak. As a result, it comes across as a very strange novel. Nobody had written a novel like that before, nobody had tried to give voice to that region of the mind—the last chapter of Joyce's *Ulysses* isn't representing Molly Bloom's unconscious—and so when you read it, you get quite an unsettled, but exhilarating, feeling of *what are these voices and what are they talking about?*

Li Wang: In postmodernist novels, there is often a prevalence of indeterminate and uncertain descriptions. Would this be related to the concept of silence we discussed earlier?

Kate McLoughlin: Yes, absolutely: indeterminacy and uncertainty can be reflected in prose style, for example when two mutual opposites are presented at the same time, so creating logical impossibilities, playfulness, that kind of thing.

Li Wang: Yeah. And the reader will get drawn in. Are there many depictions of violence of women and veterans in literary works?

Kate McLoughlin: Women and other minorities have been silenced throughout literary history. It's difficult to demonstrate because it involves proving a negative. But minority silences have also sometimes been turned into strength. There's a rough divide between Anglo-American feminist literary criticism, which sees silencing as a barrier to women's expression, and French literary criticism, which sees silence as a powerful way of speaking in itself.

I have found veteran silence throughout British literary history. And, although I say that silence is culturally specific, I suspect it's also true in other countries that veterans can't or won't speak about the wars they have been through. This silence is often psychologically based but when it appears in literature, I read it as related to a more general sense of the challenges of communication.

Li Wang: So, if we consider speech as a manifest manifestation of subjectivity, then could silence of women and the veterans be seen as a form of objectification, reflecting a lack of discourse, power, and subjective presence? I mean, can we regard the silence of women and veterans as a negative phenomenon? And consequently, can it be argued that silence is a negative

phenomenon?

Kate McLoughlin: That has been the general critical approach, most famously in Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's essay "Can the Subaltern Speak"? And the answer to her question has often been *no*. If the subaltern could speak, they wouldn't be a subaltern. But, more recently, there's arisen a critical school called the New Ethics, and it's suggested that people have the right to remain silent like someone does if they're arrested. The idea is that critics shouldn't necessarily expect authors, or characters, to explain things. It's ironic in a way because it does critics out of a job – our *raison d'être* is to explicate texts! But, instead, if you can register and honor the silences rather than try to elucidate them, then that produces a new and interesting critical approach.

Li Wang: Could you elaborate on the interplay among the silence of the author, the silence of the characters, and the silence of the readers within the context of postmodern literature? Have you previously contemplated this relationship?

Kate McLoughlin: Are you talking about authorial intention? Obviously, there can be quiet and timid characters in fiction who are prone to silence, and they can appear in very wordy novels. Fanny Price in Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* for example. Her silence is saying something about human nature, but also about the status of women in society at that time. I'm also interested in readers' silence: we mostly read in silence, although you might have a voice in your head that's 'saying' the words. You asked specifically about postmodern literature. I have a chapter about experimentalism in the book, in which I look at moments when authors try to stop the process of reading. They might do that by blanks on the page. Some—B. S. Johnson, for example—even cut bits out of their novels.

Li Wang: The issue of "silence" in literature has been discussed throughout the twentieth century by George Steiner, Maurice Blanchot and Susan Sontag etc. For Steiner, the silence is brought about by the poverty or limits of language. Blanchot discussed the problem of literary silence too, but he approached it more from the perspectives of language and philosophy, proposing the characteristics of literary silence based on the self-negation of language. Susan Sontag, in her essay "The Aesthetics of Silence", believes that the understanding of silence should not be limited to viewing it as a "blank space" in art; rather, it is a stylistic approach that refuses to communicate with the reader and their interpretation. How do you understand the difference among these writers and philosophers? And do you discuss silence in British literature from these perspectives?

Kate McLoughlin: The works of Blanchot, Steiner and Sontag are milestones in philosophical and literary thinking about silence. Both Blanchot and Steiner link silence with the stymieing of reason. The disaster, says Blanchot, erases all that has been said: it 'un-writes' anything that humans try to set down. Steiner was pessimistic about the fact that literary culture has no ameliorative effect. He pointed to the guards at Auschwitz who would read Goethe before going

out to do their hideous daily work. The ‘unwritten poem’, Steiner says, is the only riposte to phenomena like the Holocaust. But how do you register the unwritten poem?

Sontag gives examples. She instances Heinrich von Kleist, Arthur Rimbaud, the Comte de Lautréamont and Ludwig Wittgenstein as writers who all deliberately paused or ceased their work. In her view, the ensuing silence gives retroactive power and authority to the authors’ existing creations.

I discuss all three writers in my book, particularly in the chapter on the two world wars, when I explore the ethics of remaining silent.

Li Wang: It seems that you have recently developed a strong interest in Chinese literature, culture and philosophy. Is it possible that you might conduct some cross-cultural research, in the future, such as a comparative study of silence in Chinese and British literature?

Kate McLoughlin: Yes! I was fascinated when you came and spoke to my master’s class about silences in traditional Chinese thinking. You mentioned Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism. I would love to know more about these; how they’re reflected in Chinese poetry and how that has influenced British poetry as well. I would also love to know more about silence and Chinese culture historically and today. My guess is that, like, like British culture, the contemporary situation is very noisy. We’re rushing here, there and everywhere. We’re constantly pinged by our phones, and the internet, even though it might not be making a literal noise, is very ‘busy’. It’s difficult to find silences in these circumstances. So, one of my dream projects is to create an online library of silences from different cities, maybe from Oxford and Zhengzhou, so people could experience them, if only virtually.

Li Wang: Then what advice could you give to young scholars who are interested in pursuing a career in literary studies, particularly in your area of its expertise?

Kate McLoughlin: To read as much as possible and really to follow your interests: that’s what will make your passion will shine through.

Li Wang: Could you please recommend some books or articles about literature in silence? Both literally and critically?

Kate McLoughlin: Yes. Max Picard’s *The World of Silence* (1948), originally written in German, is seminal. Picard was a Swiss catholic theologian, as well as being a medical doctor, and he reflected deeply on silence from a spiritual point of view. Alain Corbin’s *History of Silence: From the Renaissance to the Present* (2016), originally written in French, is a fascinating account of social and cultural attitudes to silence across centuries. Sara Maitland’s *The Book of Silence* (2008) is more personal. Maitland writes about seeking silence in her own life, but she is also wonderfully well informed about historical and religious practices of silence. Diarmaid MacCulloch is a professor at my own university. His *Silence: A Christian History* (2013) was an inspiration when I started to think about silence. It ranges from the Desert Fathers

and Mothers who practised silence in the early centuries after Christ to the use of silence in Christian liturgy to the *omertà* of the Catholic church. *Seeing Silence* (2020) by Mark C. Taylor is an impressive exploration of visual silences. Recently, there have been a couple of more general books about silence: John Biguenet's *Silence* (2015) and Sarah Anderson's *The Lost Art of Silence* (2023).

Li Wang: Thank you.

Kate McLoughlin: Thank you. It has been such a pleasure to talk about silence with you, and I hope we can create future collaborations.

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